

Planning a Wedding on a Budget



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Financially Empowering You



Planning a wedding can make finding the person who you want to spend the rest of your life with seem like the easy part. There may be a variety of people weighing in with their opinion on such matters as whether you should invite your 30 second cousins once removed whom you never see or if the cake should be chocolate or vanilla. And, of course, there is the little issue of how you are going to pay for the whole affair. Even if you skip arriving on a horse-drawn carriage and having flowers flown in from halfway around the world, a wedding can cost a pretty penny. However, with careful planning, you can have the wedding that you want without starting off married life in financial distress.

What Can You Afford To Spend?

The first step of financially-smart wedding planning is determining what you can afford to spend. Some of the money may be coming from you and/or your fiancé's savings. How much do you have in savings and how much of it do you want to spend on the wedding? (Don't deplete the savings completely – it is a good idea to maintain an emergency fund in case medical bills, car repairs, or other unexpected expenses pop up.) You may also be expecting or hoping that your parents or other relatives will be covering some of the cost. If this is the case, it is important to get clarification now on exactly how much they are contributing. You don't want to sign contracts or start buying things, only to find out later that your parents are not giving you the \$5,000 you thought they would provide. List all of your sources of contributions in the Wedding Budget below, and add them together to see what your total budget is. (You can always spend less, of course, but you should not spend more.)

If your savings or the amount of assistance you are receiving from others is limited, you may have thought about putting some expenses on your credit cards. Is that really such a bad thing? If you can pay it off in a couple of months, not really, but otherwise you could be burdening yourself with debts that take years to pay off and cost you thousands of dollars in interest charges. For example, if you charge \$5,000 on a card with an annual percentage rate of 14% and only pay the minimum (typically around 3% of the balance or \$20, whichever is greater), it would take you over 12½ years to repay the debt and cost you almost \$3,000 in interest. Do you really want to still be paying for your wedding 12 years from now? Probably not.

Where Will Your Money Go?

After you know how much you have to spend, the next step is to determine where you will spend it. Unless you have deep pockets, chances are you will have to make sacrifices somewhere. Think about what is a priority and what is less important. For example, perhaps having good food that your guests will talk about for years to come is a must, but you could care less about the flower arrangements. Or visa versa. There are no wrong or right priorities – it's all about what is important to you and your fiancé (and perhaps assertive relatives!).

Using the Wedding Budget, list how much you plan to spend for each category. (Remember, the total for expenses should not exceed the total for contributions). Keep your budget in mind when you do your actual shopping – in fact, you may want to bring it with you. It is not that difficult to get caught up in a moment and spend more than intended. Try to avoid looking at things that you know are above your budget. If your limit for a wedding dress is \$2,000, don't try on a dress that costs \$6,000. Also try to create a specific shopping list before you set foot in the store or talk to a vendor. (For example, "Craft store – 5 tubes of silver glitter, 1 pack of white feathers, 100 pearl beads, 2 clear glass vases".) If at some point you feel that an estimate for a particular category was unrealistic and you want to spend more, look for other things that you can reduce. The Tips section can help you figure out where you can save money.

Dealing With Vendors

Unless your wedding is a completely do-it-yourself affair, you will probably be hiring vendors to provide services. How can you ensure that transactions go smoothly?

First, it helps to shop around – this allows you to see who provides the services/goods most in line with what you want as well as who offers the best price. Choose at least three vendors to interview for each function (caterer, photographer, band, cake baker, etc). Discuss with them what you want (remember to make a list before the interview) and what their experience is. Also ask them to provide references of past customers. After the initial consultation, each vendor should give you an estimate of the price. Obviously who offers the lowest price is important, but you will also want to consider your impression of them during the interview (Did they seem knowledgeable? Responsive to your desires?) and satisfaction of references. If the person you like the most doesn't offer the cheapest price (or does offer the cheapest price, but it is still more than you want to spend), you can try to negotiate a lower price. It doesn't always work, but it doesn't hurt to ask.

In order to book them, most wedding vendors require you to make a non-refundable deposit and sign a contract. Before you do, it is important to read the contract carefully and make sure you understand exactly what services and goods the vendor is providing, the cost, and the cancellation and other policies. Get everything that was agreed to in writing – verbal promises can be easily forgotten. Once you find all of your vendors, don't forget about them! It is a good idea to periodically check in before the wedding to ensure that everything is on track.

Cost-cutting Tips

Invitations

- Send electronic invitations or postcards instead of formal invitations.
- Make your own cards. If you have a quality printer, you may be able to produce professional-looking cards at home. But if not, you can always go with a handmade, do-it-yourself look.
- Don't limit yourself to party/stationary stores. Places such as craft stores, office supply stores, and copiers can be a good source for reasonably-priced invitations. So can the internet – there are countless websites that sell discount invitations.
- If you are having the invitations professionally done, forgo extras, such as bows, engraving, and lined envelopes.

