



PLANNING YOUR WEDDING

Everything You Need To Know and Do!

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PLANNING YOUR WEDDING

A Wedding Without a Plan is Often a Disaster!

The day you've been waiting for has finally arrived. Your partner has proposed marriage and you've emphatically said 'YES!' Now what do you do? The answer to that simple question will make a tremendous difference in how the real 'big day' plays out. Gone are the days when weddings were simple affairs that took place on family farms with all the neighbors pitching in to help. Today the bride and the groom are the ones calling all the shots. Others will try to get involved, but overall, it's the two people getting married who decide what's going to happen, when and how.

With so much to coordinate, it's amazing that weddings go on at all. Considering that both the bride and the groom are likely holding down full-time jobs, who has time to work out all the details? And there are so many. Well the big secret is it's all in the plan. Having a well-thought out plan that starts with selecting the perfect wedding date and ends with arriving at the most romantic honeymoon destination is the only way to keep nerves from fraying and budgets from being blown.

Plenty of tools are available to help you plan your wedding. It's up to you to decide which tool will work best for you and then you've got to make sure you use the tool you've selected. Wedding planning tools range in price so before you go spending any money, take a step back and think for a moment about the b-word. A 'budget' is crucial because it's what will keep you and your partner (and anyone else funding the festivities) from going into debt. As unflattering as the word is, every wedding needs to begin with a budget. Wedding costs can rapidly spiral out of control because let's face it, everybody wants their big day to be magical.

To determine a budget for the big day, start with figuring out who is going to be contributing towards the finances and how much each can afford to contribute. Once you have a total dollar amount to work with, you can then begin to allocate the budget to the different parts of the wedding.

The wedding plans all begin with the wedding date. Everybody wants to be a June bride, but with only four week-ends in this month, not everybody can. The wedding date you select will have a significant impact on your budget. A wedding during the busy summer months will cost far more than one that's held off-season. Not only will the wedding date impact the price you'll pay for everything from the function hall to the photographer, it also impacts availability.

Once the wedding budget and wedding date have been nailed down, it's time to get busy. Part II will provide a timeline of tasks you need to accomplish in the days and months leading up to the big day!

Wedding Planning Timeline/Overview

When planning the wedding, work backwards from the 'big day' according to the timeline presented below.

Six to twelve months before your wedding date is the time when you need to make most of your reservations and put down deposits. You've got to get a rough but fairly accurate estimate of the number of guests you'll have because each wedding location can accommodate a certain number of people and you want a location that can comfortably accommodate everyone. Here's what needs to be accomplished during this timeframe.

- o Select and reserve locations for the wedding ceremony and the reception
- o Interview and reserve your professional talent including: Musician or DJ, Photographer / Videographer, Floral arranger, Caterer, Wedding cake baker, Wedding official, Wedding planner or consultant (optional)
- o Select and confirm wedding party attendants for both bride and groom
- o Select wedding party attire and coordinate fittings
- o Arrange transportation for bridal party on the big day
- o Place engagement information in local newspaper

Four months before your wedding date is the time to make sure everything is in place.

- o Finalize your guest list including complete mailing address for invitations
- o Order wedding invitations
- o Select a destination for the honeymoon, make hotel and airfare reservations, get passports
- o Reconfirm that bridal party dresses are on order and menswear rental attire is coordinated
- o Begin planning the wedding shower
- o Register at bridal registries for shower and wedding gifts – if not registering at national chains, remember to register at stores that are local to the families of both bride and groom
- o Reserve suite for bride and groom's wedding night
- o Reserve block of hotel rooms for out-of-town wedding guests
- o Shop for and order wedding rings
- o Make sure you both agree where you will live once you're married

Two months before your wedding date:

- o Address and mail wedding invitations
- o Make preparations for rehearsal dinner
- o Coordinate details for marriage license in state where marriage ceremony will take place
- o Coordinate, order, or make decorations and favors for wedding
- o Select the music you want for the ceremony and the reception

One month before your wedding date:

- o Have the wedding shower
- o Complete final fittings for bridal dress and all bridal attendants
- o Coordinate and schedule all hair and make-up appointments
- o Purchase gifts for bridal party and groomsmen

Two weeks before your wedding date:

- o Get marriage license
- o Begin process of changing name on credit cards, social security card, driver's license, bank accounts
- o Prepare seating arrangements and prepare place cards
- o Make sure accommodations for out-of-town guests are in order
- o Reconfirm all details with those who have been hired
- o Prepare change of address paperwork, pack and get ready to move (if applicable)
- o Give final count to caterer
- o Practice hair and make-up styles; grooms should get hair cut now

Day before wedding your wedding date:

- o Hold rehearsal and rehearsal dinner
- o Get some rest

The Big Day

- o Make it to the ceremony on time
- o Bring wedding rings
- o Have a means of paying final tab for all services rendered and have cash for tips
- o Eat before ceremony so you don't get sick
- o Smile pretty for your pictures
- o Be proud because you've just pulled off a major feat!!

The Official Business that Goes Along with Marriage

Weddings are many things. They're fun, they're expensive, they require a lot of planning, but a wedding is also first and foremost a legal matter. And as such, there are steps the couple must take so that the union is recognizable in the eyes of the law. They'll need a marriage license, but before that, the bride must make an important decision – to take her future husband's surname or continue to use her maiden name.

You'd think that a name was just a name and changing it wouldn't be such a big deal, but it really is. During previous generations whether or not a woman changed her last name was something that wasn't given a second thought. The woman took her husband's name and that was that. But recently, women have challenged this tradition. There is no law that says a woman's last name must change in marriage, so really this decision is a matter of personal choice.

