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## AXTER

### WATERPROOFING BY DESIGN

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## GUEST

*Christmas parties are a chance to say "thank you" for work well done. But Penny Guest asks why anyone's still bothering as the recession now chills the drinks.*



entrance and gratefully follow them.

**7.00** After queuing for 20 minutes to deposit your own coat in the cloakroom, you wait while a lady with fixed grin tries to find your name badge. She fails and scribbles out a new one with your name spelt wrongly.

**7.05** Shake hands with host. He stops abruptly after sighting a Much More Important Person standing behind you. Gravitates towards the drinks.

**7.06** The following hour can vary. With luck, you spot a huddle of close associates and immediately go into an impromptu site meeting for the rest of the evening. Others adopt the floating tactic, roaming around trying to spot a client with a job. They are easy to identify as men with satisfied grins standing amidst a group of admirers.

Then there are the wallflowers – their natural habitat is clinging to the side of occasional tables for support, gripping their glasses while reading the guest list for the 10th time. Occasionally they will glance up to see if anyone will take pity and talk to them.

The coarse guide to cocktail parties gives the following advice for dealing with wallflowers. Hover near your victim, give him an encouraging smile, then, just when he is screwing up the courage to say hello, wave at someone else and walk past.

**8.00** Many people will have already left – those who are driving and can't drink; those with trains to catch will have missed them because of the huge queue waiting to get coats.

**8.15** Only quarter of an hour to go before the catering staff start to whisk glasses out of your hand. The atmosphere has changed perceptibly from a polite buzz of conversation to raucous gusts of laughter. Junior executives make complete idiots of themselves in front of the boss. He makes a brief note in his diary for disciplinary action the next day.

**8.45** A boisterous QS is led gently down the stairs shouting abuse at another consultant. "What do you say to an architect with a new job? ... One Big Mac and fries please. Geddit?"

## Christmas cocktail of fizz and chat goes flat

IT HAD had not been a good evening for the white-coated waiter. "I've been looking for a queen all night, dear," he confided to me. "But there aren't any here."

With a sad smile, he swept off to round up the empty glasses from the few remaining revellers at Bovis' Christmas cocktail reception, held in Whitehall two weeks ago.

While some of you may find it reassuring to have this proof of the machismo of Bovis and its clients, it did set me thinking – why do companies bother with Xmas drinks? Not usually, as in the waiter's case, to find true love. In marketing terms it is a chance to thank everyone on your Xmas card list in person.

They can be useful. One successful architect assures me he secured £10m of fee income from Japanese developer Kumagai Gumi after passing on his business card to the project manager of an estate agent one evening.

But the 1990 vintage of Christmas parties will be remembered as a bad year. The ever-deepening recession seems to sully the atmosphere and turn the canapes to ashes in people's mouths.

There are more drunks for a start. Not due to pressure of

work, that's for sure. If you spot someone having one over the eight at your next cocktail bash, remember they will have spent a harrowing day sacking anyone under 25 and over 60.

The jokes told by the men in suits aren't the jolly japes of 18 months ago, they are more in the graveyard humour bracket. Take the following quip, overheard in the men's loo (not by me) at a party last week.

Two consulting engineers meet in the gents. Says number one: "Well, I've been looking for two hours but I couldn't find an optimist." Replies his friend: "I did, but some men in white suits came and dragged him away."

Their laughter rang hollow.

McAlpine. Once you manage to get on to its guest list, I'm told the only qualification for a repeat invite is being alive.

Another PR advises holding your annual function at a different time of year to make it stand out – Twelfth Night, Burn's day, or something like that. But this does have its pitfalls.

Take for example the case of the well-established Midlands QS firm holding a reception in London to celebrate the merger with another practice. The food was good, the wine sparkled, but the hall was practically empty. Their misfortune was to pick a day when England was playing West Germany in the semi-finals of the World Cup.

But, as a rule, the 500-odd parties taking place in the run up to Xmas are much of a muchness. For those of you just setting out on your cocktail career, I supply a purpose-built guide which, with slight amendments, can be adapted to almost any situation.

**6.40** Invitation was for 6 pm, but you have spent at least a quarter of an hour stumbling around badly lit back streets trying to find an obscure hall dedicated to an even more obscure ancient guild of craftsmen.

**6.41** Sight a group of men in trenchcoats entering a narrow