

Companies Host Political Conventions' Off-Podium Fetes

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PHILADELPHIA -(Dow Jones)- Besides their elephant paraphernalia and Bush campaign buttons, delegates and others attending the 2000 Republican National Convention will arrive in Philadelphia soon with invitations to dinners and cocktail parties hosted by brand-name corporations.

The made-for-television portion of the convention - the balloons and speeches and cheering that will fill First Union Center - is only a piece of the big gathering. Roughly 1,000 events have been scheduled for the days before and during the July 31-August 3 convention, according to the local host committee, Philadelphia 2000.

Among these are parties that automakers, electric utilities, telecommunications giants and entertainment conglomerates are holding to honor key lawmakers. Other events, like a fishing outing with House Speaker J. Dennis Hastert, R-Ill., also will give supporters the chance to mingle with officials.

Similar festivities, some with the same corporate sponsors, are planned for the Democratic National Convention next month in Los Angeles.

"The purpose of being at the convention generally is to really educate opinion leaders and the public and media about DaimlerChrysler, to give them a real good understanding how this company impacts the American economy," said

DaimlerChrysler AG (DCX) spokeswoman Jodi Tinson.

DaimlerChrysler will exhibit cars to the public and throw parties for delegates from seven states where the automaker has plants. It wants to make delegates aware of "how integral they are to our ability to succeed in the economy and how they fit into the big picture, into the DaimlerChrysler family," she said. (The United Auto Workers will join Daimler-Chrysler at the Democratic convention.)

AT&T Corp. (T), Walt Disney Co. (DIS), America Online Inc. (AOL), Morgan Stanley Dean Witter & Co. (MWD) and utility company Dominion Resources Inc. (D) are among the numerous other corporations sponsoring events for delegates or specific lawmakers.

AT&T joins Covad Communications Group Inc. (COVD) in throwing a cocktail party at the trendy Continental restaurant honoring House Rules Committee Chairman David Dreier, R-Calif., featuring - what else? - "drier" martinis.

A technology provider for both conventions, AT&T also is co-sponsoring a luncheon for Hastert. Others sponsoring that event, hosted by former New York Rep. Bill

Paxon and Washington's Akin, Gump, Strauss, Hauer and Feld law firm, include Albertson's Inc. (ABS), Citigroup Inc. (C), Ryder System Inc. (R) and the Gila River Indian Community.

"Like other corporations and groups, we are sponsoring and helping to sponsor these events," AT&T spokesman Jim McGann said. "It will give people a chance to meet with local officials, members of Congress."

With the telecommunications world and AT&T rapidly evolving, he said, conventions give the company an opportunity to demonstrate and discuss new technologies. Separately, Hastert's leadership political action committee, Keep Our Majority PAC, has organized fund-raising golf and fly-fishing trips, though the speaker's spokesman says convention business will keep him away from the golf foray at a premier course in Merion, outside Philadelphia.

"He likes to fish. He's not much of a golfer," Hastert press secretary John Feehery said. Feehery didn't say how much donors had to give to hit the links in Merion or fish with the speaker.

"The convention is a party-building experience. The whole point of the event is to bring people together and build parties," Feehery told Dow Jones Newswires, adding that golf outings and such are part of the "fund-raising culture" throughout the U.S. "This is how the system works," he said. "This is all an effort to build the Republican Party. The Democratic Party does the same thing at their conventions."

Some say the parties are simply a chance to socialize.

At the Shampoo night club, heavyweights of the entertainment industry - Disney, Time Warner Inc. (TWX), Seagram's Co. (VO), News Corp. (NWS), Viacom Inc. (VIA), the Motion Picture Association of America and the Recording Industry Association of America - are honoring Florida Rep. Mark Foley and the House Entertainment Industry Task Force, which he chairs.

Latin pop star Jon Secada is expected to entertain, and several celebrities have been invited.

"These are widely attended events that people are coming just to enjoy the convention and have a good time. They're purely social functions," Foley spokesman Sean Spicer said. "Some of these events, you're talking about thousands of people attending...This is just a fun, carnival-type atmosphere."

Viacom spokesman Carl Folta said: "The task force is one of the principal coalitions, members of Congress, that focus on our industry, and we're very happy to help recognize their vital role by hosting this event."

Besides the entertainment party, Seagram's, Viacom, Disney and News Corp. also are joining a corporate A-list in sponsoring an event for Rep. W.J. "Billy" Tauzin of Louisiana, a Commerce subcommittee chairman. The Neville family and the Bayou Boys are scheduled to entertain the party-goers in a cruise terminal on the Delaware River.

The 30-plus sponsors range from America Online to UAL Corp.'s (UAL) United Airlines to Morgan Stanley to Philip Morris Cos. (MO).

Seagrams also is co-sponsoring a party for another Commerce subcommittee chairman, Rep. Michael G. Oxley of Ohio. Someone familiar with the company's sponsorships described convention parties as little more than a chance for corporate folks to socialize with lawmakers and staffers they know well.

"This is a convention for us, just like the dentists go to a convention. These are the people we work with every day," the person said. "It's not unlike what plumbers do when they go to Las Vegas."

Essentially, typical Washington interactions between business and government will be transplanted to Philadelphia.

"If you walk into restaurants all over Philadelphia next week," he said, "you're going

to see government affairs people for various corporations hanging out with people who work for government in one way or another."

Not everyone considers such interactions to be benign social affairs.

"This is where the real action is taking place in Philadelphia, I'm afraid. It's going to be in these parties, which are no doubt going to be honoring the great Americans who also happen to be chairmen of important congressional committees," said Larry Makinson, executive director of the Center for Responsive Politics, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research group that tracks money in politics.

The parties aim to reward big donors and inspire them to keep giving to lawmakers, and corporations hope to make lawmakers "feel swell," Makinson said. Party hosts aren't crass enough to thank lawmakers for specific legislation, so they fete them instead as great Americans, he said.

"The overall problem that you have here is that there's such a preoccupation with money, it gets in the way of what's supposed to be a democracy," Makinson said, calling presumptive GOP nominee George W. Bush, a record-breaking campaign money-maker, "the \$93 million man."

Makinson lamented, "It's basically the way Washington works, first transplanted to Philly and then to L.A. for a week."

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