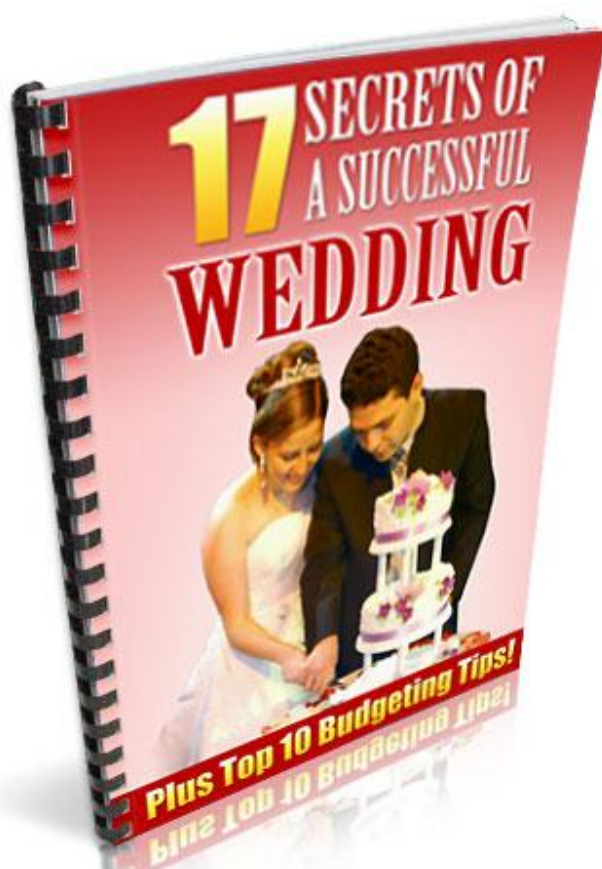


17 Secrets of a Successful Wedding.



*In association with String Quartet's Live and Scotland's Ceilidh Band
'Creating the Perfect Atmosphere'*

17

Secrets of a Successful Wedding.

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Introduction:

From our years of experience in the wedding entertainment business, we've put together the 17 key suggestions that should be read and followed by every couple who is planning to get married. We recommend you use our Perfect Wedding Planner software which will keep your budgeting, guest planning and 'to do list' on schedule and on target. Planning is everything in most areas of life and this is especially so when it comes to planning the biggest day of your life. The secret of a successful wedding is being organised and leaving nothing, and we repeat, nothing to chance. Let's start our journey - planned and prepared.

1: Planning is Everything

It goes without saying that drawing up a time line for your wedding may be one of the best moves you can make. Having chosen your approximate month for your wedding, the next step is the selection of your hotel/ venue and the availability of dates for that venue.

Indeed, one of the first decisions you'll make will be the choice of your wedding and reception venue. Will they both be held in the same place? In reality, one will determine the other. You seldom see a wedding venue and a reception far apart and more than half an hour's travel distance.

Popular venues can be booked months, and sometimes more than a year in advance - particularly over the summer months and on key weekends. So it makes sense to tie up your venue and wedding date as soon as possible.

As soon as you're engaged and up to 18 months before the date of the wedding do the following:

- Set the date.
- Choose the type of ceremony and venue you want.
- Finalise and reserve the wedding venue and reception venue.
- Determine the size of the reception and draw up a guest list.
- If necessary select the caterer.
- Decide on your music and arrange for a band or a DJ.
- Book your photographer and your videographer.

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- Order the cake.
- Select the florist and decorations supplier.
- Then start dealing with the details.

At some point you'll be faced with the decision to either hire a professional Wedding Planning Consultant, or to do all the arranging yourselves. Depending on your budget and objectives, hiring a consultant could actually save you money as well as time and stress. What many couples fail to acknowledge is that although a consultant will charge a fee, more often than not their contacts and experience will save you more than their fee in terms of what they book for your big day.

Particularly if time is limited and the wedding day is looming on the horizon, it could prove a safe bet to hire a professional consultant. Consultants generally charge a flat fee or a % of the total budget, (generally 10% - 15% of the total budget). Particularly if you are not used to haggling and negotiating the best deals and prices, we would recommend searching for an experienced local consultant.

With the help of our guide you can always start planning your wedding and reception yourself and then bring in a consultant if you find the task overwhelming.

3 to 4 months before the wedding arrange the following:

- Finalise the guest list and organise the invitations and thank you notes.
- Complete the arrangements for the reception including rental of items, storage areas for gifts, etc.
- Deal with the details, (both for the wedding and reception, seating arrangements, favours, flowers, etc.)
- Confirm the date and time with those you've already booked: caterers, musicians, florists, photographers, etc.)
- Reserve accommodation for guests who want to stay overnight.
- Finalise the arrangements for the cake.

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2 to 3 months before the wedding deal with the following:

- Mail out the invitations, allowing time for the return of R.S.V.P.'s.
- Plan out the seating arrangements and think through your timings again.
- Advise participants, speakers, toasters etc, of their roles.

2 to 3 weeks before your wedding deal with the following:

- Place any gratuities in envelopes for distribution.
- Write out cheques or arrange cash for the supplier's balances.
- Give out directions and final schedules to those who need them.
- Contact any important guests who haven't returned their R.S.V.P.'s.
- Confirm the play list with the band or D.J.
- Confirm the final headcount with the caterer.
- Complete your own reception toasts and speeches.
- Plan your own changes of clothes that you'll need both during the day and for your getaway.
- Make sure you've arranged for someone to be in charge of transporting the gifts.
- Convey your final headcount to the hotel or caterer.
- Get ahead by writing out thank you cards for gifts already received.
- Convey your special instructions to the photographer.

