



UNIT-3

The Wedding Consultation

Learning Outcomes

- ✓ Identifying Wedding Preparation Concepts
- ✓ Obtaining Required Details for Wedding Preparation
- ✓ Analysing Offers You Present to Clients

Unit 3

The Wedding Consultation

First Meeting with Clients - Establish the Wedding Vision

Preparation

As a wedding consultant, you will have to be very well prepared before the first meeting with any new client. It is of the utmost importance that you have a very clear understanding of the client's needs. Below, we discuss what must be done in preparation for the very first meeting.

Meeting Place

The first meeting can be held at a home office if you have one, but only if it actually looks like a very professional office. If this is not an option, you could suggest a visit to the client, perhaps to their home. Many clients prefer this as they are usually more relaxed and more forthcoming about what they want and need. You should ascertain beforehand exactly who will be at the meeting. The ideal would be just you and the couple. Sometimes the parents want to attend the meeting. In such cases, take care as this may confuse things. Make sure that you listen very carefully to the couple's precise wishes and not those of the other people in the room. Ensure the couple is satisfied with whatever plans are being made by the group.

Presentation

It is imperative you make a good impression at the first meeting. Look like the professional that you are. Ensure you are neat and tidy and very well organised. Take care with your appearance. Clients will surely have more confidence if you actually look the part. If you appear to be struggling to keep your own life in order and look as though you've just stumbled out of bed, the clients will not see you as a person capable of organising an entire wedding.

Style

Maintain a friendly but professional manner in the meeting. Let the clients see that you take your business seriously. Be understanding and approachable.

What to Take to the Meeting

You will need the following when attending the first meeting:

- A pen and pad to take thorough notes
- A set of questions mentioned later which ask: who, what, where, when and how
- The 'planning the ceremony' list of questions which will be mentioned later
- Suggestions for locations, suppliers and venues etc.

- Brochures and/or leaflets from suggested suppliers etc. as well as budget estimations
- Calculator

Always switch off your mobile phone during meetings. It will reflect very poorly on you if someone calls halfway through just to invite out for a coffee.

Make Sure You Are Clear About What You Will Ask

Make sure that you know everything you want and need to ask. This will be covered in the following section.

The Meeting Itself

Getting to Know the Client

As the wedding planner, your duty is to ensure your client's concerns and needs are met in the process of wedding planning. Effective communication between you and your client is necessary. You will need to ask many questions and clarify ideas. This will reduce the likelihood of errors or mistakes. Ways to enhance communication between yourself and the clients include the following:

Listening Skills

The art of holding a good conversation is to encourage other people to talk about themselves. This is especially true of wedding planning. To get them talking about exactly what they want, you must ask the right questions and obtain valuable information. The information you extract will be helpful in understanding the clients and knowing how to fulfil all their individual wedding needs.

The two most important approaches to adopt with clients:

1. Say nothing
2. Ask questions

Good Quality Questions

Asking proper questions will attract the client's attention; it will help them understand their individual situation, and it will also help you learn more about them. Proper questioning will also reveal their needs. Use the funnel approach in your line of questioning. This means beginning with more general questions such as prospective dates for their wedding, before moving on to more complex wedding aspects, such as the guest list and food for the reception.

Summarise

After the clients have spoken, even randomly for a few minutes, summarise what they've said. You can perhaps say something like:

- 'So you prefer a live band at the reception?'
- 'What you're saying is, you want only close friends and relatives present?'

This summary will put everything the clients are trying to say in a nutshell.

Getting the Details You Need

To be able to serve your clients, you must identify every important detail. Clients may be very vague about what they want, especially at the start. This is one reason why they've hired you. They need assistance to make their wedding ideas become a reality. The following questions must be kept in mind when meeting with clients to plan such a big event:



WHO?

You will initially need to work out the following:

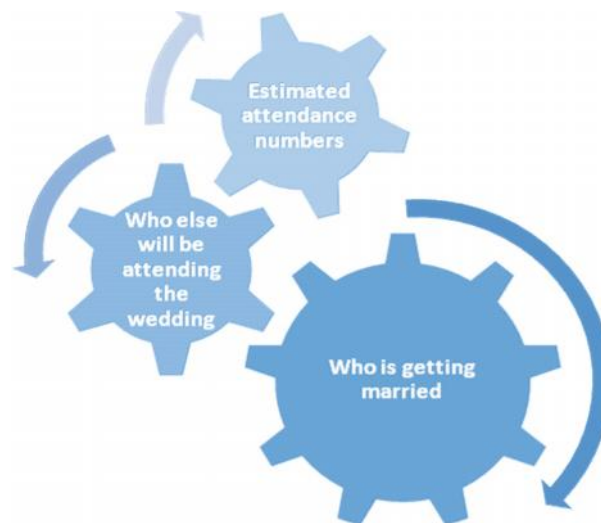


Fig. 3.1

WHAT?

