

How not to plan your wedding

By Emma Gardiner

Weddings are stressful.

Everyone you love will be there.

They will all be looking at you.

You're pledging your eternal devotion to another human who you may or may not be in love with.

Maybe you're pregnant?

All I know is that my wedding was one of the most disconcerting chapters in my life. I wasn't prepared for how I would feel, how people would behave or how any of it would pan out.

I am writing this for anyone who doesn't know where to start and doesn't want to f*ck it up (like I did).

My story

There was a time when I was deeply in love with my ex-husband; a time long before our wedding day. I dreamt of marrying him, I longed to marry him and I wanted to be his wife more than anything.

This is not how I felt in the lead up to our wedding. I felt bad. Not just cold feet but like I was going to the gallows.

I shouldn't have gotten married. This is my first point. If you feel a sense of horror at the prospect of getting hitched, don't go through with it. No amount of humiliation, non-refundable deposits or angst from your family can ever be as bad as the knowledge that you married the wrong person.

Listen to your instincts. If they are saying cancel, cancel.

Simple as that.

But if you do love this guy and you are excited about the wedding, there are still a number of challenges ahead of you.

The main thing to remember is that it is your wedding. Yours and his and no one else's. It's really easy to bend to the will of well-meaning others but it's your day.

A lot of people say this but I actually mean it. Make it about you and your love for each other; not about your mother's ego, your father's bank balance or your friends' love of a party.

You're not a producer and this is not a show.

This is the legal entwining of you and your beloved, as witnessed by people you love and who love you.

It's easy to go into people pleasing overdrive when you're planning your wedding – I sure as hell did – but it will only make you miserable.

Be clear about your intentions, set a realistic budget and above all else, make your wedding day about you and your partner.

So let's begin ...

Your questions answered

My parents hate each other. How can I invite them both without causing World War III?

I feel you. My parents haven't spoken to each other since the 1980s. Mine and my sisters' weddings were an exercise in running interference so the warring parties wouldn't come face to face. It didn't work and there was still a bunch of emotional sh*t to deal with but there are ways of making this work.

It's not going to be easy but I strongly recommend you say this to both of your parents: 'I love you, I want you at my wedding but if you fight or cause trouble, I will kill you with my bare hands'.

At this, your parent will get affronted and act, like, 'Who me? It's him/her who will cause trouble. I will be a supportive, model parent.'

That is total crap.

There is nothing like a wedding to send an already dysfunctional parent off the deep end.

They may still misbehave but at least you'll know you did everything you could to head this nightmare off at the pass.

We don't have a lot of money. Is there a way of having a cheap wedding that's not embarrassing?

The minute you mention the word 'wedding' to a venue, caterer, florist or AV supplier, all they hear is 'cha-ching'. There are event prices and there are wedding prices that are roughly double the normal price.

The first thing I would recommend is that you don't use the 'w' word when dealing with suppliers.

Secondly, define 'embarrassing'. Embarrassing, to me, is trying to dress cheap up as fancy.

Embarrassing is spending money you can ill afford on alternate drop beef and chicken dishes.

Embarrassing is crying over your debts when you should be enjoying the first year of married life.

It's better to do something cheap beautifully than to fake being rich.

Why not have a wedding brunch and serve mimosas and chicken sandwiches? Or have a wedding picnic in a park? Or a small gathering at a good restaurant where you ask guests to pay for the meal instead of buying you a gift?

If you're truly poverty-stricken, elope and announce it on Facebook. Cheap, dirty and guaranteed to piss off your relatives.

We can't afford to invite everyone. Is there a way of not inviting people that won't offend them?

Just be honest with people. Tell them you can't afford a big wedding, that you love them and that you're really grateful that they are so understanding about your financial position.

Have a tiny wedding with your absolute must-invite guests and then have a big bash at a bar or a BBQ with everyone else before or after the fact.

We don't want to invite certain people but our families are forcing us to. Is there a way of getting around this?

Think of it like cleaning out your wardrobe. If you haven't seen them in the past two years, they don't deserve to be there. By applying a rule like this to the guest list, at least there's a clear line between who's in and out.

Same goes if they don't fit any more. You might have been best friends when you were kids but if Cousin Andrew grew up to become a paranoid militant who stockpiles weaponry and canned peas, you don't have to invite him.

The only caveat on the tough love policy is overseas relatives and family friends who are really important to your parents. You probably couldn't pick them out of a line-up but if it means your parents are going to be happy, excited and importantly, distracted, at your wedding, it's worth having them there to take the heat off your friends who are mainlining Champagne and having sex in the bathrooms.

