

Valley summer slowdown becoming a thing of the past

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The intense summer heat that hammers the Arizona desert each year creates plenty of challenges for businesses and employers.

In the Valley's sleepier times, it was easy to write off a summer and head to the northern part of the state or San Diego and then get back in the swing of things when the heat index subsided a bit.

But Phoenix and Arizona have become more cosmopolitan over the years, and businesses and the economy must be able to slog through the heat.

"The summer in Arizona isn't what it used to be. It used to be that everyone wanted to leave in the summertime, and they did," said Jay Thorne, a local business and political consultant. "Today, everyone wants to leave but they can't, or they do, but they take their work with them."

Thorne said, as recently as the 1980s, Valley companies essentially would shut down during July and August.

Those days are gone, but Thorne said it is much tougher to organize meetings during the summer months because of all of the people taking vacations. He also pointed out that earlier school start dates — which now occur in August rather than after Labor Day — make summers feel shorter.

Don Rinehart, president of the Glendale Chamber of Commerce, said more and more businesses are getting away from the practice of significantly pulling back during the summer months.



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Susan Ratliff, president of Exhibit Experts, says many workers use the summer heat as a handy excuse for poor productivity. Ratliff recently attended the Greater Phoenix Chamber of Commerce's business trade show at the new Cardinals stadium in Glendale to help drum up business this summer.

"While business activity is still slower during this time, in recent years we have experienced more activity and more inter-

est in having summer events," said Rinehart. "It's pretty much business as usual. I think the days of 'taking a summer hiatus'

are pretty much over," he said.

Plenty of corporate honchos, business owners and rank-and-file employees still take vacation time during the summer, though, and the heat forces companies with outside operations to adjust accordingly.

Susan Ratliff, president of Phoenix-based trade show display company Exhibit Experts, said vacations and kids being out of school require staff to fill in for one another during the summer months.

"Our schedule does not change, but our staff steps up to cover accounts for each other as we all travel and vacation," said Ratliff. "When children are out of school, our flexible schedules allow for more time out of the office when needed in the summer."

Ratliff said there still are plenty of people working and businesses operating during the summer, even if there are workers escaping to California or places where it's not 112 degrees.

"No matter how many people are out of town, there are still thousands here. I think it's a handy excuse for poor productivity," said Ratliff, whose company provides exhibits, graphics and other services to businesses appearing at trade shows.

The summer months and the desert heat do force companies with outside operations to adjust to the environment and inability to do certain things during the middle of the day. Construction companies and contractors try to start work early in the morning. Cable television provider Cox Communications trains, schedules and outfits its field technicians and repair personnel so they are ready for the heat and potential problems.

"We have monthly safety meetings for field technicians at Cox and, during the summer, our main focus is on heat-related illnesses and skin protection. It's what most of us are concerned about in the field during the summer months in this state," said Bryan Otts, a field manager in Arizona for Atlanta-based Cox.

Cox outfits its field technicians with equipment to help them stave off the heat, including umbrellas, large-brimmed hats, sunblock, Gatorade and water, and schedules repair calls in attics and other really hot places in the early morning.

Anna Hackett, spokeswoman for Firebird International Raceway in Chandler, said the raceway uses the summer months to do repairs and other improvements to the facility and book vendors and events for the next season.

"Our operations staff takes this time to work on track improvements. This year, we will spend \$30,000 over the summer for maintenance and upgrades for our facility. These long-term projects are not possible when we have racers on the track every weekend during the prime season," said Hackett.

Firebird hosts mostly drag races and other auto racing events throughout the year, except during the hot months. Hackett said the down time allows the staff to plan events and work out details with vendors because they are in a more relaxed, slow-paced environment.