2: Choose your venue carefully

In terms of buying a property, you've probably heard the phrase 'location is everything.' In terms of your wedding, location will determine a great deal about what will form part of your day.

If you share a common hobby, interest or love for a certain part of the country, these can all influence where you are going to book your wedding. This is where you can have fun letting your imagination run riot. Will your wedding be by a rocky coastline, in a historic cathedral, in a romantic castle or in a small village church? Eventually, practicality may determine a slightly more conventional venue - particularly when you have to consider the needs of guests of all ages.

Okay, let's say you've narrowed down your choices. How do you go about finding them and checking them out? Start with internet searches and by using a copy of yellow pages or a local service directory to guide you. The local tourist information office or chamber of commerce will be a good place to start when it comes to see if a possible venue is a realistic choice. Following this, a web search can quickly lead you to the relevant contact details that you will need to proceed further with your enquiries.

If you're lacking inspiration, ask those you know and those around you. Good networking is the key to wedding day success. Everyone loves to help a bride and people love to recall their own happy wedding experiences. In particular, ask suggestions from those that you are hiring for your wedding.

Photographers, musicians, car hire firms, etc., all have had years of experience of working with loads of different venues and they can often come up with suggestions that you may never have thought about before.

3: Get Value for Money

We recommend that you don't rush into booking anything and consider your options at every opportunity. If you have options in relation to the venue and indeed with any of the other suppliers you will be in a strong bargaining position than somebody who has to take what is given. The longer you have to plan for your wedding will put you in a stronger position than when you've only got months to arrange everything.

Your bargaining power is primarily a function of supply and demand. It always pays to be well informed about alternative suppliers and venues - along with what they can offer and at what price. Few things can help bring a price down as effectively as, 'Venue X only charges £Y and offers A, B, C. Are you sure you can't do any better?' When you ask questions like that, who is in the driving seat?

Naturally, price is not the only consideration, particularly when you are paying for quality. The following are questions that you should consider asking your venue or hotel manager:

- Do you charge a flat-fee for the day - or by the hour?
- Is there a minimum no. of hours that we must pay for?
- Do you have a wedding or reception package, and if so, what does it include?
- What is your minimum deposit you'll accept? (anything from 10% - 50% can reasonably be charged by a supplier).
- How many guests does this include?
- What rooms or facilities are available aside from the main hall?
- Are your services or facilities cheaper on any other day of the week – apart from a Saturday?
- Do you allow outside contractors or caterers to use your premises?
- Is there a corkage fee if we supply our own wine or champagne?
- Is there a cutting fee for bringing in an outside cake?
- How many hours do we get? Is there an overtime charge if we run late?
- Can you provide references? Can we speak to people who have used you before?
- Do you have other events immediately before or immediately after us?
- Can we have access to the reception venue the day before the wedding?

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- What is your cancellation and refund policy on deposits?
- Who will be in charge of the facilities on the day of our wedding? Do they have an assistant/ substitute?
- Is there a changing room for the bride and groom?
- How many toilets are provide and is there a secure room for gifts?
- How many staff will you be providing on the day? (waiters, bar staff, security, etc)

Remember if you are booking a 'bare bone's' site that is not a hotel, you may have to hire personnel as well as rent out all sorts of items. If this is your plan, find out if your caterer can provide a lot of the items you require. If you have to rent items that require delivery, and perhaps assemble and pick-up, make sure everything is fully spelled out in the contract and that the company will deliver what they promise. Always inspect the items that will be supplied and check out what the penalties are for late returns.

A final tip. Ask for extras and freebies! The worst answer that you could get will be 'no' - which leaves you no worse off than before. For example, if you're using a hotel, negotiate discounted rates for your guests and see if they will throw in a room for free. What about the bridal suite for yourselves or a room for the worn-out parents? That would do nicely, wouldn't it?

4: Choose quality, reliable transport

The question to ask yourselves is 'how are we going to get where we want to go?' Once again the answer could be a real flight of fancy – at least until reality sets in.

Brides and grooms have been known to arrive at receptions by parachute, by hot air balloon, motorcycle and by boat. Even if you prefer more conventional ground transportation, there's plenty of room for style and elegance.

This could be your once in a life-time chance to ride in a Bentley, Aston Martin or a Rolls Royce or a beautiful vintage car. Consider renting one of these for a weekend, (don't mention it's for a wedding!) and supply your own driver. It's amazing what this little trick can save! Let's face it, your friends and relatives will be lining up for the prestigious job of chauffeur.

The majority of couples choose to ride in a limousine or typical bridal car. It is in this area that it's easiest to prune the budget. As noted, a nice car can be easily rented or even borrowed. We've known many a couple to rent the bridal Rolls Royce and to borrow the best of their friend's cars for the bridal party.

Even if you're using a limo, there's still a chance to save. If you only want a ride from the ceremony to the reception, then don't pay for the time that you're eating or partying. Although check to see if there is a minimum charge and maximise what you can get for this. We've even known a groom who asked the limo company if they would consider doing a 'split'. If the firm can squeeze another job into the hours of the reception, there is every chance that they can pick you up afterwards for a reduced fee.