Wedding dress

- Skip the bridal stores, and go to the formal dress section in department stores. Wedding dresses commonly come with a bigger mark-up than other formal dresses. You may be able to get a big discount if you buy in late spring, when many stores have after-prom-season sales.
- Buy a sample or “last season’s” dress.
- Buy a used dress instead of a new one. If you don't have a friend or family member whose dress you can buy (or borrow), check listings on-line or visit local consignment stores.
- Instead of buying a dress, rent one for the day. There are many wedding stores that offer this service.

Decorations/flowers

- Look for vases and other decorations in craft and thrift stores.
- Only use flowers that are in season and readily available.
- Grow your own flowers or get them from an on-line wholesaler or from a bulk or grocery store.
- Hold the wedding in a garden or other venue that provides natural adornment.
- Consider alternatives to flowers for centerpieces and other decorations. For example, you could use branches (available for free outside!), fruit, stones, books, candles or feathers.

Venue

- Ask if you can get a discount if you hold the wedding at a less popular time, such as Friday or Sunday. (Saturday is typically the most popular day for weddings.)
- Consider other options besides traditional wedding halls. Many places of worship and parks allow use of their facilities for a small fee. Having it in your backyard or the backyard of a friend or a family member may be another option. (However, don't forget to factor in the rental fees for such things as tables and chairs.) Holding it in a restaurant could also save you money.
- If you are holding the reception in a hotel, see if they will give you discount if you also reserve a block of rooms for guests.

Food

- If it is allowed, provide your own food and/or wine. You may be lucky enough to have someone willing to cook for you, but if not, you may be able to get platters from the supermarket. Remember, wedding food does not need to be fancy.
- If you are using a caterer, ask which menu options are the cheapest and if you can save money by doing a buffet instead of a served meal.
- Serve just hors' d'oeuvres or dessert. (It is easier to do this if the reception is in the afternoon.)
- Instead of a traditional tiered wedding cake, have a sheet cake, cupcakes, or pie.

Music

- Typically, a DJ is cheaper than a live band. Using an MP3 or other music player is even cheaper, especially if you have or know someone that can provide speakers.
- While you do not want to sacrifice quality, you may be able to save money by going with a band or DJ that is not yet established. High schools and colleges are often a good source for low-cost groups.

Photography

- Contact photography clubs or schools in your area to see if there are any budding photographers interested in shooting a wedding. Like with music, you can typically save money by going with someone without years of experience.
- Instead of having a photographer at the event, ask your guests to bring their digital cameras with them to take photos (or provide disposable cameras). If you want formal photographs (because, let's be honest, Aunt Sally may not take the best pictures), visit a studio before or after the wedding. It is usually cheaper than having a photographer come to you.
- Go with a digital photo album instead of a printed one. (You should still be able to get a few prints of favorite photos.) Or have the photos printed yourself – regular photo labs often charge less than photographers. (Although keep in mind that you may not be able to do this if your photographer holds the copyright to the images.)



Wedding Budget Chart

		Estimated	Actual	Notes
Contributions	You	\$	\$	
	Fiancé	\$	\$	
	Your parents	\$	\$	
	Fiancé's parents	\$	\$	
	Other	\$	\$	
	Other	\$	\$	
	Other	\$	\$	
	Other	\$	\$	
Total contributions		\$	\$	

		Estimated	Actual	Notes
Attire expenses	Wedding dress	\$	\$	
	Tuxedo	\$	\$	
	Veil/headpiece	\$	\$	
	Shoes	\$	\$	
	Accessories	\$	\$	
	Hair/makeup	\$	\$	
	Other	\$	\$	
	Other	\$	\$	
Total attire		\$	\$	
Ceremony expenses	Location fee	\$	\$	
	Officiant fee	\$	\$	
	Marriage license	\$	\$	
	Rings	\$	\$	
	Flowers/decorations	\$	\$	
	Other	\$	\$	
	Other	\$	\$	
Total ceremony		\$	\$	
Stationery expenses	Save the date cards	\$	\$	
	Invitations	\$	\$	
	Thank you cards	\$	\$	
	Other	\$	\$	
	Other	\$	\$	
Total stationery		\$	\$	

		Estimated	Actual	Notes
Photography expenses	Photographer	\$	\$	
	Videographer	\$	\$	
	Albums	\$	\$	
	Extra prints	\$	\$	
	Digital copies	\$	\$	
	Disposal cameras	\$	\$	
	Other	\$	\$	
	Other	\$	\$	
Total photography		\$	\$	
Reception expenses	Location fee	\$	\$	
	Rentals (table, chairs, etc.)	\$	\$	
	Food	\$	\$	
	Drinks	\$	\$	
	Cake	\$	\$	
	Music	\$	\$	
	Decorations	\$	\$	
	Staff (including tips)	\$	\$	
	Wedding favors	\$	\$	
	Other	\$	\$	
	Other	\$	\$	
Total Reception		\$	\$	
Miscellaneous expenses	Transportation	\$	\$	
	Gifts	\$	\$	
	Wedding coordinator	\$	\$	
	Rehearsal dinner	\$	\$	
	Other	\$	\$	
	Other	\$	\$	
	Other	\$	\$	
Total miscellaneous		\$	\$	
Total expenses		\$	\$	

Bottom line	Total contributions	\$	
	Total expenses	- \$	
	Budget surplus/shortage	= \$	



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