

INSIDE BUSINESS

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ENGAGING NORTHEAST OHIO'S BUSINESS ENTHUSIAST

Youngstown/Warren

Regional Focus:

firm's alcohol-infused events usually did. With this initial success, Handel's launched a direct-mail campaign in the Pittsburgh market, sending packets to 50 companies. More than 80 percent responded. Since 1997, Handel's has served nearly 40,000 people annually at these off-site affairs, split 60/40 between schools and corporate events. Last year, the company brought the concept to the Mahoning Valley, where two area hospitals were among the first to offer a Handel's ice-cream social.

"We wanted something to celebrate National Hospital Week that all our employees could take advantage of," says Christine Begalla, nurse recruiter/retention coordinator for Humility of Mary Health Partners. The two-day social (one day at each of



the health-care organization's locations) was available for all three shifts, and, Begalla notes, "The employees really enjoyed it. We are hoping to be able to do it again this year."

Socials take place at product launches and company picnics, during or after work hours — any time, it seems, is the right time for ice cream. Even diet-conscious employees can participate: Handel's brings along Italian ices and sugar- and fat-free selections. It also will create flavors specifically for an event.

"One of the biggest socials was for Bill Cosby at Harrah's Casino," recalls Fisher. Themed "What Bill Likes," it included enough Handel's ice cream

(shipped overnight in dry ice) to satisfy close to 800 people. "The Cos," a longtime Handel's enthusiast, also has ice cream shipped to him whenever a Handel's craving strikes.

Other high-profile fans include Tom Cruise, Maureen McGovern, Gerald Ford and Ben Vereen.

The success of the ice-cream socials mirrors the company's success: Handel's will have 23 locations by the end of this summer, a combination of corporate-owned and franchised stores in Ohio, Pennsylvania and Indianapolis. The company now employs about 600 people, including those who work at franchise stores, and offers more than 200 flavors of ice cream. (Youngstown favorites include chocolate pecan, butter pecan, cherry vanilla and seasonal or special-event selections.) In 1998, *USA Today* selected Handel's as one of the "Top 10 Great Places for Ice Cream."

Fisher, who purchased the company from founder Alice Handel in 1985, attributes the company's growth to a quality staff and quality product. "In some cases, we have second-generation or siblings working at our stores," he says.

The ice cream is made fresh each day with fresh ingredients. "The only shipping is from the back room to the front," says Fisher. "This results in a better-tasting, creamier ice cream."

Sweet Employee Treat

Handel's offers an alternative to corporate cocktail parties.

Leonard Fisher thinks he has the perfect solution to break down departmental barriers or boost employee morale: ice cream. But the CEO won't serve just any frozen treat. It has to be *his* ice cream — Handel's Home-made Ice Cream and Yogurt, which Youngstown-area residents have enjoyed since 1945.

Think the idea isn't worth ... well, a lick? Just ask the people at H.J. Heinz Co. in Pittsburgh or PPG Industries Inc., which has manufacturing plants in Northeast Ohio. Both have introduced Handel's "Ice Cream Socials" into their corporate atmosphere.

With many companies cutting high-cost perks, finding cost-effective motivational tools and reward programs that



A recent ice-cream social at PNC Bank of Pittsburgh

satisfy nearly everybody is quite a challenge. One solution: ice cream.

"Businesses have realized that it is not politically correct to serve alcohol at corporate-sponsored events," says James Brown, COO of Canfield-based Handel's Ice Cream. "Management also needed to introduce activities that were more social and less formal, that would break down barriers between levels and departments. [Ice cream socials are] a way for people to slow things down a bit, and for management to give people a little bit of a break. Everybody likes ice cream!"

The first corporate social took place at a law firm. Despite a senior principal's prediction that it would never work, the event drew more participants than the

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— NANCY CHRISTIE