My future mother-in-law has strong ideas around how things should be and I don't agree with her. How can I assert myself?

I don't want to be the harbinger of doom but this is just the beginning of a lifelong struggle and, if you don't manage this well, it will set an unhealthy precedent.

What makes this especially hard is that you have probably spent valuable years sucking up to this woman; buying thoughtful gifts, saying complimentary things about your partner, suffering through family gatherings with a smile plastered on your face.

Your PR campaign is about to pay off but now you have the small issue of this woman trying to plan your wedding in the style of a Days of Our Lives season finale.

The best thing you can do is outsource the problem. By this I mean blame someone else.

Tell your mother-in-law that your mother wants to plan everything. Furthermore, your mother is a terrifying control freak who will only deal with you and no one else. You're happy to pass on your mother-in-law's feedback but you can't enforce anything.

I don't want to have a lot of bridesmaids but I don't want my friends and sisters to feel left out. How can I get around this?

This is another chapter in a game of 'Life is a Popularity Contest' and your lady friends are lining up for their awards. Being chosen to be a bridesmaid says to everyone else, 'She likes me better than you because I am a better friend.'

Not just that, they get to dress up, be in the photos and sit at the special table. In the hierarchy of a wedding, they are the good chess pieces you sacrifice pawns for.

The only way you can politically manage this is by splitting it into two groups: sisters and friends. Sisters get first dibs because they have known you – and stolen your hair bands, socks and Easter eggs – forever. They will also usually tell you if they want to be involved or not because, let's face it, they don't care if they hurt your feelings.

Your friends are a bit trickier. There's your best friends, there are friends who will be really helpful and supportive during the wedding process and then there are people you really like and would like to hang out with on your wedding day. These are not necessarily the same people.

The best thing to do is narrow it down to who you would let watch you wee, who will calm you down if you freak out, and who will make sure you always have a full glass. These are probably the three most important tasks for a bridesmaid.

For everyone else, give them a job at the wedding so they feel included and special; a reading, ushering, an MC gig, handing out programs or choosing the music.

Should we get married in a church?

Have you been to a church the last year? If you are not an active church-goer, it's a little like having a gym membership but never going.

Churches are God's function centres and they are usually beautiful, set-up for weddings and cheap to hire.

On the downside, there's that whole awkward religion aspect. To get married there, you ideally need to be drinking the Kool Aid.

If you believe in God but never go to church, it's still fine to get married there because you'll feel OK about dealing with the priest, saying prayers and including religion in your vows.

If you don't believe in God but your partner does, it really comes down to your relationship with him. It's just a building and they're just words; it all depends on how much significance you're willing to give these aspects of your wedding.

There's also the fact that you may not be allowed to get married in a church if you're not a card-carrying member of the faith. In Catholicism, churches are considered consecrated

ground and if you're not a Catholic, you're not allowed into the club, regardless of whether your partner is.

If neither of you are religious, what are you thinking? Step away from the altar.

Should we use a celebrant?

It depends on how you feel about middle-aged women who make a lot of eye contact.

The majority of celebrants are frustrated actors, lawyers and politicians whose skills include projecting their voice, enjoying power and loving an audience.

They also rock a matching pastel outfit.

Compare this with the dull colour-ways of the average religion, not to mention the confinement of religious texts, and celebrants come out ahead in terms of charisma, styling and creative execution of your vows.

What should we splurge on?

Be selfish. What matters to you? What are you into? If the only thing you care about is the flowers, spend money on that. If you want a Vera Wang gown, buy one. If you want a diamond-encrusted wedding band, get one.

Spend what's left over on food and wine. Give people enough wine and they won't even remember the food, let alone the wedding.

Where can we save money?

There are so many ways you can save money on a wedding that this is almost a redundant question but the really obvious ones that won't affect the quality of the experience are things like DJs and expensive booze.

An iPod playlist is just as good as a DJ, sparkling wine is just as good as Champagne for the purposes of mass catering and you don't need to spend money on calligraphers, expensive print jobs or bonbonieres.

If you're willing to do a bit of work, you can chuck some flowers in a vase and light some candles – you do not need a stylist or expensive styling elements like chair covers, linen napkins or table decorations.

You don't need canapés in between the wedding and the reception, you don't need a videographer and you definitely don't need to book the world's most expensive photographer. You will need a couple of decent photos that you will frame for your grandmother but you don't need an elaborate album or 500 shots of you and your spouse doing things you would never normally do (dip and kiss, hold hands walking down a country lane, kiss on the bonnet of a vintage car, etc).

