

Smart Entertainment: Retro Suave Affairs

By Josef Aukee

Turn on an event with retro flair

Call it nostalgia for an era defined by Art Deco or mid-century design, fancy nightclubs, dubious morals and a distinctly American fashion and decadence. Event themes have long been part of the meeting industry, and with the reemergence of the *Mad Men* phenomenon and roaring '20s jazz-era depictions in films such as *Midnight in Paris*, retro trends seem ubiquitous—and a whole lot of fun for planners and attendees alike.

Whenever the planning process calls for themed events, it is critical that the demographics of the groups are acknowledged. A tongue-in-cheek retro event may turn off one group, but charge up another even when the age range of attendees varies. Getting to know a client's group can help drive what types of entertainment and activities will work best: a Perry Como-style crooner, a Copacabana setting or a F. Scott Fitzgerald *Great Gatsby*-era flapper gala. Strike up the band and pour those martinis and Manhattans.



How to Make a Party Swing

Vendors that provide classy to quirky staging effects and services can enhance events. They bring in local talent, decor, speciality foods and equipment to recreate a 1960s cocktail party, 1970s disco dance or 1980s new wave or New Age chill-out affair. One such company planners often employ is Beachy Cream, which serves ice cream treats with flair at events. The vintage-style Beachy Cream girls have been serving 100% organic ice cream sandwiches at top-notch events, including the Elton John Aids Benefit Oscar Party and an *American Idol* gathering. The pin-up models appear wearing vintage swimsuits and high heels, serving attendees ice cream sandwiches from their trays reminiscent of those carried by cigarette girls who once flitted among nightclubs. Made from locally sustainable ingredients with six signature flavors, including Key Lime Cowabunga and Ginger Wipe Out, the ice cream is a lively addition to events. A similar effect can be arranged by cigar girls from Coastal Cigars, who add a bit of elegance to a swank affair with cigar rolling demonstrations, humidors and packaged cigars with company logos for gifts.

The Places You'll Go

Stylish hotels including New York City's Hotel Elysee, with its alluring Monkey Bar, or The Carlton Hotel, both in Midtown, are literally steps from the fictional *Mad Men* advertising firm—a Don Draper character might even appear there. Local actors and singers can help replay other signature roles of the era. At the Riviera Palm Springs in California, event planners have invited Dean Martin and Frank Sinatra impersonators to entertain attendees. Arrangements can often be made through CVB resources or hotel sales staff. Atlantic City, N.J., and Las Vegas destination meeting hotels offer the retro theme in excess by providing the swinging cocktail culture and glitz that defined the Rat Pack era. Miami Beach, Fla., is

another natural for reviving the golden age of glamour with its upscale Art Deco beachside hotels and fashionista cruisers on Ocean Drive. Your group can revisit the tropical beach clubs of the Caribbean or piano-bar setting of *Casablanca*. The Raleigh Hotel or boutique Blue Moon Hotel may fit the bill. And the 790-room Loews Miami Beach Hotel can transform its 65,000 sq. ft. of space for retro-themed events.

Disneyland Resort in Anaheim, Calif., can put together a Hollywood-style glamour affair complete with paparazzi, red carpet, starlets and directors for a swank way to get attendees talking. NBCUniversal Events or Universal Studios Hollywood can stage a memorable backlot party in a setting recreated to fit any era. Revive the *Ocean's Eleven* Las Vegas set at Warner Bros. Studios or arrange an evening dressed in the New York City Jazz Age at The Studios at Paramount. For more intimate events, book the Art Deco landmark Sunset Tower Hotel in West Hollywood or bring back the hard-charging '80s with a rooftop event at The Standard Downtown LA.

The venue options are endless, but working with a local destination management company, such as Hello Florida, which operates at 14 major resorts in the Orlando area, can be critical to finding the right space, decorations, entertainment, furnishings and other fun elements, such as attendee costume-making vendors.

In the Houston and Galveston area of Texas, Cosmo Cool Concepts, Inc., can pull together a themed event of almost anything a planner can imagine. Popular themes run from a retro casino format to futuristic space travel-era lounges.

Food, Fashion & Music Connection

With retro parties, food can often bring relief to stretched budgets. Deviled eggs, ambrosia salad, pigs in the blanket, Jell-O and sliders fit the bill. Update the classics with local ingredients such as rhubarb and strawberry tarts in the Midwest and Canada, or move upscale with filet mignon bites rather than meatballs, or organic chicken potpies instead of the same old skewer.

Encourage attendees to dress for an event as it helps deliver a festive experience. It also acts as a natural ice-breaker for attendees. Flapper frills and tuxedos add razzle-dazzle for a 1920s speakeasy party; fedora hats, dapper suits and thin ties for men and faux fur and minis for women can enhance a 1950s–60s event; and The Byrds, Grateful Dead and Jefferson Airplane can inform fashion for an alternative version of the 1960s and early 1970s. Tie-dye party anyone?

Most destination management companies or partner planners of hotels and CVBs can help deliver the music that best fits an event theme, whether it's a jazz band from the big band era, Elvis impersonators, Bing Crosby-style vocalists, a New Age harpist or cover bands (or the real thing) from the 1960s–90s. Whatever the theme, a live music and video component can add much-needed excitement to a gala meant to impress and be memorable.