For those women who do opt to change their last names, the process to change isn't difficult, but it can be time-consuming. Besides making the change with the federal Social Security Administration, which really where it all begins, a woman must also change the name on her driver's license and registration, her credit card accounts, her bank and other financial/insurance related documents, utilities, property deeds, clubs at which she is a member,

and at her place of employment – not only for Human Resource and income tax purposes, but so that a new email address and new business cards can be created.

And while you're going through the process of changing your name, you might want to consider changing your address, too. You've just got to double-check the timing. If it doesn't work out right, you can pick up a change of address kit easily enough and complete this when you return from the honeymoon. It's not really necessary to begin the process of changing your name until about 2 weeks before your wedding, so do whatever makes most sense.

One other aspect of the name change process that requires careful timing is planning your honeymoon. You might be better off making your reservations using your maiden name if you won't have official identification (or an updated passport) with your new name ready before you leave. You don't want to experience any unnecessary delays.

When dealing with the marriage license, be sure to check the requirements in your state of residence ahead of time. Each state will vary with some states requiring one or more witnesses and others requiring blood tests and/or physical exams, and others requiring something else such as a waiting period. Regardless of the state, expect to pay for a marriage license. Costs will range from a low of \$25 to a high of \$100 or more. You'll both need to be present and you'll likely need to bring a birth certificate and proper identification.

Then breathe a sigh of relief, because you're almost there!

Wedding Rings

Wedding rings are the most visible signs of marriage. They have long been a part of history and they haven't always been made out of metals. Ivory, leather, bone and glass, along with precious metals, have all been used to represent what wedding rings still represent today – eternal life together. Shopping for wedding rings is one of the more enjoyable tasks of planning the big event, but with so many beautiful styles to choose from, it can become overwhelming.

According to most wedding planning timelines, you can wait to shop for wedding rings until 4 months before the actual wedding date. By then, most of the stress-inducing logistics have been taken care of enabling the two of you to relax for a brief period. And that's what shopping for wedding rings should be – a time relaxing, quite time for the two of you to regroup before things really spiral out of control and tensions flare!

The wedding rings are an important purchase because they're something that you'll want to last a lifetime. But even so, it's important now more than ever to stick within the amount you have previously budgeted for this purpose. Once you start looking at wedding rings, you're going to want them all, no matter what they cost. Keep in mind while you shop that you do want your rings to look good, but because they'll become part of everyday life, be practical and make sure that your wedding rings fit comfortably.

Where do you begin your search for wedding rings? Trends are great, and the trendy rings will be placed center stage at the jewelers, but most people opt for tradition when selecting their wedding rings. Remember, the rings are going to be worn for a long time, hopefully decades, and today's trends aren't going to last that long. Be sure to consider what you both like. For many men, a wedding ring is the only piece of jewelry they'll ever wear so let the guy have some say in the decision.

Do you both prefer white gold, yellow gold, or platinum? Do you want gemstones or diamonds included on the bands? How about scroll work or filigree? Would simple, unadorned bands suit you better? Do either of you have any cultural preferences such as Irish Claddagh rings, Jewish wedding bands or Russian wedding rings? Do you want matching wedding rings or do you each want a ring that represents your own unique style? (Believe it or not, this is acceptable nowadays!)

Once you've selected the wedding rings that best suit your tastes, decide whether or not you want to have the rings engraved. Engraving is a great way to make yet another statement about your commitment, and you'll be amazed at how much can actually fit onto that tiny space! Be sure to go over the receipt carefully before handing over your partial or full payment, especially when special-ordering rings or having them engraved. To ensure they'll last a long time, understand how to properly care for them. And finally, consider insuring your wedding rings.

The Pre-Wedding Parties

As social events go, there aren't many that can top a wedding. The wedding reception really, is when the fun begins. But let's not forget about the parties that precede the wedding, the engagement parties, the bachelor and bachelorette parties, the wedding shower and the rehearsal dinner. These pre-wedding parties can be great fun, too. Here is a run-down of each:

The Engagement Party

A great way to announce the upcoming nuptials is with an engagement party. Traditionally, the parents of the bride hold this event a month or so after the couple announces their engagement. However, there are no set rules and they can be held at home, at a restaurant, or anywhere the host prefers. Engagement parties for the most part are intimate affairs of a casual nature. Their purpose is to give bride and groom an opportunity to meet each other's family members and close friends. If the couple's parents live far apart, it's not uncommon for the groom's family to hold a second engagement party. Typically gifts are not given. Invitations can be hand-written or even verbal. If you need to plan for food, include an RSVP.

The Bachelor/Bachelorette Party

The stereotypical bachelor party consisting of a wild night of drinking and strippers is giving way to more coordinated events. Although still quite popular, these parties are being replaced by guys getting together to watch a major sporting event either live or on TV, or to spend a

week-end together skiing or fishing, or even by holding a poker tournament. Traditionally held the night before the wedding, this too is changing and these parties are being coordinated earlier, for reasons that don't need to be explained. For a long time, the wedding shower was the 'bride's party.' Bachelorette parties are a relative newcomer to the wedding scene and they, too are coordinated by the bridal party. Make no mistake; these parties can be just as wild as the bachelor parties. But they can also involve a simple, relaxing day at the spa.

The Wedding Shower

Wedding showers are great social events designed to give the soon-to-be couple the things they'll need when they move into their new home together. It's also a way to add to a bride's trousseau. Many of today's wedding showers are themed, and can be anything from a recipe shower to a camping shower in which the gifts would include things the couple could use on their camping adventures. Wedding showers should be held a few weeks before the wedding date and only those guests who have been invited to the wedding should be invited to the shower. Some women are lucky and end up having more than one wedding shower.