Here are a number of questions to ask your car company:

- What are your rates and what do they include?
- When does the clock start and stop running?
- How long have you been in business?
- Do you have all the proper papers, insurance, liability cover, etc?
- Do you have a substitute car in the event of an accident?
- What perks are included? (champagne, drinks, DVD player, fridge, etc.)
- Is the driver's tip included in your fee?
- Is your fee VAT and surcharge inclusive?
- Is there a mileage limitation?

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- Can we inspect the vehicle, and possibly be taken for a test drive?
- Will the price include ribbons? If not, can you provide these?

We've said it already, but we'll repeat this point again, get everything in writing or in electronic copy format. Your contract should specify exactly what you're getting for your money. It's also worth getting the owner's and driver's home and mobile numbers - as you will almost certainly be hiring the car out with normal business hours and may have to contact them in case of emergency.

Here's some further advice concerning wedding cars:

- Consider colour coordinating the ribbons on your wedding card with the colours in your dress and perhaps with the colours you've chosen for the flowers. Colour coordination is starting beginning to play a bigger role in weddings.
- Your choice of car should fit in with the style of your wedding. There's no point borrowing your friend's old banger if you've arranged an up-market event.
- Have a bottle of Champagne chilling on ice in the back of your car for a post-ceremony celebratory drink as the pair of you travel between the ceremony and reception.
- Have you're favourite DVD or tape in the car to add a romantic melody during what will be the most important journey of your life.
- The wedding car will be the backdrop for wedding photos, so make sure the colour doesn't clash with the bride's bouquet or the bridesmaids' dresses.
- Check with the wedding car company a week before your wedding to make sure that your chosen vehicle is still available. Wouldn't it be awful if they'd double booked it for that day, or it was out of commission?

- If you're going on honeymoon straight after the wedding, remember that you'll have to take your luggage with you to the reception. Taking care of all these practicalities is traditionally the best man's job, so liaise with him to ensure that all goes smoothly on the day.

5: Create a wedding day schedule

In the Perfect Wedding Planner software you will see that the timeline to the wedding day is all important in terms of planning. Making full use of your 'to do list' and 'budget planner' is an absolute must. However, on the day itself you need a timeline or schedule - and this is particularly so when it comes to the reception. The reception has a beginning, a series of stages and an end to it.

Normally it's the job of Master of Ceremonies to keep the reception moving according to schedule, alerting the guests as to what is happening and coming up next. This is an important role and some venues will provide a M.C. for an additional fee. It's a role that requires plenty of notice and time to prepare.

Is it possible for you to arrange a Master of Ceremonies for your special occasion? For the role of M.C., you'll want a reliable, energetic and enthusiastic friend who will want to accept the responsibility. Even if you have the skills and are tempted, under no circumstances should you take on the role of Master of Ceremonies?

Apart from the M.C., you may want to appoint a friend or relative who can coordinate transport on the day, for directing guests around the wedding and reception venues. The use of ushers has become increasingly popular in recent years and it's important that your appointed people are reliable, easily recognisable and well prepared for the job in hand.

Role of the M.C. and/or wedding organiser:

- Welcome guests as they arrive at the ceremony and the reception.
- Announce the order of proceedings and the schedule for the day/ evening events.

- Make announcements relating to dinner service.
- Make sure the couple's play list is adhered to by the band, DJ or musical entertainers.
- Announcing the couple's first dance, (a good dance leader or caller will automatically undertake this).
- Call on the persons making speeches and giving toasts.
- Call the guests attention to the cake cutting ceremony.
- Call the guests attention to the bouquet toss, (if this is arranged later in the evening). (DJ or dance caller can announce this.)
- Signal farewell at the end of the reception and make relevant announcements relating to transport or accommodation.

The reception is such an important part of your wedding day that we recommend planning a timeline for it sooner rather than later. Ideally, this timeline should include a 'who does what' list alongside the approximate times for each event during the reception. Planning won't remove all the stress from your big day, but it certainly will go a long way to making your day a little more relaxing.

6: Organise a Great Meal

There's little doubt about it, unless you've chosen the most stunning and spectacular surroundings imaginable, the centrepiece of your reception, (apart from yourselves), will be your wedding dinner. Whilst the meal may not prove to be the most memorable part of your wedding, there's little doubt that if the food is of poor quality your guests will remember your big day for a very long time to come.

Work with the wedding couple to arrange a sequence of events.

If you do your homework and plan your catering arrangements well in advance you'll have little to worry about. We recommend that even if you are using a hotel venue, and more so if you are employing an outside caterer, you get to taste a sample meal beforehand. It goes without saying that you will want to see sample menus, yet it's amazing how few people taste the quality of what their guests will be eating before the event.

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Always check out the reputation of a chef and the catering team before you book. Ask to taste some samples or even better get some samples to take away!

Don't overlook restaurants as potential caterers or even as a reception venue for a smaller wedding. If you have a favourite eating place, approach them about the possibility of providing off-the-premises catering. Particularly, if your face is known to a particular restaurant manager, it's amazing the deals that they can serve up. For the smaller wedding, you may find that a larger restaurant will have private rooms they can let you use and if you make it worth their while; they might even consider closing the entire establishment for you and your guests.

A highly recommended chef and catering team doesn't have to be expensive. Indeed, much will depend on the menu you choose and the ingredients. Remember, a skilled chef can make a variety of simple foods taste terrific and it goes without saying that a lavish presentation will make a great impression on your guests.

If you are working within a tight budget it is worth considering having a buffet style dinner as opposed to a sit down menu. Reducing the number of waiters can significantly lower your expenses. The balancing act between buffet and sit-down revolves mainly around cost. One advantage of buffet catering is that guests can pick the foods they like, in the amounts they like. On the other hand, if there are a significant number of older people present, it may not be so appropriate to consider the buffet option.

