

Chapter 1

First Steps to a Wedding to Remember

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You came home once to find that his black cat had redecorated your white living room, and instead of pitching a fit, you thought it was hilarious. He not only wasn't embarrassed but also found it endearing the night you became violently ill on margaritas at your firm's Christmas party. This must be it then, you both realize — true love. And what comes next is the big step.

In this chapter I guide you through the beginning of the wedding-planning process. I also help you decide whether to hire a professional wedding planner or do things on your own (hint: I favor hiring a planner).

The “Ize” Have It

In spite of what you've heard, the time between your engagement and your marriage need not go down in the annals of your relationship as the Dark Ages. What follows is a series of “exercIzEs” to kick off your wedding planning and set you on the right track to pulling off the wedding of your dreams. As you familarIZE, fantasIZE, prioritIZE, and so on, the goal is to figure out what's important to both of you and to achieve your vision with as little acrimony and heartburn as possible. Okay — I admit this IZE thing is corny, but it really works.

Familiarize: Spreading the news



After you and your beloved decide to get married, I recommend that you demonstrate respect and courtesy by telling your parents first. This isn't the time, however, to ask them to foot the bill. Give them oxygen. Let them bask in the glow a bit. (If there's no glow in sight, proceed directly to Chapter 22 and start planning your honeymoon — it may be time to elope.)

This is a natural time for the first communiqué between the bride's and groom's parents if they don't already know each other. I recommend you rely on your own sense of whose parents should initiate contact. If it's a tossup, you can fall back on tradition and suggest that the groom's parents call the bride's.

If either of you has children, tell the kids before you tell other people (or other people tell them). Life isn't like *The Brady Bunch*; the merging of families can be highly charged, even if everyone seems to get along famously.



I realize that you're overjoyed with your decision to marry, but don't let your enthusiasm lead you to draft 82 people for your wedding party as you spread the news among your friends and relatives. If you've known since you were 2 who your best man or maid of honor will be, then by all means that person should be among the first few people to know. Otherwise, hold off broadcasting even tentative plans until you know how many of your 2,000 closest friends you can actually invite.



And a special caution for this age of social networking: Resist the urge to update your Facebook status or tweet about your engagement until you've told your parents (and your kids, if any) the good news. And know that after you announce your engagement online, all your friends and relatives may assume that their invitation is on the way. So if you don't plan to host every single person in your social network at your wedding, be prepared to manage expectations, and give some thought to carefully controlling your privacy settings.

Fantasize: Envisioning your dream wedding

All too often, people begin planning their wedding by setting a strict budget and then trying to shoehorn in all the things they think they *should* have in their wedding. This process doesn't work and can leave you feeling like you can't afford to have your dream wedding in any way, shape, or form.



Guest-imating your costs

You can never make a preliminary guest list (*in writing*) too early. Thinking about whom to invite and who will actually show up has a tremendous impact on the way your wedding planning evolves. The number in your head may not correspond to the reality, and seeing the names on paper helps check your natural propensity to invite anyone who's anywhere near you. Though certain costs such as space rental, officiant fees, music, and the wedding dress are usually fixed, items such as centerpieces, food, and beverages change in proportion to the number of guests attending. The difference between 100 and 125 guests is three more tables and a 25 percent increase in food and drink. Only you can decide whether those people make the day more special or simply blow your budget.

Including everyone who *really* matters while not inviting everyone you or your parents have ever met is a precarious juggling act. Before you ask your prospective in-laws to submit a list of names and/or a guest estimate, give them some parameters upfront so there's no confusion later. After you agree on a tentative number of guests, you can look for venues with a much more realistic idea of what will accommodate your group as well as your budget.

Remember that the mysterious folks who calculate wedding statistics say that you can expect 10 to 20 percent of those invited not to attend. That's the national average, but it could be irrelevant to your situation, so don't bank on this to plan the size of your venue or to determine your budget's bottom line. You may be the lucky ones blessed with 100 percent attendance.