Rehearsal Dinner

This is a time to relax and get ready for the big day that lies ahead. Rehearsal dinners are generally for the bridal party only and they're held immediately after the wedding rehearsal. They're held early so all can rest up and they're usually held at the home of the bride or groom's parent or at a restaurant.

Wedding Attire for Groom and Bride

The guys have it easy. Pick up the tuxedos they rented months ago right before the wedding, put them on and then be sure to return all the pieces in decent condition right after the wedding. The women, however, don't get so lucky. For the bride, her quest for the perfect wedding dress means hours poring over bridal magazines in search of the perfect look and months of agonizing dieting and humiliating dress fittings. Plus she needs all the accessories. Unfortunately, selecting wedding attire for both the groom and bride is something that cannot be avoided, unless they're headed to Las Vegas or the county courthouse.

Wedding attire is one of those wedding tasks you need to tackle well in advance, especially if you're planning your wedding during the height of the season. Almost as soon as you announce the wedding date, but only after you have put together a wedding budget, you need to begin planning the attire. Now that's not something you have to tell most women. Many already know the type of wedding dress they want because they've been planning this big day for most of their lives! But still, most brides will spend 4 to 6 weeks shopping, trying on and pondering wedding attire before it's even purchased.

And after this 1 – 2 month period, brides still need ample time for special ordering and custom fitting. They'll need about 3 separate fittings so that the wedding dress looks absolutely perfect on the big day. It's a good idea to allow extra time for unexpected delays and emergencies.

Most brides devote a considerable chunk of the wedding budget to the dress and accessories. It certainly doesn't need to be this way, and there are plenty of options for looking stunning without spending thousands. How much will be spent is a really important point to discuss beforehand, agree on, and follow through with. The bride will be center stage, lots of photos will be taken, and it's normal to want to look better than ever.

To help the discussion along, begin with talking about the type of wedding you both want – elegant, informal, themed, seasonal, outdoors, or something else. The wedding attire that the groom and bride select is going to set the tone for every other aspect of the wedding including what others wear, the color scheme, decorations, invitations, flowers, venues, transportation, everything.

And in addition to the wedding dress, the bride needs accessories including the veil, headpiece, train, shoes, undergarments, stockings, garter, handbag, and jewelry. Much of it can be ordered along with the wedding dress, but other accessories will have to be purchased over the coming months. Be sure to factor in the costs for these accessories when planning the wedding attire budget.

And as was mentioned in the beginning, men's wedding attire follows the lead of the bride's. Men need only locate a tuxedo rental outlet 6 – 12 months before the date, get fitted and pick up their tuxes, which come with all the accessories they'll need – cummerbund, bow tie, vest, even shoes!

Wedding Invitations and Etiquette

Wedding invitations do more than tell who, what, where and when. Wedding invitations set the overall tone of the event. From the way the invitation is addressed on the outside to the font used for the text inside, a wedding invitation says whether the event will be formal, casual, grand, intimate, themed, traditional, or something entirely different. Who could have imagined that an invitation to a wedding could say so much?

While many of the 'rules' dictating a wedding are often broken by today's couples-to-be, don't even consider going against generally-accepted etiquette when sending your wedding invitations. In addition to providing the details and setting the tone, a wedding invitation should also convey what is and is not allowed. And as tempting as it may be to put your guest's names and addresses into a database, select a script font and print out a sheet of stick-on labels, don't do it! If you're having a casual affair, it may be okay, but anything else requires handwriting. If your handwriting is not up to par, hire someone for this task. Many couples hire calligraphers, which is a great option if your budget allows.

It's important to include a response card and a stamped, pre-addressed return envelope in with the wedding invitation to make replying an easy task. As for addressing, here are a few of the etiquette rules. If you're allowing the invitee to bring a guest, or if children are not invited, you need to specify this. Customarily this is handled by the way the inner envelope is addressed.

Adding 'and guest' after the invited guest's name conveys the message that the guest is allowed to bring a guest. Adding the names of the guest's children, in order from oldest to youngest, indicates that their children are welcome to attend. There are other rules for addressing the envelopes of professionals, couples that live together but are not married, women who use their maiden name and others so be sure you follow them.

It's customary to mail wedding invitations at least six weeks prior to the wedding date to allow guests adequate time to respond. Guests arriving from out of state or even out of the country will appreciate the extra time to coordinate their travel so as a courtesy, it's a good idea to mail their invitations 8 – 10 weeks before the wedding.

And while you're busy selecting your wedding invitations, you'll find matching wedding stationary available for purchase. For that special day, you can order coordinating beverage napkins, match books, place cards, wedding cake box, and even a special wedding album. You can have the menu printed up and a wedding ceremony program that can be handed out to guests. You'll also need to thank your guests for attending and for their generous wedding gifts so it's a good idea to order thank-you cards and envelopes when you're ordering wedding invitations.

You and your partner should plan to shop for wedding invitations and wedding stationery when you aren't feeling rushed, and do keep that budget in mind!

Getting Ready for the BIG DAY – Your Wedding!

It's a given that it'll take the bride-to-be far longer to prepare for her wedding day than it will the groom-to-be. The up-do, the make-up, and the manicure/pedicure all need to be done on the big day, but there's more. Getting into that mind-boggling contraption that's called a wedding dress and its associated gear can easily take up to an hour. Then of course, it's picture time. It's no wonder late afternoon weddings are so popular!

And while most of the guys probably don't have a clue how to put on their penguin suites, there's likely to be plenty of mothers and aunts around to help those needy men get ready. A splash of water on the face, a quick comb through the hair and viola! Then as long as the guys don't get lost on the way to the wedding ceremony, they've pretty much accomplished their wedding day tasks.