The season of your wedding will determine how appropriate some dishes are. If your wedding is in summer, a quality salad selection, light starters etc. may be welcomed by your guests.

Questions to ask prospective caterers or chefs?

- Can the caterers cope with your number of guests?
- Does the chef have a list of references you can see/ contact?
- Where is the food prepared?
- Can you taste samples and perhaps see a wedding reception in progress?
- What is the chef's experience with the menu you are choosing?
- Can children and vegetarians be accommodated?

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- Can the hotelier or caterer take care of the whole catering package and at what cost?
- How is the fee calculated? (cost per head is the most popular method)
- Are the waiting staff's gratuities included in the fee?
- What hors d'ouvres and entrees do you recommend?
- What are your speciality dishes and deserts?
- When do you have to supply the final head count?
- If you are having an evening buffet for guests/ evening invites, what will be included?
- Who will be in charge of catering on the day of the wedding?
- Do you foresee any reason that may push up the initial quote or estimate?
- When are the deposit and the final payment due?

Again from experience, one way of saving on catering is to re-schedule the 'cutting of the cake' and have the cake plus some chocolates with coffee or tea at the end of the meal. Frequently, guests are so full at the end of a meal that deserts go half eaten. This is an area where you can trim your budget without affecting the overall effect of your wedding hospitality.

Since the hotelier or caterer is the key person orchestrating food service at your reception, it is worth adding an additional checklist of what will be provided and where you may have to take responsibility.

Will your hotel or caterer deal with the following?

- Serving of the drinks during the meal? (Aperitifs, wine, champagne, after-dinner and soft drinks.)
- Centrepieces? (floral, balloon, candle-centred or otherwise.)

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- Reception venue decorations?
- Placing of name cards/ table name cards, etc?
- Hot drinks both for the dinner and at the evening reception?
- All tablecloths, napkins, china, glasses and silverware?

7: Choose Your Cake Carefully

One of the enduring symbols of a wedding reception is the traditional, multi-tiered wedding cake with bride and groom sitting on top. If you are looking for a memorable wedding cake, please ensure that you leave plenty of time to organise it. We recommend starting to source your cake maker around 6 months prior to your wedding, if not before. The best time to visit a cake maker is early in the week, possibly in the morning. Most good bakeries and cake designers get increasingly busier as they head towards the weekend.

If the cake is to be layered as well as tiered, you can ask for different flavoured and coloured layers and for different creams separating the layers. Whilst cakes spiked with brandy and liqueurs will keep long after the event, the downside is that this may not be acceptable to guests who can't tolerate alcohol.

The amount of cake you'll need will obviously be determined by the serving size and the number of guests. Ensure that your cake designer shows you sample serving sizes and this will help you estimate the size of cake that you will require.

Without tempting fate, take a photograph of your cake whilst it's still in the bakery; have a smaller or home-made back-up cake on standby and please ensure that your special cake is covered by someone's insurance. Most cake makers request a substantial deposit due to the amount of work involved. Full payment and final payment should nevertheless not be made until the wedding is over.

Consider where you are going to place your cake in the reception venue. Is the background suitable for pictures? Is the table secure and sturdy and unlikely to be bumped? Who is providing the table cloth? Will the venue provide you with knives and serving plates immediately after the cake is cut?

The cutting of the cake during your reception, is one of the most tender and romantic moments of your special day. Make sure your photographer and videographer are focused in on capturing the emotions and atmosphere of this special scene. We've seen couple's not only cut the cake together, but also feed each other the first bit of cake! (that can make a very interesting photo).

When choosing a cake, remember the following:

- You get what you pay for with cakes. The more intricate the decoration, the more it's going to cost and the longer the preparation time.
- How much is the deposit?
- When is the final payment due?
- Get a written contract specifying all the details, including size, flavour, colours and whether a cake knife and accessories are included.
- Are delivery and setting up included in the fee? Get this in writing.
- If you want colours matched, remember to bring a swatch of colour with you.
- What artificial decorative effects have to be removed before the cake is served and enjoyed?
- Can portion sized cake boxes be provided for guests and those unable to attend the reception?
- In advance of ordering, you should be able to view photographs of different styles – as well as taste the cake and the icing.
- Would you consider a tasteful picture in icing artwork of you both, or maybe miniature statues of you both on the top of the cake?
- Get an emergency number if the cake is damaged accidentally on the day of the wedding.
- Make sure you have a smaller back-up cake in case of disaster.

8: Dealing with drinks and toasts

Almost as traditional as the wedding cake is the champagne toast. No matter what kind of food you serve, your guests are going to need to wash it down. We'll give you a brief run down on how to satisfy your guest's thirsts. When it comes to spending money on drink for your guests consider the following:

- A well-stocked bar open throughout the reception whilst very generous, could set you back a small fortune if you are picking up the final bill for your guests.
- A more sensible option is to have a bar with limited free drinks to greet your guests on arrival and perhaps also after the meal or to greet your evening guests.
- Some people may consider a dry reception with the minimal champagne toast to the bride and groom.
- Make sure your venue has insurance cover for alcohol related incidents.
- Make sure your hotelier or venue provides a full range of soft drinks and other non-alcoholic refreshments.
- If champagne or white wine is going to be provided, try and ensure that ice buckets/ wine chillers will be allocated for each table.
- In the UK, as in most countries, guests expect to pay for their drinks over and above any free drinks received.

