

PROFILE ANNIE-O'S

Party planner's plan: Help others celebrate Personal losses helped owner appreciate the good times

By Tammy Lieber Special to IBJ

For Anne-Marie Dezelan, selling her business is really about selling herself.

"I don't find that some direct-mail piece says what I do," said Dezelan, owner of Annie-O's event planning. "I think a lot of what sells myself is me—my personality." That's why, Dezelan said, most of her new business comes via word-of-mouth, from people who've met the energetic 36-year-old with the big, bright personality. Her marketing efforts try to reflect that personality. Dezelan recently revamped the Annie-O's Web site so that "it's like a party at your desk," she said. On the Internet pages showing her services, viewers see cartoon partygoers and hear background chatter and music. Each page also features a recipe for a party drink.

Likewise, Annie-O's offices in a rented Broad Ripple bungalow feature bright, funky colors and flamboyant touches, like the ring of orange feathers hanging on the front porch. Dezelan's business cards proudly tout Annie-O's slogan, "Fab parties for fun people."

For Dezelan, event planning is more than a career—it's more like a personal mission. The central Florida native grew up the child of missionaries who embodied hospitality, she said.

"Our doors were always open, there was always food on the stove, and the place was always packed," Dezelan said of her childhood home.

After graduating with a degree in advertising and public relations from Flagler College in St. Augustine, Fla., Dezelan landed an internship with a not-for-profit, where her duties included helping plan fund raisers and other events.

Around the same time, both of Dezelan's parents died—her mother when Anne-Marie was still in college, and her father a few years later. Their deaths had a profound effect on her career path, she said.

"It absolutely instilled in me the realization that we only have today, and no matter what we're celebrating, it's worthwhile," said Dezelan.

She was working in event planning in Orlando, Fla., when she met her husband, Marty Dezelan. They married in St. Augustine—in a ceremony planned by Anne-Marie, of course. The rehearsal dinner, which among other details, featured an actor portraying Ponce de Leon handing out glasses of water from the Fountain of Youth, won the bride a professional achievement award.

Upon moving to Indianapolis, Dezelan worked for two years at the Children's Museum of Indianapolis before starting her business in 2000. The museum allowed her to explore her creativity, but starting her own enterprise allowed Dezelan more flexibility and personal freedom, she said.

"I'm not thinking [just from] 8 to 5," she said. "I knew I had to do my own thing."

Since then, Annie-O's has grown to planning about 35 events a year. Those include corporate events, such as open houses, employee fairs and holiday fetes; not-for-profit events; and personal celebrations, such as holiday parties or all-out bashes marking milestones.

The latter is what led local businesswoman Karen Gentleman, owner of consumer-research firm Gentleman Associates, to hire Annie-O's. As she prepared to celebrate her 50th birthday in January

2005, Gentleman found herself wishing she could bring Florida, where she and her husband often travel, to Indianapolis.

She hired Annie-O's to develop the theme and plan the event. On the night of the party, which turned out to be cold and snowy, 75 guests dressed in beach wear suddenly found themselves in the tropics.

"There was sand on the floor, crabs boiling, sunlight—it was amazing," Gentleman said. Furthermore, "[Dezelan] was there the night of to supervise all these various vendors, so I could just be the party girl."

Annie-O's has staked a reputation on planning the details that get people talking, then working with her network of caterers, florists, musicians and other vendors to bring them to fruition.

"My love is in the creative, the ideas ... what makes a guest say 'wow' when they walk in," Dezelan said.

At last year's Torchbearer Award dinner at Indiana University's Melvin and Bren Simon Cancer Center, where Lance Armstrong was the speaker, those details included biking gear as décor and a group of central Indiana cyclists to greet guests.

The event made an impression on the 375 attendees, which also included Indianapolis Motor Speedway CEO Tony George and Indianapolis Colts center Jeff Saturday, said Mary Maxwell, development director of the center.

By planning the event in six weeks and sticking to a firm \$50,000 budget, Annie-O's made a similarly favorable impression on the event's organizing committee, Maxwell said.

"We had six weeks to pull it together," Maxwell said. "I knew immediately we could trust [Dezelan's] instincts and her energy. ... She always solicited our input, but we trusted her completely with the dynamics for what she was suggesting."

That dinner wasn't the only Annie-O's event to garner headlines. The firm has planned several events that have made the news, including last year's bipartisan Capital Caucus party hosted by Baker & Daniels LLP, and more recently, five events leading up to the grand opening of Harry & Izzy's, a new downtown restaurant launched by St. Elmo Steak House and other partners.

For those events, which included practice dinners and VIP-only festivities, St. Elmo President Craig Huse took his ideas to Annie-O's and then let Dezelan run with them, Huse said.

"Basically, she listened to many of my ideas, then completely kicked them up a notch," Huse said.

For instance, Huse suggested the music during the events be "classy, old-school, sophisticated" sounds. Dezelan suggested something more contemporary and upbeat. Although Huse admitted it was "out of my comfort zone," he agreed. The result—a more modern sound rooted in jazz standards, "went over really well and kept the party going late," Huse said.

"I learned long ago that if you tell someone exactly what you want, that is exactly what you'll get," Huse said. "Anne-Marie is a party expert and I gave her the freedom to make my event special and unique."

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Anne-Marie Dezelan is the owner and creative director for Annie-O's in Broad Ripple.

Location: 813 Main St.

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E-mail: annemarie@annieos-events.com

Founded: 2000

Founder/owner: Anne-Marie Dezelan

Service: Corporate and private party and event planning

Employees: 2 part time

Revenue (2006): \$400,000

One-year goal: To plan more memorial services, which Dezelan believes should be celebrations of life

Industry outlook: The event-planning industry has grown tremendously in the past decade. Trade groups estimate that spending on event-planning services is about \$500 billion worldwide and growing, as corporations outsource more and time-crunched individuals seek outside expertise to make their parties special.

IBJ Photo/Robin Jerstad



Dezelan talks with a Zoobilation worker before a VIP event at the Indianapolis Zoo.