All joking aside, there are still wedding day tasks that need tending. Most have already been confirmed and reconfirmed, so really what is needed on this day is someone responsible for making sure the wedding ceremony location and reception venue are ready – that the decorations, flowers, favors, DJ, photographer and cake are all in place. Hiring a wedding coordinator for the day is always an option. Plus, it won't hurt to triple-check the transportation. It should be picking up the bridal party at least 20 minutes before the ceremony.

If the couple has paid attention to their planning checklist, the day will go off pretty much as anticipated. However, even the best laid plans are subject to falter and this is something that

needs to be understood and even expected. The good news is most of the types of things that go 'wrong' aren't even noticed by the guests. Broccoli gets served instead of green beans. The DJ forgot to bring the bride's requested first dance music, but puts on a suitable substitute. The bride needs to relax and let these things go.

The best man does have a few important responsibilities. He's got to take charge of getting the groom to the ceremony. He has to make sure the wedding rings and his speech are carefully tucked away inside his pocket. He should also have the money that'll be paid out at the ceremony. And someone has to have the money needed to pay off any balances due for professional services rendered.

The bride may want to take a few moments before the wedding gets underway to sit with her parents and thank them for their help throughout her life and reassure them that her love for them is stronger than ever. And she definitely should eat. With all the anticipation and excitement of the upcoming festivities, it's easy to not feel hungry, but this is not a good idea, especially if food won't be available for several more hours.

Most importantly, remember to keep smiling. And remember that in just a few hours, you'll both be relaxing, alone, in your honeymoon suite!

Who Will Be Attending the Wedding?

Probably no other part of wedding planning causes as much frustration and ill-will as the guest list. Just who will be present to bear witness to the big event is something that no family has ever been able to totally agree on. Sure there are those fairy-tale weddings where money is no object, but even those weddings have their limits. More often than not, it is the case that some of the prospective guests never actually make it onto the final guest list. And you know what? As devastating as it may seem at the time, it really isn't the end of the world for those who don't get invited.

When should the couple put together the guest list? Although it doesn't have to be set in stone, a fairly approximate head count is needed early on in the wedding planning stage. The number of guests invited to your wedding will have a considerable impact on your wedding budget. Remember, they're your guests and you'll need to accommodate each and every one of them! You'll need a venue large enough to hold all your guests comfortably, you'll have to feed them, they'll need invitations, and if they're coming from out of town, they'll likely need overnight accommodations. With an average cost of \$25 per guest for food, every 4 guests will cost approximately \$100 just to feed!

But every wedding needs guests (unless you're planning to elope) so let's think about whom will be attending. You and your mate will be there, of course. After that, add your immediate family to the guest list. Notice I say 'immediate' and not 'extended' family. Mothers, fathers, step-parents, brothers, sisters and grandparents are absolute musts, unless personal situations dictate otherwise. According to the above estimate, you're already spending about \$300 for food just on this group! That should make you rethink your grand illusion of 250 guests!

It is tradition to have wedding attendants and they should be added to the guest list next. A maid or matron of honor and the best man are absolute minimums. From there, the number of bridesmaids and ushers is purely a personal choice. But remember, even though the attendants will be paying the costs for their attire, the number of wedding attendants will have an impact on your budget. Why? First, they'll be at the rehearsal dinner and they'll expect to eat for free. Second, the bride and groom traditionally give each of the attendants a gift as a way of showing their appreciation, so the more attendants, the more gifts you buy. And something that's not always considered, a large number of attendants may increase your transportation costs.

With the basics in place, it's time to add friends, co-workers, extended family members, your parents' friends and business associates, your realtor, the butcher, and on and on. Put everyone you can think of on the list and see where you're at. Then, if necessary, take the red pen and start cutting until you're down to a figure that's manageable and that fits into your budget.

Planning Your Wedding Budget

Money is the number one thing that married couples fight about. But do you realize that the tension surrounding money begins long before the happy couple say 'I do'? Wedding costs can rapidly escalate out of control which is why it's so important to begin the planning by devising a realistic budget. And once you've got the numbers crunched, it's equally important that you both stick to the budget.

And while a wedding budget doesn't sound all that glamorous, it doesn't have to be a bad thing. In fact, planning your wedding without a budget is almost guaranteed to land you into serious financial debt. What's the key to success? As it will be throughout your marriage, open, honest, two-way communication is an absolute must.

Newly-engaged couples must talk about how each envisions his and her special day. Women work on the assumption that guys don't care about the details but that's not always true. It is, after all, the man's big day, too and he has a family to please as well.

Once the excitement of the engagement wears off, go somewhere quiet and talk about what's important to each of you in regards to your wedding day. Listening to your partner's opinion is as important as talking so be sure to do both. Then, make a list of what you both want (to arrive in a horse-drawn carriage, lobster, renaissance theme, color scheme, etc.) and what are absolute necessities (for example a photographer, caterer, rings, etc.). You're going to use this information when it's time to allocate your budget.

Once you both have an idea of what's important, it's time to crunch the numbers. You've got to determine how much money is available now (for example, in savings accounts, stocks/bonds, real estate, trust funds), how much you'll have to commit to saving from your regular income streams, and how much you can realistically expect others to kick in. Depending on how far out the actual wedding date is you may want to consider opening a higher-interest bearing account for the money so that it can earn interest.

When considering what others may be able to put towards the cause it's really important that you don't make unrealistic demands. Take whatever others are willing to contribute graciously and try not to belabor the issue. Getting angry or disappointed in the amounts you are being given isn't a very mature way of handling the situation.