I suggest that you work backward. Before you rein in your dreams, imagine that no budgetary or logistical constraints exist. Start thinking about all the elements that would go into your fantasy wedding. Be as specific as you can, using all your senses. How big is the wedding? Where is the wedding? What time of day is it? What color are the bridesmaids' dresses? What does the band sound like? Who's there? What does it smell like? What are you eating and drinking?



Write down these thoughts on a piece of paper and exchange them with your spouse-to-be. You may feel more comfortable brainstorming out loud together, but the point is that you should both be honest and open-minded. Take each other's fantasies seriously. Refrain from making dismissive snorting sounds. This type of open exchange is neither a mind game nor an exercise in futility, but rather a very helpful step in discovering what both of you really want.

Prioritize: Deciding what's really important

Now, take all your fantasy elements (see the preceding section) and put them in some order of importance. Are towering bouquets of white lilies more important than fine champagne? Are you flexible on the time of year? What about the time of day? Must you have a couture gown or are you willing to go with something less lavish and instead spend more money on a seven-piece orchestra? Does the wedding site have to be the country club or would Aunt Myrtle's parlor serve the same purpose?

Compare your priority list with your intended's. Maybe you both agree that having a sit-down dinner isn't so important. Perhaps you've always pictured getting married barefoot on the beach, but your better half thinks only a black-tie hotel wedding will impress everyone back home. What compromises are you both willing to make? (This is good practice for the rest of your lives.)

Visualize: Making a reality checklist

The next step is to take these priorities and paint the picture of where you're going to park your money. Start by estimating the cost of each of the most important elements. These estimates provide you with a rough budget, a way to set some parameters; you'll flesh it out later. (See Chapter 2 for more information on setting a budget.)



Remember that none of this budgeting is etched in stone, so you can afford to be flexible. Assuming you can't afford the world's most exotic flowers or rarest Champagne, assess which parts of your prioritized fantasy lineup may really work. Though you both may have in mind a caviar-and-blini bar, you may also see a band that sets you on fire. Because having both will blow your whole budget, one has to go. To help make that decision, think back on what sticks in your memory from great weddings you've been to. Was it the food? The setting? The music?



Weddings aren't planned in a vacuum, and they don't end when the cake is cut. You'll encounter both familial and interpersonal ramifications that last far longer than this one day. A good idea, therefore, is to find out at the very beginning what the highly charged issues are and, when in doubt, compromise. Doing so makes for a happier day and a happier future family life.

Dealing with kiddie complications

One of the wonderful things about weddings is that they can bring many generations together under one roof. On the other hand, you may not be delighted to have screaming infants punctuating your vows or to pay for even the most adorable Shirley Temple clone to take up a seat at your reception.

Whether to invite children to your wedding is one of the more emotional issues you may face during your premarital meanderings. As you may have noticed, people can get positively fierce when it comes to their little darlings. So what are your choices, and after you make your decisions, how do you impart them most graciously?

Don't count on guests being versed in the nuances of invitation addressing. (In other words, they probably won't realize that their children aren't invited if their names aren't on the envelope.) After you make your decision, be gracious but firm when people call and ask whether the exclusion was an oversight. The easiest way to start an all-out family war is to cave in and make an exception for some children but not others. Specifying an age

cutoff is difficult. If you have young ladies and gentlemen involved in your ceremony as junior ushers and bridesmaids, they'll undoubtedly be crushed if they aren't invited to the reception. What's more, depending on your families, you may be pressured to invite other relatives of the same age if you're including these kids. And for an evening reception, trying to have any children whisked away at their witching hour without having to bid farewell to their parents is next to impossible. One solution may be to arrange a quiet area adjacent to your reception where this age group can be deposited to nap — under the supervision of a sitter — until their parents are ready to leave.

Banning children at destination weddings (see Chapters 4 and 6) is tricky. Many people won't travel without their children and consequently may refuse your invitation. One way to please everyone is to include children at surrounding events and hire a baby sitter during the wedding itself. It's up to you to pick up the tab for this sitter, as well as to arrange to have the children in one place, fed, and properly cared for.