Which brings me to car hire: don't bother. The only time you need a special car is to fit a coffin and hopefully there won't be any dead people at your wedding.

Should we print invitations or is it OK to do it online?

Do most of your friends attend Hogwart's School of Witchcraft and Wizardry or do they live in the modern world?

Ask yourself this: when you normally communicate in writing with your friends and family, how do you do it?

If you normally email, Facebook or text them, it's totally fine to use an online invitation system. There's no reason you need to revert to the archaic, hard to manage and infinitely more expensive postal methods.

But here's the thing: wedding invitations are exciting. Everyone loves getting them and receiving them by post is even better. If you can be bothered with all the hassle of printing, writing, tracking down postal addresses and managing RSVPs manually, it's a much lovelier approach. It just depends on how much time and money you have to burn on this.

How much should I spend on my dress?

Easy. How much can you afford? If you have a multi-million dollar budget, go nuts. Fly Miuccia Prada in, have a fitting and make it out of fairy silk.

Your dress should represent about five per cent of the overall spend so if you have crazy money, spend crazy money.

If you don't, though, don't worry. There are tonnes of ways of getting a great frock without spending butt loads of cash. There are second hand websites where people who spent a fortune sell their pre-loved dresses for a fraction of what they paid, there are sample sales at bridal shops, there are clearances at hire places and there's always your mother, grandmother or mother-in-law's dress for a touch of sentimental vintage.

There's also eBay for all the dresses from broken engagements (hint: they're new).

If you insist on wearing a tailored, bespoke dress, it's generally much cheaper to have one made in Vietnam so fly to Hoi An, take some fabric and pictures with you and weave a little holiday into the bargain.

Do I need to use a hairdresser?

It depends. How happy are you with your hair generally? If you're an understated kinda gal, wedding hair might make you feel uncomfortable. After all, there's a lot going on; there's veils, tiaras, flowers, those cute forehead jewel chain things, jeweled slides and clips; there's a lot of sh*t you can justifiably place on your head on your wedding day.

If you are an OTT kind of person who is all nails, tans, heels and blow dries all the time, you definitely need a hairdresser, if only to make you feel special because the bar on grooming is already set high.

Do I need to use a makeup artist?

Make up artists know all kinds of cool tricks to make your make up stay on longer, make you look better in photos and generally ensure you look super hot at all times. There's a reason trash magazines run 'Stars without make up' stories.

Make up artists are very clever but so is Youtube. You can look up any number of make up tutorials online and practice doing your own make up at home.

For the same price as paying a make up artist to help you out, you could buy all your make up and skincare and do it yourself.

The one thing you should definitely pay for is eyelash extensions and a spray tan: guaranteed to make anyone look halfway decent if they're done right.

How do you choose bridesmaid's dresses?

Assertively. It's your party and they'll wear what you want them to.

I made the mistake of letting my bridesmaids and flower girl choose their own dresses and it was a clusterf*ck.

The vibe of the wedding was meant to be 'vintage garden' and they chose 'cocktail party in New York' dresses.

My flower girl looked like a very cute Gumnut baby in pale yellow; a colour that went with nothing and matched no one.

You need to choose a flattering colour, a range of cuts so that the fat girl doesn't get stuck in a skinny girl dress, and be realistic about the pricing. It's not fair to ask your bridesmaids to pay more than \$300 for a dress they will never wear again and don't make them buy those terrible satin-covered matching shoes. Just choose something neutral and comfortable that they can re-wear.

As for bags and jewellery, it would be ideal to buy these for them as bridesmaid gifts.

Is it OK to ask for money as a wedding gift?

100 per cent yes. Money is useful; crystal rose bowls, less so.

Don't ask for it in a twee, 'here's a cutesy poem we wrote' way.

Ask for it in a straightforward 'we've been living in sin for years' way. You need a house. You need a holiday. You do not need monogrammed towels or a sandwich press.

Supply envelopes and a box to put them in. Your guests will thank you because they didn't have to spend their Saturday shopping for home wares.

When should we go on our honeymoon?

Do not go the day after your wedding. You will be hungover, tired and you will have a lot of people in town that want to say goodbye to you.

Leave it for two days. This gives you a chance to haul the gifts home, debrief with your partner and pack your suitcase.