When you know where the money's coming from and how much is coming, you'll know how much you'll be able to spend. Now make another list of all wedding-related expenses and allocate a dollar amount or the percentage you're willing to spend next to each item. This will help when you're actually contracting for these services. Remember that if you exceed your budgeted amount in one category, you'll have to scale back another so your budget will stay balanced. Because budgeting is so very important for most couples, you'll find that wedding budget worksheets, software and other tools are available everywhere, so go find one and start using it right now!

Selecting the Location of the Wedding Ceremony

The wedding ceremony is where two individuals unite to become one. Choosing the location for this event would seem a simple task, but it's actually one that requires much planning and coordination, especially if a non-traditional ceremony is being planned.

Many couples will hold the wedding ceremony at a house of worship, usually one that the bride, the groom, or some other family member attends. When this is the case, selecting the location is fairly easy, provided the date is available. But what happens when the bride- and groom-to-be are of different denominations? More tricky still, how is the situation handled when the couple doesn't have any religious affiliation?

That's when the couple needs to get together to discuss their wedding ceremony location options. And there are many. Selecting the location of the ceremony should happen well in advance of the wedding date, up to 12 months if possible. If you wait too long to reserve the location, you may find it's already booked.

Besides a house of worship, wedding ceremony locations can be practically anywhere – at home, at a country or yacht club, outdoors at a local, national or state park, on a yacht, on a tropical island, at a mountaintop retreat, in a medieval castle, at Disney World – you name it, it's probably capable of accommodating a wedding ceremony.

Before selecting a location, however, you've got to make sure it'll accommodate your needs. Is the location large enough to accommodate all your guests? Are dressing rooms available? Are there electrical outlets for acoustics and/or music? Is the location easily accessible, especially for those with special needs? Can you find someone to officiate at the location?

The amount you'll pay will vary from location to location. When you're finding out the costs, be sure to ask what is included with the price. Make sure the items mentioned are written out on

the contract, too. You'll likely be asked to provide a deposit to reserve the date. This needs to be reflected on the contract as well as the balance amount and due date.

There's more to consider about the wedding ceremony than just the location. The music and the vows need special attention, especially if you wish to break out of the 'traditional' mode. The music may be included with the location. For example, oftentimes a church will use its own organist. However, if your budget allows, you may wish to write your own wedding songs and hire a soloist and accompanist to perform them. Or you can hire musicians to match the theme of your wedding. If these types of arrangements are in your budget, be sure to reserve the talent far in advance, right after you've secured the wedding ceremony location.

You can also write your own vows or make modifications to traditional vows. This puts a truly personal touch on the event. Just be sure to give a copy of your version of the vows to the person officiating so that everyone knows what to say.

Selecting the Perfect Wedding Reception Location

Choosing a wedding reception location involves more than just making sure all your guests can fit comfortably into the space. This location is where the majority of the wedding day festivities will take place so there needs to be enough room to accommodate eating, dancing, socializing, and all the other fun activities that happen at receptions like cutting the cake and throwing the wedding bouquet.

Many couples choose larger-sized hotels or function halls for their wedding receptions because typically, everything they need to pull off this memorable event is right there on-site. As an added bonus, these types of wedding reception locations usually include the services of a wedding coordinator who will work with the couple to meet their every need. And the great thing about having a reception in a hotel is that overnight accommodations don't require any extra planning.

Selecting the wedding reception location as soon as possible is highly advisable, especially if you need to accommodate a large number of guests and especially if your wedding will be held during the busy season. Although you do not need a firm head count, you will need an estimate. A medieval castle on a lake may not accommodate 250+ guests. Also, determine your wedding reception budget beforehand as this likely will have an impact on your wedding reception location options. You may want to consider arranging your wedding off-season when rates on reception locations will typically be much lower.

You will be required to make a down payment to reserve the space and date and this typically will be non-refundable. You'll want to make sure you understand the cancellation policy as it may involve more than losing your deposit. Also discuss arrival and departure times to make sure all the elements you have planned can be accommodated during this timeframe.

Besides the types of venues already mentioned, plenty of other wedding reception location options are available, and they'll each vary in terms of space, price and amenities, so it's

important to pay close attention when visiting the ones you're considering. Smaller gatherings can be held at places such as at home, a museum, a botanical garden, or a park. Although these may be smaller in size, the details will still need to be coordinated by someone so don't forget to ask for help, even if that means hiring a wedding coordinator.

When you're looking at wedding reception locations, try to plan out the space, much like you would if you were buying or renting a home. Where will dining and dancing take place? Where will the guest book and place cards be located? Is there a secure area for wedding gifts? Will you need a stage for your musicians? Are there electrical outlets for the DJ? Your photographer will want to know about the lighting and whether there's a suitable location to take wedding party photos. Is there a way to control the temperature? If the reception will be outdoors, you'll need a back-up in the event of uncooperative weather, which may add to your costs.

Wedding Photography and Videography

Long after the last guest has left the reception you and your spouse will have your wedding photography or videography to look at when you want to re-live the joyous occasion – hopefully, that is! When it comes to planning your wedding photography or videography, the most important aspect is to have an idea of the wedding memories you want to capture. And then you've got to work on finding someone with the right experience and who has a personality you can work with.

This will require more than scanning the phone book or Internet to find the least expensive package deal. It's true that you get what you pay for and if you're willing to pay the minimum amount, you might just end up with minimum wedding photography/videography service.

Right from the beginning, realize that wedding photography and videography services will consume a significant portion of your wedding budget. Also know that it's an absolute must to book this type of talent as soon as possible, at least 6 months to a full year before the wedding date, especially if you're planning the wedding during the summer or holiday season. You've got to get a head start and although that offer from your Uncle Vinny to photograph your wedding (for free!) as his gift to you sounds tempting, resist the offer. This is not the time for amateur shots.