9: How to get the most from flowers

Flowers have oft been described as the "blooms of love." Flowers will typically play a bigger role in the ceremony part of the wedding than in the reception, particularly if the service takes place in a church or similar building.

If both service and reception are scheduled for the same venue, bring some of the flowers used during the ceremony into the reception or banqueting hall. Naturally, if you're holding your service or reception outdoors, you'll be surrounded by nature - and the role of flowers will be unnecessary.

At the reception arrangements can be provided for the top table, the gift table, cake table, centrepieces of guests' tables. We've even seen examples of a flowered arch at the entrance of the banqueting area and also behind the bride and groom at the top table. Flowers have no bounds apart from your imagination!

An experienced wedding florist will have plenty of photos of receptions and wedding arrangements that they've done before. In many respects, the florist has similar responsibilities to the baker – in so far as the finished product is fresh.

It goes without saying that the flowers chosen should reflect the tastes of the bride and the groom. They should be delivered promptly, be very fresh and be set up properly in their selected spots. Also remember that flowers are seasonal, and as such what you get will be determined largely by what is in stock in the main flower markets, which supply virtually all the florists in our towns.

As usual, get it all in your contract with the florist. Everything must be spelled out in writing, including exact names of flowers, descriptions of arrangements and the amounts of flowers in each arrangement. You'll want itemised prices, precise times and places for delivery and set-up costs included. Also information regarding the deposit, final payment, set up labour charges. Indeed everything associated with the flowers, should be set-out in your florist's contract.

At the end of your big day recycle your flowers and in so doing so bring some joy to local housebound or elderly people. Think about approaching a nursing home or send the arrangements to elderly relatives and friends of your own.

Typically, flowers take on a starring role towards the end of the reception with the legendary 'bouquet toss'. If you want your photographer to still be around, it's worth considering having the 'bouquet toss' either just before or just after the cutting of the cake.

The other traditional spot for the bouquet toss is right before the bride and groom make their final getaway. However, few photographers will be at a wedding until the getaway – unless you pay them of course.

More often the bouquet that is tossed is smaller than the one carried by the bride down the aisle. It could be a portion of the original bouquet, detached at some point, or a separate one prepared by your florist beforehand.

Interestingly, the origin of the bouquet toss is said to come from the folklore that certain herbs were deemed to be lucky. Hence, the lucky single woman who catches the bride's bouquet would receive the blessing of being the next one to be married.

To save money with florists, as we've said before - shop around. You'll frequently find trained florists who operate a home-based, part-time wedding flower business.

Prices will inevitably be cheaper as home-based florists don't have many overheads, staff costs or have any need to charge VAT. We recommend you phone round a few flower shops and ask if they know of anyone who specialises in doing wedding flowers part-time. You'll save a small fortune by using a home based florist over a large florist chain.

Another economy option that is seldom thought of is to rent large potted plants or even artificial or silk flowers. Nurseries can generally provide these and they can provide an unusual and atmospheric backdrop to a wedding reception venue.

10: Additional decorations

Remember, flowers are primarily a decorative feature – they bring colour, freshness and life to a wedding. Other decorations can at least partially fill in any gaps in the floral arrangement displays.

We've mentioned the possibility of using hired potted plants and/ or artificial flowers or silk flowers. Consider using the following to enhance your venue.

Candles –

- You could have tall ones in pedestal candelabras flanking the main table at the reception. Candles can also feature prominently in your church and/ or civil wedding service.
- What about using floating candles and/ or short aromatic ones as centrepieces at the wedding dinner?

Ribbons:

- Tied in bows or other creative designs, mounted on walls, at pew ends in the church or tied to chairs in the reception venue.
- Ribbons can be in a variety of styles and colours, including silk, tartan or velvet material.

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- If you have chosen a personal colour theme for your wedding.

Balloons:

- Perhaps not in a very posh venue. However, let's face it though; balloons add colour, joy and a bit of movement to tables at a reception.
- Consider having balloon bouquets with themed weights and silk ribbons.
- Use foil balloons and a mixture of large and small sized balloons in your bouquets.
- Ensure your balloons are helium filled and that the balloon arrangements are made up by an expert. There's nothing worse than half baked balloon displays.

Photos of the bride and groom:

- What about enlarged snap shots or perhaps a collage of photos of the guests of honour at different stages of their life and courtship?
- An excellent idea is to have an engagement photo of the bridal couple mounted on poster board where guests can write greetings and wishes. This can be looked back on for years afterwards – by family members of all generations.

Final note:

- Ensure that you've appointed someone to pack up and save all the souvenirs, non-disposable decorations at the end of the wedding day.
- You may want to gather up your flower displays and give them to a local nursing home or to housebound elderly. Likewise, children love balloons!
- The whole clean up issue should be addressed in your contracts with the reception venue, hotel or caterers. As the last thing you need a month after the wedding, is to be hit by an unexpected clean-up bill from the hotel or venue you've used.

11: Great music will make a great day

More than most factors, music can shape the mood of your wedding service and reception in a really big way.

Imagine the difference if a band decided to play a completely different type of music to what was wanted. Swing instead of String, Classical instead of big band music, ... get the drift. It's your party, so be ready to detail the type of music you need, from classical to ceilidh, disco to swing.

It's imaginative to involve quite different styles of music over the duration of your reception. For example, you may want to start the church service with guests being met by a piper, (if it's a Scottish wedding), or a classical rendition from a string quartet just prior to the proceedings commencing.