Don't leave it for longer than a week, though. The 'just married' magic will start to wear off as you clean out the kitty litter, receive bills in the mail and start eating carbs again. You want to arrive at your honeymoon on a loved up high and capitalise on that by having sex on the rose petal hearts and accepting the congratulations (and free drinks) from the hotel staff.

Where should we go for our honeymoon?

Somewhere you've never been before that's really special. Don't go stay in your family holiday house. Don't return to where you got engaged. Don't go camping or do anything even remotely normal.

Do something really special because this is your one shot at a honeymoon. It's the one time your boss is happy to give you loads of leave; the one time hotel staff will fawn all over you; the one time you and your partner can justify spending a tonne of money on Champagne and cocktails and fancy resort wear.

The Maldives, Paris, Portofino in Italy, the Greek Islands and Tahiti are all perfect 'special' options.

Don't go to Wagga Wagga.

What legalities do we need to be aware of?

In Australia, you need to apply for a marriage license at least 30 days before you intend to get married. Most celebrants, priests and ministers can guide you through this.

On the day, you need to sign a statement saying you are married that is then witnessed. This is not your marriage certificate. This will be posted to you after the wedding.

How much should we spend on rings?

Not very much. The average wedding ring is fairly inexpensive. It's only when you start getting into platinum, diamonds and specially designed rings that things start getting expensive. You should be able to get away with buying a couple of wedding bands for about \$500.

What about flower girls and pageboys – do we need to have them?

This is usually where you shoehorn in some nieces and nephews to make your family happy. Do you need them? Hell no. In fact, trying to find stuff for them to do is nigh on impossible and there's also the Show Biz Mum aspect of involving other people's children. What do they wear? Who will curl their hair? Who is watching them around the alcoholic punch?

They are great for cute factor but a monkey could throw petals and wouldn't need to wear pants. They are an added complication that add very little to the overall experience.

Who do we need to ask to make speeches?

Traditionally, the fathers of the bride and groom try to out-do each other with their love for their child and their welcome of the interloper, the best man and the matron of honour make terrible, inappropriate jokes about the couple, and the groom thanks everyone and talks about how hot his new wife is.

In a modern wedding, this gets a little more complicated because, despite the underlying misogyny that the whole concept is founded on, it's not really cool to leave out the mums and brides.

Which leaves you with six compulsory speaking slots: mother and father of bride and groom, best man and matron of honour, bride and groom, all with the option to decline. There are also step-parents and grandparents who might want to get on board so you should extend the invitation to them too.

How formal should we make our reception?

No one is suggesting you book out the McDonald's party room but wedding receptions don't have to be as formal as they once were. This is largely because hipsters have moved in with their food trucks and their kissing booths to make weddings a whole lot more colourful and fun.

The level of formality of your wedding reception largely reflects how seriously you take the whole wedding caper. Do you see your wedding at the pinnacle achievement of your adult life? If so, have a super formal reception that honours and respects this level of gravitas.

If getting married is about as serious for you as getting a bad tattoo in Las Vegas, play around with it. Do your bridal waltz to Michael Jackson's Thriller, wear a tutu, use Cheezels instead of rings.

It's like a university graduation. All the hard work came before the ceremony so it really depends on whether the formal acknowledgement of this is meaningful to you or just an excuse to wear a funny outfit and get drunk.

What kind of food should we serve and how much?

What kind of crowd are you inviting to your wedding? Are your family Tongan footballers or organic garlic farmers? Are your friends gluten-intolerant yoga teachers or Wagyu steak snorting stockbrokers?

There's a safe middle road you can walk where people supply their dietaries before the wedding and then you over-cater on everything.

What is more interesting and contemporary is a shared plate menu where people help themselves to dishes and the leftovers can be saved.

A foolproof option is a cheese and antipasto table at the beginning with whole wheels of cheese and a range of pickled vegetables, meats, olives and bread.

For mains, do shared plates or a themed buffet (ie local produce, seafood, Indian or country roast) where people can choose their own food and the resultant portions.

For dessert, do shared plates of mini tarts and truffles on the table, or offer wedding cake with tea and coffee. If you want to make the drunk people happy, bring out an icecream truck or icy poles later in the night.

How much booze do we need to provide?

Too much. The worst thing that can happen is running out of booze. It doesn't have to be fancy or varied. You just need lots of the basics: full strength and light beer, sparkling wine and red and white wine.

With whites, go for something innocuous like Pinot Gris. With reds, go for something soft like a Cabernet Merlot.

With the sparkling, make sure there's heaps of it and start serving it as soon as possible after the wedding ceremony is over.