The first step is to find out the client's plans for their wedding. Would they prefer you to organise every aspect from the invitations to the hen's night or stag party? Do they want you to concentrate only on the ceremony? You must be able to handle anything they present you with.

WHEN?

Next, work out exactly when the clients want to hold their event. This is important as it will show the timeline progression of the services.

Sample questions that you might ask the clients include:

- In which month do you want your wedding to take place?
- Do you have a preference for a certain day? Would that be a weekend or weekday?
- Do you want the wedding in the morning or the afternoon?
- Is it a one-day occasion or will it take place over a few days?

Ask questions in order to pick the most suitable date. Dates may have to be altered. Nevertheless, it is necessary to acquire all this information in order to choose an appropriate venue for the wedding ceremony and the reception.

WHERE?

Ask the client where they would like to hold the wedding and consider these questions:

- Does the client want to get married locally or further away from home?
- Do they want the ceremony to be held in a church, a hotel ballroom, or a country club?
- Do they want to get married abroad?

It is essential to pick a suitable location which can accommodate the number of people the couple want to invite, as well as one that can host the wedding appropriately.

HOW?

The final question will be 'How?' This is an open-ended question and can help you to fill in any blanks. Some 'How?' questions would be:

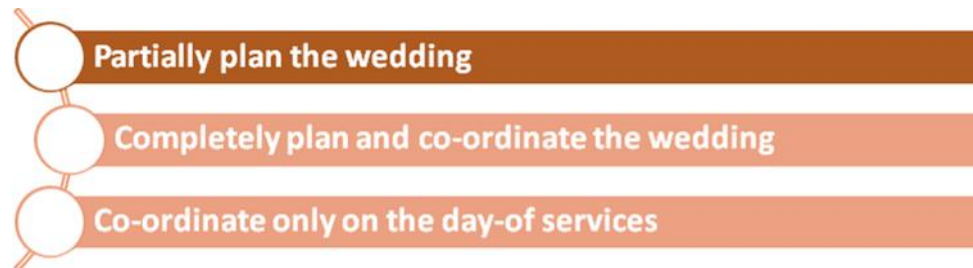
- How long will the event last?
- How much do you plan on spending? (What is your budget?)
- How do you plan on accommodating the guests? Will there be snacks, food or beverages?
- How do you want to notify the guests about your event?

CHECKLIST (Who, What, When, Where, How)

Who	
What	
When	
How	

Planning the Ceremony

Once hired to plan the wedding, you might:



You have been chosen to provide the couple with the most complete service possible. You have to be prepared to meet all their needs and desires with full competence. Wedding planning is really about one event: the ceremony. There is a huge amount of pre-planning as well as post-planning associated with arranging the dresses, the tuxedos, the vendors, the site and the reception. All of these aspects are directly connected to the pivotal event - the ceremony itself.

What to Offer Your Clients

Before the initial meeting with your clients, you should have a lot of resources prepared to enable the planning sessions. A complete wedding package would include these services:

- Constant communication with the couple
- Budget planning
- Timelines, schedules and checklists
- Selecting and booking of venues for the wedding and the reception
- Selecting and booking the officiant
- Preparing the theme and the style of the wedding
- Preparing the design, ordering and mailing of invitations
- Organising selection of wedding attire and accessories
- Providing and co-ordinating vendors such as caterers, florists, photographers, beauticians, musicians and hairstylists
- Organising transport
- Negotiating contracts and reviewing them
- Assisting with the marriage licence
- Planning the itinerary
- Planning the ceremony
- Overseeing the rehearsal
- Directing processional and attendant duties
- Reception planning
- Co-ordinating the gifts on the day
- On-hand co-ordination on the actual wedding day
- Relieving the couple of any stress (as much as possible)

The above is indeed a very impressive list but it is only a small portion of what wedding planners do. Weddings are like symphonies of chaos and the wedding planner is the conductor who must organise them all. Whether you provide full or partial wedding planning services, you must know about all features of wedding planning.

