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Southfield firm delivers entertainment

*MELISSA PREDDY**Special to The Detroit News*

While repeat customers are key to survival in any business, entrepreneurs at one Metro Detroit entertainment firm are taking relationship sales to a new level by weaving together a network of return clients and reliable vendors.

From instructors for traditional sixth-grade dancing class to festive teen parties to young couples' first waltzes as husband and wife, Joe Cornell Entertainment has been setting the scene at regional social events for more than 50 years. The Southfield-based company figures it's provided lighting, sound, DJs, dancers and other services for 15,000 occasions since the company was founded by now-retired namesake Joe Cornell.

In 1991, sister-and-brother team Rebecca Schlüssel and Steve Jasgur, who had started dancing with the company as teens, purchased the business. At the time, the company specialized in entertainment for bar and bat mitzvahs and in polishing up the social skills of young students through 12-week pre-teen ballroom dance programs offered in schools and other organizations.

"We were charged by Joe to maintain his legacy and his name but also to innovate and to change with the times," Jasgur said. "Flash forward 20 years, and we're still doing the interactive entertainment, but we're expanding into weddings and other services."

While Joe Cornell has entertained wedding clients for decades, expanding that facet of the business now -- with an official wedding division -- makes sense because the company's clientele is growing up. Ideally, families that get their first exposure to Joe Cornell through the dance lessons will come back to book music and DJ services for a bar or bat mitzvah, a Sweet 16 party or a graduation dance -- and eventually a nuptial reception.

"We're growing along with our clients," Jasgur said.

The demographics are in Joe Cornell Entertainment's favor, and so is the economy.

Nationwide, special events planners and suppliers have been tweaking their business plans to survive the recession, when discretionary spending tends to wane. Consumers are planning smaller events and making reservations much later than had been the norm, vendors say.

Jasgur and Schlüssel say they have maintained momentum, especially by portraying their DJ services as a cost-effective alternative to live bands. Five hours of continuous DJ and emcee service can cost thousands of dollars less than live bands -- plus there can be no breaks in the music and a personalized playlist.

"We have room for more business," Jasgur said, "but it's not an outgrowth of 'uh-oh, we are seeing a decline.' "

The company's full-service ethic has led to two other initiatives. Eight years ago, after fielding countless calls from customers seeking vendor referrals, Joe Cornell Entertainment launched a party planning expo where

clients could meet photographers, cake makers, invitation printers, balloon artists and other service providers in a relaxed, one-stop setting.

"Last year we had 400 people come through," Jasgur said, and he expects a similar turnout Oct. 3 when the trade show takes place at the Jewish Community Center in West Bloomfield. The company doesn't take commissions from exhibitors.

"We do a lot of networking with other vendors," said David Thornton of VTI Productions, a video firm.

"And of course we've signed up a lot of business from exhibiting there. The Joe Cornell showcase is something you don't want to miss."

In addition, Schlüssel and Jasgur plan the first issue of Plan It! magazine. In addition to advertising from event vendors and suppliers, the glossy publication will feature how-to articles and columns on topics like food and hospitality.

The first 3,000 copies will be distributed to dance class students, former clients and expo attendees; subsequent issues are planned at six-month intervals.

"We're the experts in our market," Schlüssel said, "and we believe in keeping it local."

Additional Facts

Joe Cornell Entertainment

Founded: 1957

Employees: 30

Contact: 29623 Northwestern Hwy # 2, Southfield, MI 48034-1076 or (248) 356-6000 or www.joecornell.com/

Strategy: Provide interactive entertainment, DJs, emcees and other services for parties and special events.

Lesson for other businesses: Build a network of repeat business and referrals by building relationships with existing customers and vendors.

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