Organize: Breaking down the details without breaking down

If the word *organize* strikes fear in your gut, then you really need to read this. And even if you're certifiably obsessive-compulsive, you may benefit from reading the following tips on getting organized and setting a budget.



Approach your wedding as any other big project in your life: Chunk it into manageable pieces. Group several little steps into segments and plot them along a timeline or calendar, setting deadlines that jibe with everything else going on in your life:

- ✓ **Keep track of tasks and deadlines in your calendar.** Use a flexible system like your smartphone calendar or a plain old pencil with eraser in case things change. And change they will — count on it.
- ✓ **Organize your time to make things easy on yourself.** If you're starting medical school, changing jobs, or moving, this is probably not the time to plan a complex wedding with a cast of thousands. Although weddings are happy occasions, they are, nonetheless, stressful. Ask yourselves, "How much are we willing to give up?"
- ✓ **Be ready to take notes at all times.** Those light bulbs switch on at the most unlikely moments, and even though you think you could never forget such an excellent idea, somehow it gets lost amid all that other important stuff crammed into your brain. Download a note-taking application like Evernote or Springpad for your phone if you don't already have one or do it old-school and keep a notebook (and pen) within grabbing distance. Just make sure you can capture those inspirations — "re: embroidered silk, not taffeta!" or "call baker re: apricot frosting" — as they blip across your brain waves.
- ✓ **Make a swatch book.** Start collecting information and inspiration in a visually inspiring way. You can use the digital pinboard at Pinterest (www.pinterest.com) to collect pictures of all those lovely flowers and cakes you see online, or try the Wedding Row application to help you create inspiration boards from images you find online or snap yourself. For all the nondigital ephemera that multiplies as you plan your big day, accordion files or clear, heavyweight, plastic sheet protectors (the kind for reports in three-ring binders) are handy. Use them to corral contracts, menus, wine labels, brochures, guest lists, fabric swatches, stationery samples, photos, receipts, magazine articles, and so on. When the wedding's over, a lot of this stuff makes great scrapbook fodder.
- ✓ **Start keeping track of your guests as early as possible.** Use a wedding-planning website or application, a computerized spreadsheet, or a stack of 3-x-5 index cards in a box. Each entry should contain data on everyone to whom you send an invitation — the correct name spelling, the person's address, RSVP info, gift info, the guest's spouse or significant other, and who invited the guest. Such a compilation proves invaluable when planning your seating chart (see Chapter 17).



Just as you collect ideas and pictures of things you want for your wedding, it's equally important to note things you *don't* want. That way you have a better chance of remembering, for example, to tell the caterer that Aunt Myrtle is fatally allergic to clams or to tell the band that under no circumstances are they to play "The Electric Slide."

See Chapter 6 for more on using wedding apps and blogs to help you get organized and spread the word.

All the details at a glance

As you plan your wedding, you'll make a lot of phone calls and send a lot of e-mails. It helps to have everyone's contact information pulled together in one place.

As you assemble your nuptial team, keep up-to-date contact information for all the key players. Include their phone numbers — home, office, and cell — as well as postal, e-mail, and website addresses. For vendors, include the company name and contact person. If this is a lot to keep up with, at least be sure to save all the relevant names and phone numbers in your phone contact list. At some point during your planning, the following players are sure to end up on that list.

- | | |
|---|--|
| ✓ Attendants' attire (company or store) | ✓ Liquor services |
| ✓ Best man | ✓ Maid of honor |
| ✓ Bride | ✓ Makeup artist |
| ✓ Bridesmaids | ✓ Officiant |
| ✓ Bride's parents | ✓ Parking services |
| ✓ Cake maker | ✓ Photographer |
| ✓ Calligrapher | ✓ Portable toilet company |
| ✓ Caterer or banquet manager | ✓ Reception musicians |
| ✓ Ceremony musicians | ✓ Reception site manager |
| ✓ Ceremony site manager | ✓ Rental company |
| ✓ Florist | ✓ Stationer |
| ✓ Gown maker | ✓ Supplier of party favors and welcome gifts |
| ✓ Groom | ✓ Tailor |
| ✓ Groom's parents | ✓ Transportation company |
| ✓ Hair stylist | ✓ Travel agent |
| ✓ Insect spraying service | ✓ Tuxedo store |
| ✓ Jeweler | ✓ Videographer |
| ✓ Lighting designer | ✓ Wedding consultant |

