

Planning a Successful Wedding

by Michael Edwards

A successful Wedding Reception requires a lot of careful thought and planning. Coordination of your hall, entertainment, caterer, photographer and video service will be easier if you know where problems usually occur and make advanced provisions that will prevent them from happening! Hiring top notch professionals will also help assure a successful day.

The following tips and suggestions are based on my personal experience as an entertainer at over 1,000 weddings over many years. Other professionals involved with your reception will probably also have suggestions to help you. Listen to everyone, digest it all and then remember that it is your wedding reception and the final decision in any matter should be yours.

Budget and Priorities

Ask most people to name the two most important factors that contribute to a successful reception and they will probably say "good food and good music". But a year or two later, long after your guests have forgotten what they had to eat, they will still remember great entertainment and how much fun they had. We feel our agency motto says it all: "The Music Makes Or Breaks the Wedding". Surprisingly, some people spend more of their wedding budget on exotic floral centerpieces or on a huge wedding cake than they do for their entertainment. A pre-meal cheese & crackers table with assorted vegetables and dip can actually cost you more than your Disc Jockey. When was the last time you heard guests leaving a function hall raving that the veggie platter really "made" the party?

Every wedding reception must start with a budget. Large or small, lavish or modest, we all want the very best we can get for the amount we plan to spend. Once you have a total budget in mind, you really have to decide what your budget priorities are going to be. If food is going to be the main focus of the reception, then don't go overboard on costly extras like a full open bar, a towering ice sculpture or custom made favors for each and every guest. If the entertainment is most important to you, why not plan a four course meal instead of five courses. You may be able to upgrade to a better Band or DJ if you don't spend too much of your budget on extra frills like 2 bottles of wine on every table, baskets in the rest rooms or an expensive dessert table. In the ideal fantasy world, money is no object. For everyone else it is wise to invest more of your budget on those things that are more important to you. In the end, the budget priorities you set at the very start of your planning will determine the ultimate outcome of your reception.

Location, Location, Location

I have seen many clients painstakingly select a historic old mansion, impressive museum or a charming little restaurant with an adjoining pub for their function. Great choices for atmosphere, but once again, questions must be asked. "Is there ample parking for all of my guests?", "Is there a large enough dance floor and how close is it to the set-up area for the Band or DJ?", "Can my entertainment gain access to the facility to set up in advance of the rental time?", "Is there sufficient power for a full band or will older "historic" circuitry cause blown fuses and power outages?", "Is there air conditioning or adequate heat and enough rest rooms for the comfort of my guests?", "Will all of my guests be able to see and hear the entertainment, or will some guests be alienated in separate rooms (or even on separate floors), away from important announcements and the music?" An adjacent pub or a bar located in another room will split your guests into groups and may ruin an otherwise cohesive function. Diverting too many guests from the main room usually means the dance floor will suffer. Borderline dancers who might have otherwise been inspired to dance due to a packed dance floor may decide to call it an early night. Good entertainment only needs an audience, and the full potential of any show is always better with a packed house. An audience that has another place to congregate can divide (and conquer your function).

Setting Up

After the head table, the most important "location" choice should involve your music. Many halls and function facilities have a stage for your entertainment but then again, others do not. Keep in mind that your entertainment is a very important part of your reception and should not be hidden in a corner of the room or behind a column. Ideally, your Band or DJ should be located in front of the dance floor in the center of the room. This enables all guests to see and hear the show equally. Some halls do not consider this factor and arbitrarily place the music at the far end of the room, away from the dance floor and surrounded by tables of guests while a gift table or ice sculpture is placed in a better location! Needless to say, to reach your guests on the dance floor from across the room, the music at such an undesirable location would be quite loud for those guests at tables nearby. If such a set-up is unavoidable, a small stage or platform to raise the entertainment above ground level will help with both visibility and acoustics. A good function hall will work with you and change from their usual set-up practices if you bring these factors to their attention.

Seating Advice

Another important decision involves your reception's seating arrangement. Try to arrange your tables so that older guests are not right next to the music. The volume that is necessary to adequately cover a large room may be too loud at the source for older guests when they have been seated right next to the speakers. Younger guests are usually not upset by the music being nearby.