And water. Give everyone access to lots of water.

Do we have to buy bonbonieres?

Absolutely not. My ex and I spent ages buying funny vintage teaspoons and sandalwood fans as gifts and most people left them behind. We ended up with many spoons and many fans and felt really disappointed that people didn't keep them.

Bonbonieres are something you can waste a lot of time and money on and guests rarely care about them so why should you?

How do we choose a venue?

There a number of considerations that should come into play when choosing a venue.

Firstly, location. Where is the wedding taking place? The venue should be as close to this as possible so that people don't have to spend a fortune on cabs or worry about parking. It would be ideal to have the whole thing happen in one place, or failing that, within a walkable (in heels) distance.

Secondly, wet weather. What will happen if it rains? I went to a beautiful wedding once where the nuptials were supposed to take place on a beach and the reception was a short walk across a park. And then it rained. And we ended up in a 1970s community centre plastered with children's drawings.

If your venue is outdoors, make sure you have a wet weather contingency that is easy to access and free to use.

Finally, facilities. Does your venue have air conditioning? Are there enough toilets? What kind of electrical supply does it have? Is there running water? Are there ovens or stovetops that the caterers can use? Importantly, will you be disturbing aggressive brown snakes by erecting a marquee on their home?

Check out the lay of the land and take note of everything you can think of, especially if you are having a wedding in the middle of a paddock or a quaint country hall.

Venues vary in price and some will lock you into food and beverage, AV, and styling packages. Some are very restrictive about the service of alcohol or noise or use of outdoor areas. Check all of this out before you make a decision.

Ideally your venue should be in proximity to some affordable, decent accommodation for people who are visiting from interstate, overseas or who plan to write themselves off and don't want to drive.

I say all of this because I screwed this up royally. We chose a venue in the middle of woop-woop that was miles from accommodation, forcing our long suffering guests to catch expensive taxis, drive or stay in weird regional accommodation. In retrospect, we should have hired buses but we didn't and I still feel terrible about it.

Should we hire a wedding planner?

If you have loads of cash and not much time, hell yes. Outsource your little heart out. In the same way it's appropriate to hire a nanny if you're a busy CEO, it's appropriate to hire an expert to plan your wedding if you have enough money to justify it.

Event planners are experts who think of every tiny detail, know how to solve problems and manage clients (i.e. you) so that they enjoy the experience without worrying about the toilet paper running out in the ladies' loos.

How do you write your vows?

One word: Google. Research what other couples have said, laugh at the bad ones and steal the good ones.

If you're having a traditional church wedding, this is pretty much taken care of, but if you're a dirty hippie like me, you will want to write something yourself.

In my case, I wrote something I could wholeheartedly swear; that I would always love him and always be his friend. That remains true.

If you're really struggling, borrow something from a poet, a favourite book or an in-joke that you share. It doesn't have to make sense to anyone else; just you two.

Do we have to write and send thank you cards afterwards?

Yep, you do. Or you could send a thank you email with a link to a Dropbox of photos from the wedding that guests can download.

It doesn't matter how you do it, but you do have to say thank you.

The problem is that it's the last thing you will feel like doing.

I wrote a tonne of thank you cards on ultra-expensive notecards that never got sent. We broke up before I finished writing the cards.

Do it quickly, do it the easiest way possible (i.e. print the labels for the cards at the same time as you print the labels for the invitations), and ask your husband to help you if you're going to handwrite them.

You also need to reference what the people gave you which brings me to ...

How do we keep track of who gave us what?

It depends on when you decide to open your gifts. If you do it the morning after the wedding, ask someone to scribe for you, noting down who gave the gift and what it is so you can refer back to the list when you're writing the thank yous.

If you do it at the wedding, ask someone to take a photo on their phone of the card with the gift and send you the pics. You don't want to go thanking Aunty Vera for the fluffy handcuffs and vibrator combo when it was actually Creepy Uncle Geoffrey who gave it to you.

If it's money, then it's easy. When you're opening the cards, just write the amount in the corner of the card and keep the cards somewhere safe. That way you'll know who to thank for being insanely generous and who to privately scorn for being stingy.

Conclusion

In closing, I want to say this: it's your relationship that matters. The wedding is one day of your life and it might be a good one or you might hate it. Either way, it really doesn't matter and it's a trap to think it does.

Try to keep your expectations low, do your best to control what you can (you and your emotions), have fun and, if you're hating it, know that it will be over soon enough.

And when it is over, you're married and not much will change. The only thing you need to get right is this: marry the right person.