Synchronize: Dispelling the timetable myth



With the exception of invitations, which can take up to four months to print and mail, you can accomplish almost every aspect of a wedding in less than two months. Not that I suggest waiting until the last minute, but you don't have to be a slave to someone else's timetable. Okay, now here's the big shocker: *Wedding Planning For Dummies* doesn't have the ubiquitous wedding timeline that tells you, for example, "Two days before: Polish your left toenail." I believe this etched-in-stone manifesto strikes terror in the hearts of even the most courageous couple. In devising your customized timetable, allow your priorities, budget, personal schedules, and reality constraints to come into play.



That said, I do advise that you attend to certain details sooner rather than later. In fact, even before you finalize your wedding date, you should get a jump on aspects that are hard to find, in great demand, or simply take a long time to accomplish. Generally speaking, these include

- ✓ **Band and photographer:** Good bands (and DJs) and talented photographers require that you book them several months in advance. (See Chapters 12 and 13 for info on finding ceremony and reception musicians, and see Chapter 21 for info on finding a photographer you click with.)
- ✓ **Gown:** The source of much prewedding anxiety, the hunt for the perfect wedding dress is unpredictable. Even if you score the first time you go shopping, having the gown shipped and altered can make the process interminable. Then you have to get the veil, shoes, bra . . . see Chapter 19 for the gory details.
- ✓ **Invitations:** You traditionally mail invitations six weeks before the wedding, but I suggest eight weeks. Exceptions do exist, specifically if you have international guests, who should receive invitations ten weeks ahead of time. Almost all out-of-towners need to take off extra time from work or make special arrangements to attend; either send them invitations early or send a card or e-notification alerting them to save the date six months to a year in advance, if possible. (See Chapter 5 for the skinny on invitations and other communication needs.)
- ✓ **Location:** You're not the only two people getting married in the foreseeable future, so if you want to get married in high season at a highly desirable spot, you may have to book up to a year in advance. (See Chapter 4 for info on choosing a space and Chapter 14 for info on working with a caterer.)

Picking the date

Maybe your maid of honor goes on a spa retreat at the same time every year. Or perhaps your future mother-in-law already has tickets for a three-month Arctic cruise next summer. People may put in requests, but you can't please everyone. Other factors can affect the best time to have your wedding. Perhaps you want the photographs to have a black-and-white, photojournalistic look, but the one person within 500 miles who does that is booked. Either you go with a more traditional photographer or you shift the date.

In the end, you must decide what's best for you and the majority of your guests. After you set the date, stick to it. Your guests have to deal with it, and most of them will deal very well.

Piggybacking a holiday

Having a wedding coincide with another major holiday is often tempting. (See the nearby sidebar, "Dates to bear in mind.") This can work if your family usually gets together anyway at this time or if people coming from out of town need a few extra days' cushion and the holiday provides some extra time off work.



On the other hand, sometimes people resent having their precious vacation time eaten up with a social obligation, especially if the date falls during a frequent flier blackout period. If they must sacrifice, however, they may expect the gracious host to make sure there's plenty to keep them entertained. In cases like these, you could find yourself playing social director for several days before and after the wedding. This can be both time-consuming and exhausting.

Another drawback to piggybacking your wedding with a holiday is cost. Think how much you'd charge to work on a holiday. The service staff feels the same way.



In cities with a large Jewish population, such as New York or Los Angeles, if you're willing to get married on a Friday night as opposed to Saturday after sunset, you stand a better chance of getting a good deal. Also, on many Jewish holidays a Jewish couple can't get married but a gentile couple can. However, this shouldn't be taken to the extreme — a gentile couple getting married on Yom Kippur or a Jewish couple getting married on Christmas Eve may find that many of their guests can't or won't show up.

