

# Queen of the (SXSW) Party Scene

Who's the creative force behind South by Southwest's most buzzed-about parties? **SAMANTHA STAPLES**, party planner extraordinaire.

If planning a simple party for a few friends is overwhelming, Samantha Staples' life might seem like a full-on nightmare. Staples is the mastermind behind Austin, Texas-based High Beam Events, the official coordinator for the majority of day parties at South by Southwest (SXSW) — one of the world's hippest film, music and interactive festivals. She's installed a half-pipe skateboard ramp inside a club for software giant Adobe Systems, printed branded T-shirts on-site for video-streaming site Ustream and crawled through ceiling rafters with CAT-5 cables (during an event) to make sure that a client had Internet for a presentation. It's safe to say there's no limit to Staples' creativity and commitment to getting the job done, and this year's March 9–18 festival will showcase her ingenious handiwork yet again. But first, she's here to share some insight on her job with us.

**AMERICAN WAY: When did you know you had an above-average talent for planning events?**

**SAMANTHA STAPLES:** I started my career as a corporate planner, which doesn't allow for much creativity. So, it probably wasn't until I started High Beam. We did an entire season of SXSW parties in March of '05, and no two events were alike. You have to have a mind like a steel trap — and enjoy juggling.

**AW: Have SXSW parties changed over the years?**

**SS:** When the party program started, it was relatively small, and our clients were smallish, with modest budgets. The plan was pretty straightforward: Get a venue, get a band, serve some beer. Now, everyone is competing to have the

hottest party, so we have a lot of creative activity and ideas to make happen.

**AW: What trends are you anticipating for 2012?**

**SS:** Almost everyone wants a house they can brand for the entire nine days, and [they want] activities that appeal to the interactive folks, film people, [as well as] the musicians and music people. We're also starting to see requests for

"the Village" — clusters of clubs or old houses that are all in walking distance. ... People want more than one location to carry out different activities.

**AW: Does the pressure to be cutting-edge overwhelm you?**

**SS:** It's part of what I love, and I have the most incredible team. When you get five really passionate people in a room talking about ideas, it's amaz-

ing what we come up with. It's the fun of the job.

**AW: Who are some of your clients?**

**SS:** Music export offices for foreign countries, Sonicbids, Razorfish, Google, Mashable and MTV, just to name a few.

**AW: The buzz about SXSW, particularly in the age of Twitter, is astounding. What will people talk — or tweet — about this year?**

**SS:** Last year was the 25th anniversary, and the attendees seemed as if they were in heaven. This year, I think it's going to be bigger and better. All my clients want to kick it up a notch. The desire to have the buzz party isn't waning.

**AW: If you weren't doing this for a career, what would you be doing?**

**SS:** I'd probably go back to lighting design. It was one of those jobs that I couldn't believe they paid money to do; honestly, I would have paid them. But, if I won the lottery, I would still do this job.

*"In nine days, we'll end up doing about 150 separate events. Our first year, we did 12 parties over nine days."*

BRIEF: Q&A

**FOR MORE INFO**

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## It's Your Party

And you don't have to be a pro to **make it a memorable one**. Here, Staples shares a few of her secrets.



**SET THE MOOD.** Create a party atmosphere — fluorescent lights are awful. Put in colored bulbs and dimmers for a festive atmosphere.



**ENJOY.** Don't be a slave in the kitchen. Get a caterer or have food trays brought in. Then, you can relax and visit with your guests.



**SPLURGE ON LIVE MUSIC.** Find an up-and-coming local musician. It sends the message that your party is different, and live music is way better than an iPod.



**CHOOSE YOUR FOOD WISELY.** A good rule of thumb is if the food needs a knife, guests need to have a seat. If it's finger food, guests can mingle.



**PARK IT.** Think about your parking situation. Do you need a valet, a shuttle or a way to get guests home if they have one too many cocktails?