

Bringing Color and Class to Events for VIPs: A Conversation with... *Laura Schwartz*



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Event planning for corporate VIPs is similar to hosting heads of state at the White House in that they are all accustomed to the best of everything, says Laura Schwartz, former director of events for the Clinton administration. "They will forget the details, but they will remember how they felt," she explains. "They need to feel that everything was first class."

TREATING GUESTS LIKE HEADS OF STATE IS second nature to Laura Schwartz, the White House director of events for the Clinton Administration. In that role, she created and executed more than 600 White House events including: 12 State Arrival Ceremonies and Dinners; America's Millennium Celebration; The UN Millennium Summit; and NATO's 50th Anniversary.

"The power of events, if they are done right, can be an incredible boost to your bottom line and the emotional appeal of your company—to the people who work there, to your clients and to your consumers," explains Schwartz, who is now president of her own Chicago-based event planning and consulting firm, White House Strategies. "It's an opportunity to show that you value a relationship and are willing to go to great lengths to deliver an amazing experience."

COMMERCE magazine was able to catch up with Laura Schwartz amid her hectic, election-season schedule, and asked her about how she handled VIP event planning for President Clinton—and how this experience could be applied to companies that want to create and present powerful events for their employees and clients. The author of the forthcoming book, *The Networking Power of Social Events*, she was more than up to the challenge.

COMMERCE: *How did you become Director of Events for the White House during the Clinton administration?*

LAURA SCHWARTZ: I started as the Midwest Press Secretary for the Clinton White House. Every time there was an event at the White House, I made sure that whenever there was someone from the media from that area, I would help them with access to the people who were going to be at the event, and with access to administration officials, when appropriate. Four years later, I

became the Director of Television. As the Director of Television, I made sure that any time the President was doing an interview—live or via satellite—I produced that look.

Both of those positions at the White House culminated for me when the President and the First Lady asked me to move from the West Wing of the White House to the East Wing to become Director of Events. I was responsible for any event held on the 18 acres—the nickname given to the White House and its properties—anything on the grounds of the White House, inside the White House, the West Wing, the East Wing, the Rose Garden or the Old Executive Building—now known as the Eisenhower Executive Office Building.

Q. *What can you tell us about that job, and all of its responsibilities?*

A. You have the entire White House at your disposal and an incredible house staff that are not political. They stay from administration to administration. They are the operations guys that build the stage, bring in the chairs and bring in the carpets. You have the butlers who oversee all of the food service and the White House chef. You have the maids who keep everything looking great; and the actual Usher of the White House, who oversees the historical integrity of the house, and the National Park Service, which takes care of the grounds. Every time we did something outside, we made sure that the grass looked perfect, the water was clear and all the flowers looked beautiful. I brought in many contractors to set up large pavilions on the grounds so more people could enjoy what the White House had to offer.

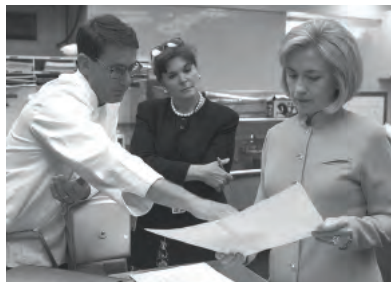
Q. *How did these large pavilions help to include more people in events?*

A. The President and the First Lady wanted to be

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much more inclusive than the White House's event space allowed for. With a traditional state dinner...the guests come in... they have cocktails in the East Room...they move into the State Dining Room through a receiving line...and then they sit down for dinner in a space that can accommodate 140 people. Then they retire to the East Room for entertainment and then dance in the Grand Foyer. The Clintons—on the other hand—had state dinners for 240 to 1,400 people—so we needed to use the White House and its grounds with large pavilions to accommodate this many guests.



First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton worked closely with White House Chef Walter Scheib to keep the menu healthy and appropriate for President Clinton—who was never without his Diet Coke and was always seeking fried food.

Q. *Did President Clinton have an equivalent to President Reagan's jellybeans?*

A. President Clinton liked McDonald's fries and he was never without Diet Coke. The White House chef was instructed to make

healthy food for the President—grilled chicken instead of fried chicken for example. The other directive was to use the products and foods of America as much as possible to showcase the best of our country—cheese from Wisconsin, potatoes from Idaho and peaches from Georgia, for example.

Q. *Can you provide an example of an important event and what made it special?*

A. My personal philosophy is that we don't host events, we host guests. And when it comes to events, every event—at the White House or at your "house"—is important. When we hosted the Prime Minister of Japan, we had 1,200 people in a pavilion on the south lawn. We changed the event—keeping the beautiful tone of a state dinner as an elite social gathering but we were able to include more than the must-have guests that traditionally make up more than half the guest list—senior administration officials, the foreign delegation, members of Congress and local leaders—what happens is that you have the same people coming to every state dinner. We were able to invite philanthropists from around the country, teachers and even a few celebrities to spice up the event. We were able to make special connections between more people than before—and not just the same people.

Q. *What kind of events would stand out for CEOs?*

A. You have to know who your crowd is. I would have to become intimately familiar with who was visiting. For example, when we researched the background

of the Prime Minister of Japan, we found out that he had foot problems from his time in an internment camp and we wanted to be sure the event that we planned did not involve a lot of walking. That's important to know. The leader of the Czech Republic was a huge fan of Lou Reed. You always need to learn what protocol is appropriate for the culture as well. What makes an event stand out from a CEO perspective is how they are treated. If you put someone special at their table that speaks to their interests or a cause that they care about, you will make a connection. By knowing who your guest is, you can set you, your company and your event apart from every other.

Q. *By knowing your guests, you also mean understanding global business and culture?*

A. You have to apply the same business practices overseas but in a different way. When trying to make an impact from the start in another country—whether opening a corporate office or a world headquarters—you have to consider local customs and traditions.

Q. *What makes a powerful event memorable?*

A. The host is important and sets the atmosphere. The host must make sure to introduce guests to other people that have similar interests. They may not remember the flowers or the music or the details, but they will remember how they felt. And if your guests feel included, you will have a powerful event that evokes positive feelings. You really want to make the whole experience first class. Six months later, the emotion the event evoked and the keepsake that reminds them of it remain—long after the day itself is forgotten. ■

For more information about Laura Schwartz, visit www.lauraschwartz.tv or www.whitehousestrategies.com.



With five full-time chefs, the White House kitchen is able to serve dinner to as many as 140 guests and hors d'oeuvres to more than 1,000.