Dates to bear in mind

Some holidays or three-day weekends seem like a perfect opportunity to have a wedding. Other times can be off-limits, depending on your religion or nationality. For example, conservative and Orthodox Jews avoid getting married during the 49 days — except on the 33rd day — between Passover and Shabbat. Still other dates may be anniversaries of painful events such as a death in the family. In any case, here are some days to take into consideration when choosing a date.

New Year's Day	U.S. Independence Day
Martin Luther King Jr. Day	Labor Day
Presidents' Day	September 11
St. Patrick's Day	Rosh Hashanah
Palm Sunday	Yom Kippur
Passover	Columbus Day
Good Friday	Veteran's Day
Easter	Thanksgiving Day
Mother's Day	Christmas Eve and Day
Father's Day	Ramadan



Choosing peak versus off-peak

Some couples are sentimental about dates — they want to get married on New Year's Eve to symbolize their new start together, or on one of their birthdays, or on the anniversary of their first kiss. Although this may seem sweet, watch out — your special spot on the calendar may fall on another holiday, an inconvenient day of the week, or at the peak (read “more costly”) time of year. January, February, and March are typically slow months in most parts of the United States. The most popular time to get married is May through October.

It pays to be flexible. Booking a venue for Sunday afternoon or the newly chic Thursday evening is less expensive than a Saturday night. What's more, if you're intent on having the wedding at the most popular place in town, that spot may be booked every Saturday night for the next two years.



If your wedding guests are local and your plans simple, a weekday could make life easier — and save a few bucks.

Deputize: Choosing your team

I presume you've purchased this book because you have some vested interest in producing your own wedding. However, like it or not, in this society, money means power. If your parents or in-laws are paying for a portion of the wedding, they do get a vote. This situation may prove to be one of the trickiest you face, requiring utmost diplomacy. Other people often have specific fantasies regarding *your* wedding, and those ideas may be diametrically opposed to yours.



Measure the importance of financial contributions against your resolve for certain aspects of your wedding. This ratio is something only you can determine. If you accept a great proportion of money from others, be prepared to take a great proportion of their advice. Decide which is more important to you: more financial help or total control.



Should people become overbearing, try to turn the situation around. Listen to every word of their input, thank them with all the grace and charm for which you're undoubtedly known, and then quietly make decisions with your fiancé(e) and announce them sweetly but firmly.

Before meddlers become too meddlesome, put them to work on a simple project, such as researching places for out-of-towners to stay or tracking down Aunt Myrtle's mother's famous punch recipe. I strongly advocate the gentle exploitation of family and friends, but keep in mind that involving someone in your wedding means inviting them. Ask favors only from close friends or from people who have nothing to lose or gain from helping you. The best way to solicit help is to ask for recommendations from family or friends who've been through this. That way they feel they've done something to help you and are absolved from the responsibility of interfering further.



Think over all offers of help before accepting them. Just because your best friend says she can do calligraphy doesn't mean she's very good at it. Delegate sensibly. The idea is to save you time, not make more work, cost more money, or cause hurt feelings.

Working with a Wedding Planner

Professional wedding planners (also known as wedding producers, coordinators, or consultants) used to be considered an extravagance or relegated to the role of social secretary. In the past decade, however, more couples have begun to rely on their expertise.

You may want to consider hiring a planner if

- ✓ You can't spare at least 12 hours per week to do the job yourself — and twice that much time as the wedding date draws near
- ✓ You want to invite more than 100 guests
- ✓ You're holding your wedding in a home, garden, loft, museum, or other location that isn't a full-service venue
- ✓ You're getting married in a far-off location



If you've been to a wedding that you enjoyed and it seemed similar in taste and style to what you have in mind, ask the couple who was responsible. A tried-and-true way to find a reputable planner is to ask other suppliers such as caterers, florists, and photographers. Trade associations are another good source, but bear in mind that they provide listings, not recommendations.



