

In addition to saving your mental health, hiring a wedding planner could also soothe your pocketbook.

# Wedding Planners: SAVING DOLLARS, CENTS...AND SANITY

Story by S. Kay Bell

**DRESS, CHECK. FLOWERS, CHECK.** Photographer, check. Sanity...?

If you are getting married and you can't check that last item off of your wedding to-do list, then perhaps you should consider hiring a wedding planner. In addition to preserving your mental health, a bridal consultant just might save you some dollars, too.

Specialists who guide couples down the aisle have many names - wedding planner, bridal consultant or wedding coordinator - but they all have one goal: making sure the engaged couple's route to "I do" is a smooth and happy one.

Just how much guidance you want or need depends on the type of wedding you want, how much time you have to

devote to the big day, your need for control and, of course, your budget.

Ah yes, the cost. This is often cited as the main reason that couples decide to handle their weddings on their own. "People always talk about not being able to afford a wedding coordinator," said Barbara Hearne, owner of Barbara's Brides in Austin. "I tell them

they can't afford *not* to hire one."

Before you dismiss that as simply marketing talk, consider that Bridal Association of America statistics indicate a typical wedding last year cost just over \$30,000. That figure is just about the average cost of the Austin weddings Hearne has managed. Part of a wedding planner's job is making

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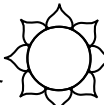
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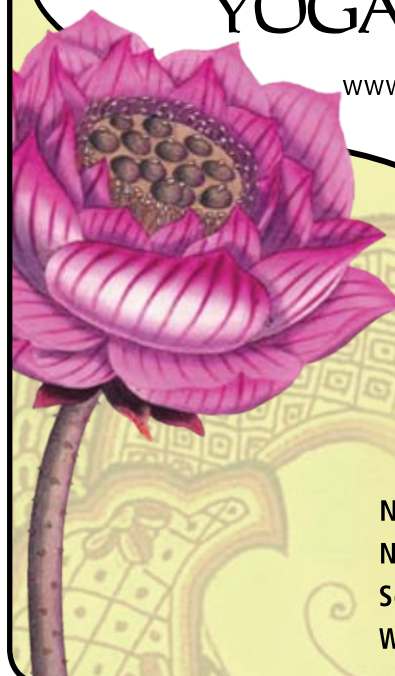
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sure that sum is well-spent.

"A coordinator is going to be able to get the best value for services," said Hearne. "Many couples waste money hiring a vendor that has a bad reputation. We hear and see it all. If we talk to one bride who's had a bad experience, we note that. We won't be using that vendor. You spend more money in the long run if you have to cancel contracts and get a new vendor at the last moment."

### Begin with a Budget

Managing wedding money has increasingly become a top priority for couples, especially since nowadays they, not the bride's parents, tend to foot the bill. "In some cases, parents are contributing some, but primarily it is the couples," said Hearne. "Most are in their 30s, so they have careers and assets and have been saving for this special day."

The first step: Know exactly what you have to spend. Obviously a planner can come in handy if you've got \$100,000 to dedicate to your wedding. Hearne has managed some at that level, complete with fireworks and special gifts for guests, but she also works with more budget-conscious brides. In these cases, expert

advice is perhaps even more critical since with less money, you have to make every dollar count.

Being realistic and upfront about each of those dollars is crucial. "Most couples, and family members, if they're involved, find it very hard to actually say an amount," said Hearne. "But once they do, then the process begins."

### Factoring in the Fee

Of course, your budget also must take into account your planner's fee. Wedding coordinator charges are as varied as the events they manage. Some collect a flat fee based on the wedding's overall cost. In these cases, the national average is around 15%, but remember, that is an average. Higher or lower percentage rates are not unusual.

Other consultants charge by the hour or offer à la carte prices for specific services. This could be the best route if you have been planning your wedding for years and simply need some help with finishing touches.

If, however, you are starting from scratch or don't know where to start, consultants typically offer packages that combine popular services. These

See WEDDING PLANNERS on page 77

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range from a couple hundred dollars to take care of basic considerations (e.g., checklists and outlines to keep you on track) to several thousand dollars to manage every last detail.

Check with the planner about tailoring services. You might be able to meet your budget and fulfill your wedding dreams by mixing and matching options from various planner packages.

Don't forget to discuss payment options. How much do you need to pay up front? When is the balance due? Does the planner offer longer installment options? Would it be wise to charge the planner's services to your credit card? Whichever financial option you choose, make sure it's one with which you and your groom are comfortable. You don't want to start your married life with a money problem that signals a rapid end to the honeymoon.

Remember, too, that weddings are full of surprises. Unfortunately, some of those are not joyful ones. Will you face a costly one if something unexpected happens? Find out the planner's refund, cancellation or postponement policy and make sure the terms are clearly stated in the contract or letter of agreement.

Now about that contract. Although your wedding is one of the most personal events of your life, when you hire a coordinator, it is also a business transaction. As with every business deal, read the service terms completely and carefully. If there is anything in the official paperwork that you do not agree with or is unclear, discuss it with your wedding planner before signing the document.

## Finding the Perfect Planner

If you decide you do indeed want or need the services of a wedding professional, you shouldn't have a problem finding one. A local phone book check or an internet search will turn up several Austin-area planners.

You can do preparatory research by visiting the sites of national planning groups, such as the Association of Bridal Consultants ([www.bridalassn.com](http://www.bridalassn.com)), the Bridal Association of America ([www.bridalassociationofamerica.com](http://www.bridalassociationofamerica.com)) and the Association of Certified Professional Wedding Consultants ([www.acpwc.com](http://www.acpwc.com)).

Because weddings are so personal, however, your best bet is to talk to friends who worked with a planner. Find out what they liked and disliked, what was helpful and what was extraneous. Then interview a couple of consultants. Ask each some basic questions, such as:

- How long have you been in business? Is this a full-time or part-time job?
- How many full-service weddings do you coordinate each year?
- What type of training or practical experience do you have?
- Are you a member of any bridal, trade or wedding associations?
- Will I be working primarily with you, or will you delegate my wedding to an associate?

Handing over the details and associated worries to a professional allows the bride and groom to focus on having fun, both in the days leading up to the ceremony and during the event itself.

If several people within the planning firm will be working on your wedding, meet them before making a decision. Also, make sure you get references and check them out thoroughly.

## Beyond the Bucks

For many couples, the value of a wedding planner goes beyond the final bill. Handing over the details and associated worries to a professional allows the bride and groom to focus on having fun, both in the days leading up to the ceremony and during the event itself.

To make sure your wedding day is one of the best of your life, Hearne has two more words of advice: communicate and compromise. "People either talk about the wedding too much so that nobody cares anymore, or they talk about it to the wrong people," said

Hearne. "Most grooms aren't interested in details like flowers and fabrics." Her usual assignments for the men: food tasting, tuxedos and music.

And don't underestimate the power of compromise. "It is ultimately the bride's day, but by give and take, everyone is happy, and there's less stress," said Hearne. "If the groom loves German chocolate cake, listen to that. Take his wishes into consideration, and those of the parents if they're involved."

Such simple acknowledgements will make everyone happier and the day perfect. Plus, Hearne added, your graceful acquiescence could come in handy later when you're seeking a similar accommodation from your new spouse or in-laws. She said, "You can always say, 'Remember the wedding where I let you have those flowers?'" ★

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