During the reception itself, string quartet or ensemble music is a wonderful accompaniment during the meal, when guests want to have a conversation along with the soothing backdrop of great instrumental music.

You may want to have a wedding band, ceilidh band, swing band or an entertainment group that you've personally chosen to start the proceedings during the dancing part of the reception.

Alternatively, you may like to have a band plus disco. The great advantage of this option is that when you choose disco you can normally send a play list through to the DJ prior to the wedding so that your own tracks and the tracks that your guests will like – will be played when you want them to be played.

Live or recorded sound?

For the most part, this question will be answered by six factors:

- The size of your budget.
- Do you want a lot of special requests?
- The availability of good local bands and musicians.
- The logistics of your venue and the size of your wedding party.
- Your desire to have a live vocalist present.

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- The amount of dancing that you'll want during your wedding.

If you are planning to hire a live band – consider the following:

- Does your chosen band have recordings of tracks that you can listen to?
- Do they have testimonials that can be seen and if necessary, can you have the opportunity to speak to people who have hired the band previously?
- Is there enough space for the band at the venue? Is the venue big enough and are the acoustics suited to the sounds of your band?
- Will extra PA and sound systems be required to be hired – where they are not being provided by the band?
- What will the band be wearing?
- Are back up musicians available in case one of the band has to drop out at short notice?
- Is the bandleader, or dance caller, willing and able to act as M.C. and organise the evening's entertainment, direct guests and convey announcements etc?
- Who is the leader of the band – and can they be contacted easily prior to the event?
- Who will be the responsible person for the band at the reception?
- What is the total charge? What is the deposit? When and in what payment form is the final balance due?
- How many breaks will the band take? Will you or the band want a break whilst an evening buffet is being served, for example?
- Don't be afraid to negotiate with the band leader. However, remember that good bands cost money and often a cut in costs can only be done when cheaper alternatives are considered.

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Benefits of using a DJ and disco during your event:

- A DJ will probably be cheaper than a band and can often be versatile and flexible to your personal needs.
- Make sure the DJ comes recommended. You want a good voice as well as a good recording.
- Virtually any type of music has been recorded and can be downloaded easily, a knowledgeable DJ will find you any piece you like and play when you would like it to be played.
- DJ's can vary considerably in price – from a celebrity radio or club DJ to a college student who works part time from his bedroom.
- With today's technology you can pre-plan and customise your entire play list – easily!
- If you're devising your own play list for the reception, just make sure you have a good mix of fast and slow and of course, romantic dances.
- A good DJ will have lists of tracks that are proven tracks; they'll know what works with an audience and what doesn't. You want a list of dance floor 'fillers' – not floor 'killers' at your reception!

12: Photos and DVD's are for keeps:

Nothing preserves your memories of your special day better than photos, or DVDs of your event. Consider the countless hours of enjoyment to follow for the rest of your lives – and your children's lives.

Photos and digital video recordings are a legacy that will be passed from generation to generation. This is not the place in your budget to stint, and yet many couples try and cut corners by using relatives with digital cameras and digital video camera, for example.

The key to good photographs is having 'photo overload', or rather a lot of overlapping picture taking. There should be more than one person snapping or recording for you at all times. A professional photographic company can normally accommodate this. Otherwise, hire a couple of separate photographers or videographers.

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Often, a family member or one of your friends may be a decent, if not professional photographer. This is where it's very important to cover your options. Especially, when someone is 'doing you a favour' it's important to do yourself a favour and cover for any errors that may occur.

It's amazing the number of rotten wedding videos and half baked photos we've seen over the years taken by well-meaning amateurs. There's not much you can do after the event, and you've got virtually no comeback or guarantees, if you've used a friend who's failed to deliver on the day.

Here are some useful tips concerning photography:

- If you're on a limited budget, one tip is to use the professional for the first half of the day – which will cover both the service and the start of the reception.
- Use family members or proficient amateurs to cover the second half of the event.
- Good photographers are easy to find. Try local newspapers, ask friends at work, visit local studios.
- If you're still stuck phone the local newspaper – and it's amazing how often their photographers will be kept to cover a wedding at the weekend.
- Always visit a photographer to view samples, see testimonials and photo albums of previous weddings.
- Take notes when you meet a photographer. It's amazing how many good ideas you'll get by meeting with a professional face to face and seeing their work.

Must have photo scenes at a wedding:

- Bride and groom's arrival at the ceremony or church and the receiving line at the reception.
- Getting into the car and in-car shots.
- Photos in a local scenic setting, such as a park or by a river bank.

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- The newly-weds first dance and then those of the bridal party as they are invited onto the floor.
- Candid shots throughout the affair, of the newlyweds and their parents.
- The bride and groom cutting the cake and perhaps even feeding each other the first slices.
- The bouquet toss – if you've decided to have one.
- The departing newlyweds.

When you're using a photographer or videographer check the following:

- Make sure the camera work is sure, focused and rock steady.
- Ensure all the most important moments are captured.
- Go over the target outcomes at least a couple of times in advance of the wedding.
- Speak to other satisfied customers and ask them what they would have done differently with the photography at their wedding.
- Find out how long the photographer or videographer has been in the business or has been a professional.
- Is there any type of insurance offered in case of recording failures, disaster on the day, and such like?
- What type of cameras and digital recording equipment are being used?
- How many cameras will be used and how many staff will be present?
- Will anyone else besides the principal photographer be shooting?
- If the reception is at night, will artificial lighting be provided?
- How many wireless microphones will the videographer be using and in what locations?

