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WEDDING / EVENT PLANNING TIPS

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Every bride wants all the components of her dream wedding, and no doubt regardless of how much your budget is, your dream wedding could be beyond reach. When my fiancé and I used the online tool to drop in a zip code, number of guests anticipated, and a few wedding basics, it told us our budget needed to be at least \$60,000. As it turns out (not including the honeymoon) we managed to don me in a unique designer dress, secure a historic Tudor-style mansion with beautiful gardens, dine on exquisite food expertly served, offer attendees top-shelf open bar for six hours, and entertain our guests with an 8-piece live band, plus 4 traditional Greek dancers in costume during their breaks, for less than half ... want to know how?

After spending over 22 years in the travel industry, and hosting events from 12 to 600 attendees several times a year (plus helping three others plan their own weddings) I thought I would know how to plan mine. At times I hit an impasse and found wedding planning articles included tips helpful to someone with little event planning experience. Perhaps my dilemmas were unique, but maybe the things I learned by trial and error could help you get more out of your wedding day and “trim the fat” by more than 50% too?

Nuptials: Let’s face it, the price of clergy or a justice is pretty insignificant to the overall cost of your wedding, but the personal connection to whoever is marrying you will carry into the wedding ceremony and make that day more special for you and your guests. I have to say, with few exceptions, nearly everyone I know decided who will marry them *last*. If they want to get married on the beach, under water, on a boat, or in their backyard, the question of *who* often is less important than the logistics of *how* and *when*. So my recommendation here is about how to “increase value” (in business-speak.) Mike and I attended a church between our two residences when we met, then we moved into a house and discovered a very small Greek church in town. In the year leading up to our wedding, we participated in community events at the church (such as the family

night that packed emergency kits for Haiti.) We created a genuine bond with our priest – one so strong, he actually got choked up during the service and froze. He finished the service and spoke briefly about knowing us, at one point forcing the whole church into laughter. We didn't save anything, but we did significantly enhance the experience for our guests. If you are not religious, then maybe share an activity or go out one night with the person who will marry you. Make sure they get to know you. Most importantly, make sure they don't deliver a service like "insert name here." That's a waste of money.

TIP: Create a personal relationship with your officiant

SAVINGS: 0?

Venue: Mike and I were a bit lucky here. We found a unique and stylish venue that didn't cost nearly as much as it looked (and tasted). We increased our savings by doing a few things. First, we did the "good cop, bad cop" routine and Mike went in as the main money manager of our family and negotiated a better deal. This saved us about 10-15%. Second, we picked a date that was good (between May and September) but not in great demand (the weekend before Labor Day). Third, I negotiated the "vendor meals" to include everyone (the contract normally provides for a set amount), claiming the band, photographer, wedding day planner (more on that later) can all recommend their venue if the food and service is good, so why should we pay for their "sales lead"? Fourth, I was able to tie my professional services in to the final deal. Their brochure was awful and the venue was gorgeous. I knew I could produce something much better with my team. Do you or your fiancé provide a service that would be in any way helpful to this company?

TIP: Negotiate price, select a date that is in less demand, include all vendor meals,

*and offer **your** services to **them***

TOTAL SAVINGS: Up to \$25 per head in negotiating, plus more for date in less demand, plus the per-plate charge for vendors, plus \$650 (services provided TO them)

Entertainment: Probably the best savings is right in here. Unless you buy a very expensive wedding dress, this likely will be the 2nd highest bill you will have to pay, (assuming venue/catering is one service provider.) I wanted a live band and we discovered they are outrageously expensive. So I shopped what we call in the travel industry "secondary markets". I live in the Boston area, but after seeing a few bands – one too much like a wedding band, one too much like a bar band, one we loved but not available, and one way over priced for the talent – I started looking in the Providence area. It's only an hour away but the costs are 50% less. I also negotiated directly with the band leader and not through a booking agent (they normally get 10-30% commission). The problem here was the band manager was a typical creative person. He was hard to nail down, didn't answer emails, didn't answer the phone, not very business-minded etc. On top of that I found he was dishonest with me at least twice (that I know of, thanks to the internet) and his lead male singer (a significant component of the

entertainment) swapped out THREE TIMES between January and August (when our wedding would be.) In the weeks leading up to the wedding, I worried if something happened with the band (Did they show up? Forget to pack a speaker? Lose their lead singer again?) **That** would be a disaster. A stain on my dress ... a cake that is damaged ... flowers that don't arrive ... are all insignificant challenges. But no music is a disaster. So one sleep deprived night (thanks to my almost 1 year-old), I came up with a back-up plan. I ordered the least expensive I-pod with playlist selection, printed the song list off the band web site that I gave the band leader (crossing off songs we did not want to hear and highlighting songs we did) and asked someone to program it for me. It turns out a client volunteered and shipped me a programmed I-pod (complete with playlists for our wedding song, for dinner hour, to cut the cake, and for dancing) as my wedding gift (*no added expense*). Worst case I would not need it and we had a meaningful gift to enjoy on our honeymoon and in our kitchen (that would conjure up memories of our wedding) for years to come. Best case (or worst case?) is we did need it, and I was prepared. Think about it. You pay a lot for photographs. Why not spend a fraction of that for an audio memory that might come in handy on your wedding day too?