It's important to move at a fast pace, but never skip the background check. Checking references is a must but so is being allowed to view the prospective photographer's images from a previous wedding assignment. Don't rely on the quality of their portfolio which is usually a collection of the best pictures from multiple weddings. You want to view one whole wedding, from start to finish. Also check with the local Better Business Bureau as they'll have on file any complaints made against the person or company.

A lengthy history of wedding photography (as opposed to other types of photography experience, or your Uncle's free offer) is also a sign that the person knows what he or she is doing. Don't assume that the person you're interviewing brings back-up equipment and batteries – ask because equipment does fail.

When selecting the wedding ceremony and reception location, make sure the photographer has access to the shots you want to get. It's also a good idea before the reception to delineate an area where the wedding photographer/videographer can be based; somewhere primarily for the storage/setup of necessary equipment and extra gear. Close to the music is always a good choice.

When selecting someone to coordinate your wedding photography and videography, take time to discuss the types of pictures you want taken and of whom. Know whether the person will develop the pictures and assemble them into the wedding album or if you'll just be getting the negatives and CD. In the latter case, you'll be the one assembling the album. That's fine as long as it's what you expect and know how to do.

As you can see, advance planning is crucial. On your wedding day, you want to enjoy yourself knowing that someone reliable is out there, capturing the memories that'll last a lifetime!

Planning Your Wedding Flowers and Decorations

When it comes to wedding flowers and decorations, the key to pulling off a look that works really lies in the planning. Since there are no rules when it comes to wedding flowers, it really is all about what the couple, well mainly the bride, wants and can afford. Decorating options are limited only by the imagination and even the most outrageous floral images can be made to fit practically any budget, if you're willing to research the many options and ideas that are out there.

From do-it-yourself arrangements to using silk floral arrangements that can even be rented for the occasion, planning your wedding flowers can be a lot of fun. Involving your bridal party will help generate ideas you might not have thought about and besides, helping the bride is one of their responsibilities so why not? But forget about the groom, though. The most he'll probably care about is that you stick within the amount that has been budgeted.

You want to give yourself plenty of time so begin planning the wedding flowers at least 6 to 12 months prior to the wedding date. The flowers are one of those things you'll want to consider while you are choosing the wedding attire because most brides want the floral arrangements to complement the overall color scheme and theme of the wedding. Bridal magazines are full of pictures of bouquets so that's a good place to go for ideas. Also think about the types of flowers that will be in season at the time of your wedding. Choosing flowers that are readily available is one way to keep costs under control.

Besides boutonnières and bouquets for the wedding party, you can also make flowers and decorations part of the wedding ceremony and reception. Pew bows, arrangements for the altar, head table, cake table and gift table, as well as centerpieces for all the guest tables should be considered. These will definitely add to your costs, but they're also areas where you can really get creative.

If cost-control is an issue, why not have the bridal bouquets do double-duty as head table decorations or perhaps the gift or cake table? Once the formal photographs are over, no one will be carrying their bouquets around anyway. Or why not use less expensive balloons or candles as centerpieces? Pew bows are very easy to make, even for 'craft-challenged' brides. Another idea is to add more 'filler' to your floral arrangements by using more greenery, baby's breath and tulle.

As you can see, it really is all in the planning. Once you've got the wedding flowers and decorations figured out, you just need to find a florist capable of turning your thoughts into reality. It's important to select a florist early on because there's a limit to how much even the best florist can handcraft. Go over the contract with a fine-toothed comb before signing to make sure the number and type of arrangements, including the flowers being used, are clearly specified along with delivery details. Record the deposit amount and delineate the payment schedule.

Wedding Food, Drinks and Cake

To eat, drink and be merry! That's the real reason guests love attending wedding receptions. Because food and fun go hand in hand, many couples plan their wedding food and wedding drinks at the same time they're planning the reception.

And even though the majority of wedding receptions are held during the evening, this doesn't have to be the case with yours. If you're working on a tight budget, instead of planning a nighttime sit down-style reception, consider arranging a morning, brunch, lunch, or cocktail reception. They can be just as festive, but at a fraction of the cost. To set the tone, select a location with a pleasant daytime view. If you prefer an evening reception, a buffet dinner will cost less than a sit-down dinner as will a paid bar versus an open bar.

You need to plan your wedding food and drinks well ahead, at least 6 - 12 months in advance of the big day. Oftentimes, the reception location is selected because of the fact that the wedding food and non-alcoholic drinks are offered as part of the package price. And while these venues may not create the wedding cake, they will often refer a wedding cake specialist. At a minimum, you'll find they offer cake cutting/serving services.

There are, however, a number of reception locations that will require the services of a caterer. If this is your situation, it's important to check whether cooking facilities are available at the reception location. If not, the caterer may have to rent what is needed, which will add to your costs as these fees will ultimately be passed on to you. Most couples think only to deal with creating the menu, not the logistical end of catering including servers. Neglecting the details can lead to problems and cost overruns down the road. A good caterer will help you through the details, but you should know what to ask as well.

Most couples will break their wedding food budget down into a cost-per-person basis. The goal is to get as much quality food as you can while spending the least amount possible. You have lots of food options and if you're planning the food and the wedding/reception simultaneously,

you have time options like those noted above which can lower your wedding food costs significantly.

When it comes to wedding drinks, non-alcoholic beverages will be your least expensive option (although you still should have champagne for a toast) and you'll find that they're often included with the price of the wedding food. If you're going to serve alcoholic beverages, you have more decisions to make including open bar or paid, wine and beer or full liquor service.