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- What is the total fee and how is this calculated? Is it by the hour or per event?
- Is there a minimum charge? What is the deposit? What about run-over charges?
- Can a payment plan be provided and if so how much is required up front?
- Are there any package deals available?
- What will be the costs of prints of the proofs? Find this out in advance – or be prepared for a shock afterwards!
- Who will own the copyrights over the photos or DVD of the event? Don't expect a professional to relinquish copyright over his or her work easily.
- How much extra will an album cost?
- Will there be an extra fee for getting all the photos on a CD or DVD?
- Most photographers will get you to sign a contract in advance. Get them to send a sample contract to you in advance so that you can compare different contracts before committing to one photographer.

Advantages of working with digital output:

As in no other area of wedding services, the impact of technology has made a dramatic difference to the way photographs and DVDs can be shot.

If a video is shot digitally, there's a lot of user-friendly software available online that will enable it to be edited into its final version on your home pc.

Digital output can significantly lower your costs, especially where you are able to get the digital versions of the photos and create your own albums and duplicates.

Having a DVD of your big day may seem extravagant, particularly if you've got a professional photographer present. However, it's great to be able to share the journey of your big day with your children and family member's years afterwards. It's worth the extra money – believe us. Remember, memories can't be recaptured if they're missed at the outset.

13: Involve your family and friends

Involving your family and close friends in the planning and organisation of your big day will liven up the event and will ease the pressure on you.

The best ways to promote involvement include:

- Inviting them for special dances, to the applause of the wedding guests.
- Accepting their personal speeches and toasts.
- Involving them in other events such as the scramble, (money thrown to children just as the car pulls away).
- Encouraging them to decorate the reception and/ or the ceremony venues.
- Have brain-storming or get-together sessions to ask for ideas and perhaps volunteers a couple of months prior to the big day.

14: Organise your speeches and toasts

Choose the wrong speech maker and you could end up in red-faced embarrassment. It's important to consider this when choosing your best man, for example. Is he capable of writing, and delivering an entertaining speech?

Here is a list of the typical wedding speakers and to whom their speeches honour:

- Sister, (maid of honour). Speech in honour of bride/groom, best man, parents of the bride and groom.
- Brother/ best man. Speech in honour of the bride and groom and parents of the bride and groom.

- Father/ Mother of the Bride: Speech in honour of the guests, grandparents, bride and groom.
- Bride: Speech in honour of the groom, maid of honour, bridesmaids, parents of the bride/ groom and family. Plus a thank you to guests.
- Groom. Speech in honour of the Best Man, Bride, and Parent's of the Bride and Groom and family; thanks to guests.

Remember, there is a big difference between a toast and a speech, so be sure you know the difference. Whilst a speech will often last around 5 minutes, a toast should take up no more than 30 seconds or so – and gets straight to the point with wit and sincere thanks. . When giving a speech that includes a toast, wait until the end to raise your glass as a toast.

It's worth asking your speakers to time-limit their speeches to around 6-8 minutes maximum. The average person's attention span is around 6 minutes. So there's nothing worse than your guests having to listen to 20 minutes of boring, or worse still, drunken monologue after the wedding meal.

15: Top Bridal Beauty Tips

Want to look perfect on your wedding day? Here's some sound advice for wedding day beauty, including product recommendations and helpful hints that have been gathered over the years from wedding beauty experts.

- **Use waterproof eye makeup.** Most brides cry at their weddings. Even if you don't think you're the crying type, with so many waterproof products out there, why take a chance?
- **Use a long-lasting lipstick.** When they first came out, most were dry and not suitable for a day-filled with close-ups and endless congratulatory kisses. But the new generation have seen the advantages of using separate colour and moisturiser. Apply the colour once at the beginning of the day, and re-moisturise a couple of times to keep lips luscious and picture-perfect. Our bridal expert recommends the 'Cover Girl Outlast All-day Lip colour.'

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- **Practice several times** as it can be tricky to apply the colour evenly and perfectly. It's hard to remove - so you'll want to get it right on the first application.
- **Employ a "spot checker"**. This could be your maid of honour or another person whose makeup style is similar to your own, (your mother is another good candidate.) Ask them to keep an eye on you and let you know if you need a touch up. They might also do you the favour of storing your lipstick in their purse for easy access.
- **Bring backups with you** Check out the bathrooms or changing facility at the venue. Take an emergency kit, including power, to beat down shiny noses, clear nail polish, and repair stocking runs - plus a hairbrush, hairspray, lipstick, and a sewing kit, along with anything else you think you or your bridesmaids might need on the big day.
- **Do a test run.** Make sure you test out beauty products several times – you wouldn't want to find out the morning of your wedding that you're allergic to your make up!
- **Relax!** A relaxed bride is a beautiful bride. A wedding succeeds as long as you end up married at the end of the day. Remember, what seems important on the day will be forgotten about or seem irrelevant years afterwards. Just be yourself, do your very best, and above all enjoy the experience.

16: Some Final Do's and Don'ts

DO:

- Get up early and start your day with a warm bath – add some bubbles! This will help calm your nerves and help you feel relaxed.
- Eat a good satisfying breakfast. Chances are you will not be able to eat a full meal for the rest of the day.
- Don't drink the night before. It's tempting, particularly if there's friends and family around you. It's not worth it though. You're going to need a clear head and a calm stomach for your big day.