TIP: Go to secondary markets, negotiate with the band leader (not an agent), give good direction on the music (do you want your prom song playing or something your ex sang to you on stage at a concert?), have a back-up entertainment plan, and use it as a wedding gift option for one of your attendees

SAVINGS: \$3,500 (plus no more stressing!)

Photographer: We did save a lot here, and that is primarily because of my professional and personal relationship with our photographer, and that I played a very small and insignificant role in his starting his photography business too. But we did save a lot asking only for a link to all the photos he took, and editing the selection and creating the book ourselves. It is important to see examples of his or her work before, and to show examples of what you like and don't like. More posed shots? Or are candid's your thing? Do you like artsy images or a more journalistic approach? Also, put together a "shot list", which is all the posed photos you know you want, in chronological order that makes the most sense for the day. For example, if you know your parents are ALWAYS early, and your friends will be delayed and distracted getting from point A to point B, then plan to do the family shots first, giving your friends time to arrive. I sent my photographer a timeline of what shots he needed to take during time segments of the day, and he said it was the best direction a bride ever gave him. The more you communicate with your vendors about what you like and don't like, the happier you will be with the results. Just make sure to be diplomatic and not barking orders. Once you do that, no one cares to please.

TIP: If you are willing, make the photo book yourself

SAVINGS: \$1,000 +

Dress: Goldilocks had nothing on me ... one dress store was too mass marketed (in its' shopping experience and quality of merchandise) and the other

dress store was too small and overstocked with not enough dressing space (3 brides shared 2 dressing rooms), but the store I eventually found, and since have found others (where I did minor alterations and shopped for veils), was just right. Try going to boutique bridal stores in areas of higher income, but shop the dresses that are coming “off the rack” (if you are open to that kind of thing.) It helps to do this after you have viewed the publications and tried on some dresses and made decisions about what you know you want. I found two I loved, one just more than a pair of Nikes and under \$200 and another in the \$900 range that was a designer dress originally priced at over \$4,000. I bought both, mostly thanks to Mike’s recommendation to not feel pressured in February (five months after delivering Olivia) to pick the perfect dress (not needed until August). Now I also have a dress I can dye or separate (bodice and skirt) for formal events, or I can use it for Halloween, or I can have one dress saved for each daughter. On our wedding day the spare dress sat in the trunk of our limo “just in case”. The point is, I got a MUCH better buying experience and quality merchandise trying these smaller boutiques.

TIP: Search boutique wedding shops in upscale communities and shop “rack” dresses

SAVINGS: \$3,000

Other garments: The same goes for the veil, shoes, undergarments, etc. Shop when you can, buy what crosses your path, keep trading (returning) until you have the “right fit.” I bought three pairs of shoes before I found mine, shopped veils in two places, bought three different undergarments, and bought two pairs of shoes for each daughter. I returned what I didn’t need and ended up using something that really worked well.

TIP: Search, shop, buy, search, shop, buy, and return all but what you will use

SAVINGS: \$500

Cake: Clearly not a very large portion of your budget, the cake still adds up and a few hundred dollars savings in different areas can also add up. Our cake was \$4.50 per piece, and we could probably get that down to \$2.50 per piece if we selected a place in Cambridge, however we wanted to support a local business and didn’t have the time or money to hire a babysitter to do another tasting, etc. In the end, we wouldn’t save anything. So, all summer long we bought cupcakes to dinner parties, BBQ’s and children birthday parties to have our friends and family taste and vote. When it came to designing our cake, we ordered for 75% of attendees (not 100%) and had a lot less leftover than most weddings (normally about half the cake or more.) Honestly, we could have ordered for 50% and still had leftovers. As for the selection process, our guests appreciated having a hand in tasting and we created extra excitement around the cake.

TIP: Order for 50-75% of your guests and do multiple tastings buying cupcakes before ordering and designing

SAVINGS: \$120

Wedding Day Manager: About 6 weeks before the wedding, I realized I had a logistical problem. For all the events I worked, I worked the day of the event. On my wedding day, I couldn't work at all. I did some research and discovered there is such a thing as a "wedding day manager", who basically does everything that day for you. This person will also meet with vendors in advance, recommend vendors (ours recommended the florist and limo company), and field problems. When I thought my veil was lost two weeks after the wedding, she earned her fee when she reported she packed it in the "back-up dress" bag (it had fallen among the skirt and wasn't noticeable.) **The best way your friends and family will enjoy the wedding is if YOU are enjoying the wedding, so put everything that day in someone else's hands and focus on hosting and having fun!**

TIP: Hire someone to work the day of the wedding and maximize your enjoyment

EXPENSE: \$500-\$1,000

Minimize the Drama: This might not be an option for you, but it worked well for us. We paid for our wedding and did not have a bridal party. As a result, there was no drama.

So what if you didn't read this whole article or wanted to ask me the three things you should do? Give the entertainment a "set-list" to select from, program an I-pod for back-up entertainment, and do whatever necessary to make sure you ENJOY your wedding.