The web is a possible source for finding planners, but be aware that any clever bridal entrepreneur, from photographers to caterers, may call herself a planner. To further confuse matters, people in the biz (including us) tend to use the terms *planner*, *coordinator*, *consultant*, and *producer* interchangeably. Before you make an appointment, find out whether the person plans weddings first and foremost or whether weddings are a mere sideline. Be sure to ask for references and then call them.

Considering how much help you need

The best time to hire a wedding planner is at the beginning of the process. However, you can bring in some planners at any point to handle just a few aspects or to serve as the director of events on the actual wedding day.



Most often, planners charge in three ways: a flat fee, hourly, or a percentage. Expect to pay between 15 and 25 percent of your total wedding budget for a planner to coordinate the entire wedding.

Depending on the level of assistance you require, you may choose one of the following kinds of planners:

- ✓ **Day-of planner:** This person gets involved up to a month before the wedding, touching base with suppliers and ensuring that details are in order, and coordinating and managing the wedding-day schedule (see Chapter 7). This option works well for couples who can oversee many of the details themselves but want someone around to make sure things run smoothly. Besides a fee of \$1,500 to \$6,000 for the wedding day, the day-of planner may charge additional fees for time before that.

- ✓ **Event producer/designer:** The whole enchilada — someone who both designs the décor for your entire event and does all the planning. Although a good producer takes your taste and style into consideration, be prepared to entrust the producer with complete creative control. This arrangement is best for couples with no time, a substantial budget, and the willingness to relinquish complete control. The producer charges two fees — a planning fee and a design fee — that together can run to \$100,000 or more.
- ✓ **Full-service coordinator:** This planner can recommend vendors, accompany you on appointments, and negotiate contracts. He then schedules and supervises the entire wedding day. If you want to take an active role in the planning but want help along the way, hiring a full-service coordinator is a good way to go. The cost — usually a flat fee or a percentage of the wedding budget — ranges widely, from \$5,000 to \$50,000. Some full-service coordinators charge an hourly fee plus a percentage.
- ✓ **Hourly planner:** If you just need someone to bounce ideas off of or to help with a specific aspect of your wedding, such as finding a band or location, paying a planner by the hour can be money well spent. Most planners have a two- or three-hour minimum and charge \$50 to \$200 per hour.
- ✓ **Referral maker:** Certain professionals provide nothing more than recommendations for vendors, including caterers, musicians, and florists. Their services appear to be free, but these planners get their compensation from the vendors they recommend. Still, the help can be worth it.

Note: These fees are based on national averages and don't necessarily include any other wedding expenses.

Interviewing prospective wedding professionals

Before you talk to a planner, do a little homework. When you pick up the phone, be prepared to tell the consultant when you expect your wedding to take place, where you want it to be (or at least some possibilities), how many guests you plan to invite, and what your estimated budget is. Schedule an appointment to meet in person.

When you arrive for your meeting, the planner will probably show you a portfolio. Although the portfolio can help you get a sense of her style, it actually says more about the talent of the designer or florist whose work is represented. Be sure to ask what the planner was specifically responsible for in each photograph. Some other effective questions:

- ✓ How long have you been in this business?
- ✓ Where did you study or with whom did you apprentice?
- ✓ Do you belong to any professional organizations?
- ✓ What services are included in your contract?
- ✓ Are you comfortable working within my budget?
- ✓ Will you be able to work with vendors I choose?
- ✓ How do you charge — hourly, a flat fee, or a percentage of my total budget?



You and your intended are in this together, after all, so both of you should meet with prospective planners together. Even if your ideas haven't totally jelled, just describing them to a planner is a useful exercise. Also bring magazine clippings or digital images featuring fashion or décor elements that appeal to you. That way, the planner can get an idea of your taste and style.

Remember, you're looking for someone who has taste, style, and creativity and is organized, detail-oriented, and objective (a plus in charged situations). You also want a planner who's resourceful and an expert at getting you the most bang for your buck. Finally, as with a spouse, you want someone who is utterly dependable and who has a terrific sense of humor.

As in any great relationship, the bond you form with your wedding planner should be based on trust, honesty, and mutual respect. With that kind of foundation, you can create a day that you and your guests will remember fondly.