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- If you haven't written your vows and speech yet, write them neatly in a small index card. Don't ask somebody to do this for you.
- Eat a little before leaving for the ceremony. Keep a sweet or two in your pouch. Don't chew gum!
- Keep an emergency kit in the car. Stuff it with spare pants, pads, safety pins, larger pins, spot remover, aspirin, needles and thread - and scissors.
- Spend time with your guests especially your family. Your wedding day is a day to be shared with others– not just a stage show for yourselves.

Advice for the bride:

- Have your make-up and hair done well ahead of time. Make sure your bridesmaids arrive early for the same reason too.
- Apply white or colourless polish. Unless you are wearing a coloured gown, do not put on coloured nail polish as it will overpower your whole attire.
- Bring a bridal pouch with you to carry your wedding day necessities. You do not want to be calling on your mother, sister, best friend, or wedding planner every time you need a lip gloss.
- Keep a blush and lip gloss with you for touch-ups.

DON'T:

- Don't overdo the make-up. You do not want to look like a vampire in your wedding pictures.
- Don't be late. Allow extra time for the unforeseen - traffic, detours, etc. We recommend building in 10% slack into all your wedding day time schedules.
- Don't trust your wedding rings to your ring bearer. Ask a more responsible adult to keep them safe for you.

- Don't ask unexpected guests, (most of the time, invitees who did not RSVP but decide to attend in the end), to pay for their meals (believe it or not - this happens).
- Don't ruin the most important day in your life by getting involved in the details of the wedding. Leave that to your delegated wedding planner or M.C. on the day.
- Don't forget to bring your sense of humour with you. You will need loads of humour, especially when things are not going the way you wanted to.

17: Saving the Memories

Your wedding day is just the beginning of your life together. It's certainly a day that you'll want to remember and cherish. It is important that you savour the memories of your wedding day with keepsakes as well as photos and digital output.

The following are some great ways of saving a piece of your wedding for the future.

Your Wedding Cake:

- Celebrate your first anniversary with a piece of your wedding cake. To do so, you need to encase the top layer securely in plastic wrap. Follow by securely enclosing it in aluminum foil.
- Do not use just aluminum foil because it can leave the cake tasting metallic. To keep the original flavor of the cake, store the cake in the back of the freezer where the temperature remains constant.

Your Wedding Cards:

- It's amazing how many people don't keep their wedding cards and greetings in a safe place.
- We recommend getting an old shoe box and placing them in a warm, dry place such as in the eaves of your attic or in a dry cupboard or wardrobe.

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- Cards are particularly important when in years to come some of your relatives and friends are no longer around. They're also great to show your children and family on a rainy day.

Your Order of Service:

- You just need to make sure you keep one order of service. It's lovely to look back on what was sung or spoken about on the day, readings, poems and blessings.
- Again, make sure this is kept in a warm, dry place and preferably with your wedding cards.

Your Bridal Bouquet:

- You can preserve your wedding flowers by drying them, turning them into potpourri or individually pressing them within the pages of a heavy book.
- To properly preserve a bouquet, you must begin the drying process even before you leave on your honeymoon.
- If you leave immediately after the wedding you should make arrangements with a specialist to have it picked up and preserved for your return.
- If you're going to toss a bridal garter, get a second one that you can keep for posterity.

Your Wedding Dress:

- Get your wedding dress dry cleaned and properly packaged after your wedding day.
- You've probably spent a lot of money on your dress. So it's certainly worth spending a bit extra to preserve your wedding dress for all time.
- If you're lucky enough to have a daughter, wouldn't she love to try it on some day? Plus, won't the grandchildren love to see and touch it?

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Best Wishes!

We hope you've enjoyed reading through the 17 Secrets of a Successful Wedding. It's been prepared for you in conjunction with String Quartet's Live and Scotland's Ceilidh Band – experts in providing unforgettable, atmospheric wedding day entertainment for over 20 years.

Our last words of advice to you are the same as our first words of advice.

Prepare, Prepare, Prepare. (then enjoy!)

Remember, success is all about dealing with the details well before the event.

Best of luck in preparing for your special day!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tony". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

Tony Coogan
Band Leader & Coordinator

P.S. Continue reading to find out our Top 10 Budgeting Tips!

Top 10 Budgeting Tips

1: Always obtain at least 2/ 3 estimates for every wedding service or product you book

2: Consider getting married on a Friday, Sunday, Bank Holiday or a weekday – you could save a fortune compared to a Saturday.

3: Compare wedding day quotes from at least 4 venues. Look at the small print. Go back and negotiate. The reception accounts for around 65% of the cost of the average wedding.

4: When you've chosen your preferred venue. Reduce costs further by economising on the wedding menu, drinks budget and additional add on's.

5: Economise on your wedding cars. Consider booking using a car hire company as opposed to a wedding car company – and getting friends in suits to do the driving.

6: Save on deserts at your reception – by cutting the cake before the meal and having the cake for a desert. The biggest problem at wedding meals is having too much food!

7: Get your relatives and friends to pay for some of the wedding services as their wedding gift. Eg: what about your brother paying for the photographer, your sister to pay for the honeymoon, etc, etc.

8: Always ask for freebies. The worst answer you can get will be no. Eg: ask your hotel venue if they can throw in the bridal suite for nothing if you choose them over a competitor.

9: What can you do yourself? Eg: venue decorations, invitations/ order of service, favours – can all be done by you or your friends using your own ideas or ideas from the internet.

10: Economise on the honeymoon. If you're budget is stretched. Consider going away for a long weekend or a few days – and having a holiday later when your finances recover.

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