Your First Dance and Parent Dances

The Bride & Groom's first dance is a special moment during the reception. Experience has shown that the best time for this dance is early in the function, right after you are introduced into the room. This is the only time you can be sure that all members of the wedding party, your guests and family are there to share that moment. The bridal party also still looks its best. By dancing at beginning of the function, the Bride & Groom are also graciously opening the dance floor to all their guests for the entire reception. Parent dances are usually done after the salad course or after the main course. In doing them later, your first dance has a moment all its own and the audience isn't asked to focus on several special dances in a row.

Music and the Meal

During dinner, the right music played at a comfortable volume level can make a good meal even more enjoyable. All caterers, country clubs, hotels, restaurants and function facilities are concerned with basically the same thing: serving you and your guests a good hot meal. Ask your caterer how long they think the meal itself will last. This will depend on the number of courses, the number of people at your reception and the efficiency of the service. While it is difficult to predict an exact time due to all the variables, the average meal at a wedding reception usually lasts about 1 1/2 to 2 hours. I have seen many a reception nearly ruined by a 3+ hour meal that leaves little or no time for dancing afterwards. One good way to save the day is to allow guests to dance in-between dinner courses. It can make a long, drawn-out, multi-course meal pass more quickly and also "warms up" the audience for the faster dancing to follow. A good band or DJ is always aware of which course is being served, eaten or cleared. If your guests are up dancing between courses and the next course comes out from the kitchen, they will announce to the audience that the next course is being served, and allow those on the dance floor to sit down and eat. This helps your caterer in two ways:

1. the meal is not prolonged by the music **and**
2. guests dancing between courses will not sit around wondering why the next course is taking so long

Some function managers discourage or even forbid dancing during the meal because of repeated bad experiences with amateur DJs or bands playing fast dance music during dinner and keeping guests from their food. When you consider that this means you and your guests may have to endure up to 2 hours of humdrum background music, such an inflexible hall policy is not in the best interest of your function. The best compromise is for the band or DJ to play a nice mixture of "easy listening" danceable dinner music during the preliminary courses and then, as soon as the main course is served, announce the main course to the audience and then play some soft background music so that any dancers will then return to their tables with everyone else to enjoy the main course. This is an ideal time for your band or DJ to take their dinner break, since nobody will be dancing until after the main course is through.

Keeping Them Dancing

There is nothing more pleasing to a bride and groom than to see all of their guests on the dance floor enjoying themselves. Make no mistake, this is also the main goal of your entertainment. Here are some tips for planning in advance that can help with this vital aspect of your wedding reception:

- If more than 2 or 3 small children will be attending your reception, their typical innocent activities (ie: running around, jumping and sliding unsupervised on the dance floor) will inhibit guests from dancing for fear of hurting these little ones. Check to see if your function facility's photography room (or any other separate area) is available to you during your reception. Find a reliable caretaker to watch the kids, supervise their meal and then entertain them with stories, coloring, games and activities during your reception. This also gives their parents a chance to enjoy the reception knowing their children are safe and well cared for. Meanwhile, you are saving the dance floor exclusively for the dancers.
- The Bridal party and their immediate families are the "heart and soul" of any wedding reception. If the bar is located far from the dance floor, in the next room or in the foyer of a hotel, sometimes (even before the meal is over) the groom and all the ushers will congregate there, away from the main reception area. Bridesmaids without dance partners end up sitting together or roaming from table to table. At other times, the bride and groom, the bridal party or various family members are all called outside the room for additional photographs or video interviews, during the main dance set after the meal. Remember: without the true focal point of the reception (the bridal party and their immediate families) the dance floor will suffer. Difficulty in locating key members of the bridal party during the reception will also delay important pre-planned announcements and events such as bridal party or parent dances, garter & bouquet ceremonies. Keep this in mind if your function facility gives you an option as to whether to put a mobile bar inside or outside of your main function room. Guests and members of the bridal party who are not in the room cannot participate.
- Some photographers or videographers offer a 20 minute "This Is Your Life" type of slide or video presentation that is sometimes scheduled to be shown on the dance floor in the middle of the function. When you consider the show's set-up and breakdown time, it can kill an hour of dance time while your paid entertainment sits and waits. If possible, schedule this wonderful trip down memory lane either right before or immediately after the meal, to maximize guests' dancing time.
- Overplanning your music can also hinder dancing at the reception. A well-meaning couple who provide a long list of all their own favorite songs in advance

unwittingly eliminate the musical flexibility needed at a wedding reception, especially if the audience doesn't respond to some of the songs on the list. An experienced music professional will know how to blend different styles of music to include the client's requests, their own "can't miss" choices and the best of the requests from your guests to keep the dance floor full and include all age groups. Have confidence in your entertainment.... if they have played at hundreds or even thousands of other successful receptions they are best qualified to select a perfect musical mixture from all of the suggestions they receive.

