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Plans Can Prevent Wedding-Bell Blues

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June weddings follow May invitations to happy ceremonies. You may even be planning nuptials for June of next year already. Whatever timetable you're on, careful planning is needed to keep costs under control.

In a survey released last year, Conde Nast Bridal Group found that the average amount spent on weddings was \$27,852. Some weddings can be much more costly.

"In two cases, I've had clients spend over 50% of their liquid net worth," said George Middleton, a financial adviser with Limoges Investment Management in Vancouver, Wash.

Wedding Woes			
Fastest-growing average costs			
Category	1999	2006	% chg
Photography/video	\$1,263	\$3,509	178%
Attendants' gifts	299	616	106
Wedding rings	1,060	2,079	96
Bouquets/other flowers	775	1,177	52
Attire for bride and groom	1,049	1,580	51
Engagement rings	2,982	4,435	49
Total	\$9,427	\$15,402	63.38%

Source: Conde Nast Bridal Group

Whatever newlyweds save can be put to other good uses. It can become part of a portfolio that later pays for a home, college education of kids or even retirement.

Setting a budget can rein in spending. "Determine an amount you want to spend. Then carve out 15% for unexpected expenses," said Jennifer Lazarus, a financial planner in Durham, N.C. In other words, plan to spend 85% of your limit. Surprise extras later can push you to your limit.

One tactic for sticking to a budget involves delegating. After deciding what your limit is, parents can give all or a big chunk of that to the child getting married, says Emily Sanders, a financial advisor in Norcross, Ga. You should do that only if the child is responsible in handling money. "This gives her an incentive to manage the costs," Sanders said.

In crafting a wedding budget, set priorities. "In my experience, 75% of wedding expenses are determined by the 3 Ds: dining, drinks and decorations," said Joe Bedingfield, a financial planner in Birmingham, Ala.

Failing to stick to the budget for those items can double or triple the cost of a wedding, Bedingfield says. To tackle the first "D," be flexible.

"Many places have different prices depending upon the time of the year and the day of the week," said Jeremy Portnoff, a financial planner in Piscataway, N.J.

He and his wife were able to book an upscale location for about half the normal cost by moving from a Saturday in October to a Sunday in November.

Prime Time

The time of day counts, too. "A brunch reception with a meal, open bar and a band will cost substantially less than an evening event with a sit-down dinner," Bedingfield said.

"See if there is a venue in your area where a wedding or event planner is included in the cost of the wedding," Sanders said. Packaged services often cut overall costs.

Still, not every wedding needs a professional planner. You may not even need a traditional reception site.

"One of my sons got married at a summer camp in early June," said Rebecca Preston, a financial planner in Providence, R.I. That was before the camping season itself had begun.

The wedding couple and friends cleaned up debris from the winter. That kept the fee to use the camp minimal. Also, barbecuing food for guests was less expensive than other meal formats, Preston says.

Saving on drinks as well as dining may be possible. "If you have a reception in a public restaurant, make sure that non-invited guests don't start running up a bar tab," Sanders said. One of her clients failed to do so. She wound up paying an extra \$1,000 for thirsty strangers.

What about the third "D," for decoration? "One way to keep the florist's bill in check is to get a contract with a maximum amount to be billed," said Jorie Barnett Johnson, founder, Financial Futures, a planning firm in Manasquan, N.J. That cuts the risk of seasonal price fluctuations.

One bride eliminated all flowers except handheld bouquets. She used candles on tables as centerpieces. And she scheduled her wedding during a holiday season so the church was already decorated.

Flowers are among the items most likely to go over budget, Johnson says. So are bridal gowns and bands. There may not be much you can do about a gown.

"Most brides fall in love with one and want it regardless of the cost," Johnson said.

But you might cut band costs. "Hire one to three musicians to play during part of the reception," Johnson said. "Have the full band appear for a shorter time."

Deal, Or No Deal

Other money-savers are possible. Hiring a skilled general photographer can cost thousands of dollars less than hiring one who markets himself as a wedding specialist. "When negotiating with a hotel where your out-of-town guests can stay, guarantee a certain number of rooms and the hotel will sometimes throw in a bridal suite for the couple and a hospitality suite for guests," Sanders said.

Another strategy is to postpone the honeymoon. That may leave more money for the wedding.

Portnoff says that engaged couples should remember that a wedding reception is just a party that lasts a few hours. A huge expense might not make sense.

A couple might be better able to afford a lavish bash on their 10th anniversary, Portnoff says, only half in jest.

"If the marriage lasts 10 years, then spend money on a big event," he said.

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