As for the wedding cake, again, the costs are typically determined on a per head basis. It used to be that you ordered your multi-tier, one flavor cake with plastic statue on top from a baker but nowadays, you can actually have your wedding cake custom-created by a cake designer! That's just one more thing to think about when planning your wedding budget.

Wedding Favors Add That Special Touch

A wedding is first and foremost about the celebration of two people uniting for eternity. It's always been this way and will continue to be this way. Guests are invited to share in the joyous occasion but also to bear witness to the union. There is something about standing before all those who are special to you and making lifelong commitments for others to hear. And that is really what transforms two people into a married couple.

Wedding favors are used as a way for the bride and groom to show that they appreciate each of their guests; the time they have taken out of their busy schedules, the help they have given, the thoughtfulness in their gift-giving, the distances the guests have traveled, whatever it is the guest did that helped make this day even more special for the couple.

Wedding favors traditionally are given to all of the guests that have been invited to the wedding reception. They're typically inexpensive gifts, averaging in the \$1 - \$2 price range per piece. Of course, more expensive wedding favors are available and there are many weddings for which these higher-priced wedding favors are appropriate. Countless wedding favors are available in just about every category one could imagine, from sterling silver picture frames, to personalized edible chocolates, and even fragrant bath soaps.

Selecting wedding favors isn't all that difficult, nor is it necessary to purchase these well in advance of the wedding date. Most are readily available at online and retail outlets that specialize in this type of wedding accessory. You don't want to wait until the last minute however, as that is a particularly hectic time, and you will need to allow ample time for personalization, or if you select an item that requires special ordering, for example, an unusually large quantity, or an exclusive item. To be on the safe side, two to three months prior to the wedding date is a good time to make your wedding favor selections. Once you have them in your possession, the only other thing you need to worry about is getting them to the reception before the guests arrive.

One way to easily shop for wedding favors is to go online. Type 'wedding favors' into your search engine and you'll get pages of web sites offering every type of wedding favor you could

ever want. So where do you begin? It's definitely a good idea to consult your budget worksheet first so you know the price range to focus on. From there, think about what makes you and your partner unique. Do you both love golf? Are you wine connoisseurs? What about a theme? If your wedding has one, there's sure to be a favor to complement that theme. Do you want the favor to be the place holder? If so, select one that allows you to write the person's name and table number. Creating your own wedding favors is another option and can end up being the most unique wedding favor of all and one that your guests are sure to treasure!

Don't Overlook the Importance of Your Wedding Music

There are two aspects of wedding music that need to be addressed when planning your big day. First, you may wish to select certain music or arrange for professional soloists or musicians to play during the actual wedding ceremony. But at the wedding reception, it's pretty much anything goes when it comes to selecting wedding music, provided it's tasteful.

Right away is the time to plan your wedding music. Good talent gets booked fast and you don't want to end up having to select the brand new DJ with only a few weddings under his belt or something even worse. Booking your music a full year in advance is advisable but at a minimum, you should know who will be showing up and what he or she will be playing at least six months prior to the wedding date.

For most weddings, selecting the music for the wedding ceremony isn't that complicated because most often, it's controlled by the person in charge at the location where the ceremony will take place. When you're researching your wedding ceremony options, be sure to inquire about any guidelines with respect to wedding ceremony music as these could possibly impact your decision. If the ceremony is being held outdoors, check for electrical hook-ups or book live musicians.

Wedding music during the ceremony is basically secondary to the ceremony itself so the music is really meant to sort of 'fill in the gaps' during the non-speaking periods such as while guests are being seated, during the procession, and while lighting the unity candles. Of course, it's your wedding and it can be custom-designed.

The music that's played at the reception, however, is going to mean the difference between a successful reception and one that's ho-hum. And this is where things can start to get complicated. When you begin searching for wedding reception music, you'll realize rather quickly that you have a lot of options. You can book a live band, or a DJ that'll play pre-recorded music, or you can buy that CD full of top wedding songs and have someone act as the DJ.

It's important that you both agree on the type of wedding music you want played at your reception. There are 'traditional' songs that almost always are played at certain points during the reception such as the father/daughter dance, the cake cutting, the dollar dance and so on. And then there is all the music in between. Do you want jazz, country, R&B, new age, Italian, Latin, Jewish-inspired, or a little bit of everything? That's an important decision to make

because the musicians you select have to be able to deliver what you want or you won't be happy.

Try to book experienced professionals for your wedding music. Always ask for and check references. Even contact the Better Business Bureau. If booking live talent, arrange to hear a live performance before booking. Scrutinize the contract before signing to make sure all parties agree on the number of hours music will be provided and that everything that has been agreed to is in writing. Find out the cancellation and refund policy, too.

Wedding Transportation for Today's Bride and Groom

Most soon-to-be-married couples don't think outside the box when it comes to wedding transportation. They open the telephone directory, search for limousines and then start calling around to find out which company is the least expensive. While a limousine is quite appropriate, it's also so very common. If you want your wedding day to stand out, you've got to get creative. Here are some transportation issues to consider beforehand and some alternative transportation ideas you may not have thought about.

Transportation is one wedding issue you want to tackle early on, six months to a year in fact, before the big day. On your checklist, it would happen after you've selected the venues for the ceremony and the reception, and after you've confirmed the number of wedding attendants you will have. Why? Because a big part of wedding transportation involves logistics, in other words, how many people can be transported to and from point A to point B and then to point C and how long will it take.

Begin with transporting the bridal party from the place where they will dress to the wedding ceremony. It is customary to transport all women (and girls) involved as well as the bride's parents. If the bridal party is so large that everybody cannot fit into the vehicle, it is possible to make multiple trips provided they are coordinated and discussed with the service provider beforehand. The groom and groomsmen arrange their own transportation to the ceremony and this is not something that typically is contracted out.