Lighting & Atmosphere

The musical entertainment you choose for your wedding reception has the responsibility of "getting the crowd going". In other words, making sure that everyone in the audience is being entertained, dances and has fun. This job is much more difficult when the room's lights are too bright. Time and time again I have seen the number of people on the dance floor increase just as soon as the lights are dimmed to a lower level. Light dimmer switches are sometimes controlled by a bartender or manager who may not realize how important the atmosphere is to the success of your function. Other factors can effect the level of lighting as well. A well-meaning guest or relative with a home video camera may keep requesting that the lights be turned up so that he or she can get a better picture. Good professional photographers and videographers usually have portable lights that go where their cameras go. Depending on their equipment, the house lights can usually still be dimmed without effecting the quality of their work. Unfortunately, if the lights do go up too much, there may be nobody left on the dance floor to film! You have to decide what is most important to you and try to address these possible areas of conflict in advance by leaving explicit lighting instructions with the function manager.

General Information

Each function facility has its own special "set" way of doing things at a Wedding Reception. Each one will also tell you that their way is the right way. **If they provide you with forms for the names of your bridal party, make sure that all the information you send to both the function hall and your entertainment has the same couple-pairings and is in the same order.**

If the wedding cake is being served for dessert it is usually cut between courses, like after the salad. This gives them time to cut it and plate it before dessert. If it is to be wrapped and put out later in the function it can be cut right after the main course, just prior to the bride's dance with her father and groom's dance with his mother (if applicable). The garter and bouquet ceremonies are usually done roughly 1 hour before the scheduled end of the reception, but this is flexible too. Remember...its your wedding, so you decide what is best for your needs.

True professionals will always be willing to accomodate your wishes.

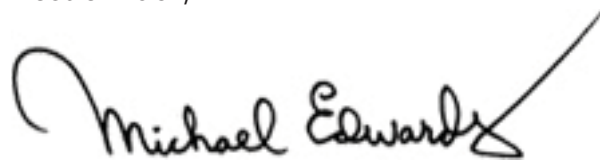
Happy Ending

If the Bride & Groom plan to change clothes before doing their "Going Away Dance", they should pre-determine how long this will take and then plan to be completely changed and ready to be re-introduced 15 minutes before the end. This will allow enough time for a good-bye circle and big send-off by all of your guests. Keep in mind if yours is a Saturday afternoon reception, most entertainers and function facilities are probably under contract for another party that night and cannot stay overtime if you are not back from changing before the scheduled end of your reception. Arriving late from changing may mean cutting short your own "good-byes"! Excluding Saturday afternoons, when a successful wedding reception approaches the end, quite often the question of overtime arises. Unfortunately, once in a while the band or DJ says "yes" but the hall says "no". I have seen halls agree to an overtime hour only if the bar closes first (liquor liability). To be safe, make sure you know the function facility's overtime policy, price and time limits on the bar, if any. It is also a good idea to find out in advance the overtime rates of all the other professionals involved in your reception. This will help avoid any misunderstandings if things are really going well and you decide to keep things rolling for another hour.

The time to let your entertainment know you want an extra hour is about 40 minutes before the regular scheduled ending time. The reason that this is so important is that most good bands and DJs try to build their musical performance to a peak toward the end of the night. Its really quite anti- climactic to drive a fully packed dance floor into a frenzied finale (with "Shout" for instance) then say good night, only to come back and play again for another hour. Some bridal couples who book an extra hour decide to go ahead with their "Going Away Dance" as it was originally planned (15 minutes before the overtime hour begins), so that they are then free to have fun and dance in less formal clothes for the final hour. This is also a good idea since older guests may not stay for the final overtime hour, and this way they will still be included in the good-bye circle of guests on your video.

It may seem like an awful lot of work, but careful planning and organization will help to make your wedding reception everything you dreamed it would be. I hope that this information makes it a little easier.

Best of Luck,

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