After the ceremony, anything goes. Many couples choose to have the entire wedding party transported from the ceremony to the reception, but it's acceptable to transport only the bride and groom, or the bride, groom, best man and maid of honor. If you'll be transporting the whole gang, again, multiple trips or multiple vehicles may be necessary. Once everyone is present and accounted for, the topic of transportation is over.

With that logistical information figured out, you're ready to begin your search. First, double-check the wedding budget worksheet to see how much money has been allocated for transportation. Your options can get pricey. Besides limousines, you can make a grand statement by being transported in a stretch Hummer or SUV, either of which can transport large groups. Classic or vintage cars are a stylish option. Other ideas include a party bus, a horse-drawn carriage, a boat, a snowmobile, motorcycle and side car, hot air balloon, or anything

really that fits in well with the overall theme of the wedding. Of course a personal vehicle is always a fine option and is the least expensive.

Be sure to ask about wedding package deals like a free bottle of champagne, or transportation at the end of the evening. And always carefully review the contract before you sign. Make sure it states date, pick-up times, total costs and payment schedule, any extras you've agreed to, the driver's name and what he or she will wear, and the cancellation/refund policy.

Wedding Gifts to Remember

There's a saying about gifts and that is, 'It's better to give than it is to receive.' Now if you ask couples who have had weddings, they'll probably tell you that on their special day, they received some of the nicest gifts ever, so these people might not agree with this saying. But whether it's for better or for worse, gifts given by the bride-and groom-to-be are certainly part of the wedding tradition.

So who makes up the group fortunate enough to receive a gift from the bride and groom? Members of the wedding party top that list. That includes everybody: best man, maid (matron) of honor, bridesmaids, ushers, groomsmen, junior bridesmaids, flower girls, and ring bearers. It's also a nice gesture for the bride to give a gift to the groom and vice versa, although this is not mandatory. Nowadays, the bride and groom also include each set of parents on the gift giving list. And finally, it's definitely a nice gesture to give a gift to any other person who did something special during the occasion. Sometimes someone will be asked to do a special reading at the ceremony, or to step in for the bride's father and walk the bride down the aisle and these individuals should be acknowledged.

The purpose of these wedding gifts is to show your appreciation, not break your wedding budget. A gift that has been specially picked out shows you put thought and consideration into the gift. Including a personalized note with the gift thanks the person for whatever role he or she played and it is certainly a nice touch when having the gift engraved with the wedding date and couple's names or initials.

Make sure you have the gifts purchased about 4 weeks prior to the wedding date. That gives you enough time to have them engraved and to create your personalized messages. To help the gifts make an even greater impression on the recipient, take special care in wrapping them. Use fancy wrapping paper and elaborate bows using colors that complement the wedding colors. The best time to give your gifts is during the rehearsal dinner, as it's intimate, and the people to whom you're giving the gifts should all be present.

Need some gift ideas? Well first check your wedding budget to see how much you have allocated to this category. You've likely spent quite a bit of your money by this stage, so it's important to take a realistic look. Brides typically give each member of the bridal party a piece of jewelry or a hair clip that the bride would like her to wear on the wedding day. Other gift ideas include bud vases, picture frames, bath oils, a collectible item or a gift basket. The men in the wedding party like to receive engraved pens, pocket watches, cigars, business card holders,

a clock for their desk, or key chains. For the parents, a professional wedding photo in an engraved frame is perfect as is a personalized letter detailing your appreciation. For each other, anything that conveys your love and devotion is ideal.

Planning Your Honeymoon

Almost as fun as planning your wedding is planning your honeymoon. You want your first trip together as husband and wife to be memorable and it's tempting to take an 'anything goes' approach. After all, you're likely to get lots of wedding gifts in the form of cold, hard cash so why not?

Well for one, you want to be able to eat and see the sights when you arrive, so you've got to use some discretion when making your arrangements. Many couples find that it is possible to have a great honeymoon, even if they're sticking to a budget and all it takes is some planning.

When is the best time to plan the honeymoon? Obviously sooner is better, especially if you intend to travel to a popular destination during peak season. But at a minimum, while you are putting together your wedding budget, it's a good idea to allocate funds for this adventure together and work from there.

To help determine an appropriate budget, you've got to think about your possibilities, and of course, you've got to be realistic. A good way to start planning your honeymoon is to think about the things you both like to do in your free time, think about places you've only dreamed of visiting, and think about what you realistically intend to do while away. You can also use the Internet or a travel agent to help you come up with honeymoon ideas.

Once you've selected a destination, it's time to get busy making your travel arrangements. Special deals are out there, but you've got to be aggressive in your search for them. Don't despair; it'll likely be worth the effort. And the great deals might not always involve getting the lowest price. It's the extras that'll turn this ordinary trip into something extraordinary. Perhaps the deal includes getting a suite with a breathtaking view, or being greeted with a bottle of champagne.

When you're down to only 3 months left until the wedding date, you should have your travel arrangements firmly in place. Know where you're going, how you're getting to the airport (after the reception) and once you arrive at your destination, how you'll be getting to your accommodations. Once you're in place, the rest of the vacation can run its course. If you wish, you can plan some day trips in advance. This far out, also make sure vaccinations and passports are current, if applicable.

A few weeks before your departure, start gathering the things you'll bring with you on your honeymoon: camera and film/memory cards, swimsuits, day and evening wear, traveler's checks, tickets, documents, confirmation numbers for ALL reservations (including person's name if possible), and a bit of local currency for tipping. Set aside somewhere safe.

Then as the approaching days become more stressful than you can handle, close your eyes and picture yourselves lazily lying around your honeymoon suite, with not a care in the world except how soon you'll be able to return!

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