Defining the Vision and Venue

The wedding vision is a creative concept of the wedding event which incorporates all the five senses: sound, smell, sight, touch and taste. You must discuss the vision with clients in order to identify their ideal day. Then move onto the more practical things such as how to make their vision a reality. In Unit 3 we discuss tools which help you help your clients to establish a clear and focused vision which will be complemented by destination, theme and site selection.

Vision Determination

Your initial consultation with the clients is the perfect time to find out as much as you can about the bride and groom's vision for their wedding. This has to be done before anything else. You must find out what is important to them and how it can be expressed in their wedding. Only in this way will you be able to meet the client's expectations. In order to do this you must use open-ended questions. You might

also ask the bride (usually the primary contact for the wedding) to perhaps bring pictures or samples of any ideas she is leaning towards and likes. These things don't have to be specific to a wedding but they will give you an indication of likes and visions. These are things such as plate shapes, fabric swatches or photos.

You must meet the couple in person. Other wedding particulars can be organised by phone or email but you must meet the couple face to face to gain a real feel for personalities and styles in order to use these for the wedding. For example, brides who wear tailored fashions will have different wants and needs to those who wear cutting-edge fashions or those who favour hiking gear. One note of caution here: don't overgeneralise based solely on appearance, but use all the information you collect through your questioning and add it to any other data the couple give you.

This information gathering is essential in order that you might have a vast area to draw upon when putting the vision into place. More importantly, as the planner/consultant, you must remember that it's not your wedding you're planning but someone else's; therefore, their vision and preferences must take priority. If, for example, the couple tell you that they were engaged at a popular theme park and would like you to arrange a cotton candy-maker at their reception, it is up to you to arrange this. Actively listening and maintaining eye contact are the keys to effectively uncovering clients' visions. You should take notes but not so assiduously that it affects your listening. It is also advisable to avoid talking too much about what you did at other people's weddings. Each couple is unique.

Wedding Themes

While learning about a client's vision, you will probably find that thematic ideas emerge. Themes can vary dramatically from the very subtle to the very dramatic. They will usually feed into site and destination choice as well and influence other aspects such as the floral décor, for example. A particular colour scheme can be the catalyst for an entire wedding framework.

Colour Composition

Suppose one of your clients is a big fan of Julia Roberts and her favourite movie is *Steel Magnolias*. She would like that as her theme and wants to base the colours on Roberts' character's wedding. These would be blush and bashful, or light and dark pink. At this point, compliment the client on her idea and explain to her that a range of colours will assist the overall design of her wedding. Use blush and bashful to then determine these elements:

Month of year: Jan Feb Mar Apr May June Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec	
Ceremony time of day: Morning Afternoon Evening	
Reception location: Hotel, Historic Estate, Museum, Garden, Country Club, Resort	
Incorporating the colours into the clothing:	
Two ideas for favours:	
One other effect:	

Complete the same activity using the following colours:



A second themed category concerns holidays and seasons. Consider the holiday calendar, which would include the more popular holidays that coincide with wedding themes such as Valentine's Day, New Year's Eve, Fourth of July (in the U.S.), St. Patrick's Day, Christmas, etc. Holiday weekends are quite popular because they provide more travel time for guests. The only drawback, however, is that their popularity commands higher prices at these times. Seasons coincide with different colours; hence, spring will go with pastels, summer with bright colours, more muted tones for autumn, and dark or festive colours for winter. You can choose an aspect of the particular holiday period or season to decide any thematic elements. Examples include a harvest wedding where you will organise pumpkin centrepieces, cider-based signature beverages, a hay wagon, and pumpkin bread or candy apple baskets.

Some clients will want a historical period theme. Examples include the Renaissance or Victorian periods, the Roaring 20s, or the Big Band 1930s and 40s. These will also help you decide on music and clothing styles for the event. Related themes comprise a chosen culture or a subculture; it may be the bride and/or groom's heritage or something completely different. Perhaps one of your clients will prefer an Ascot theme for their wedding. This may be because they love horses and not because they are of British heritage. Perhaps another couple who love horses would go for a Country and Western theme.

Subculture themes may be based on careers; for example, a military wedding has specific customs and protocol associated with it. Clients who are very 'outdoorsy' might choose to have a garden or beach wedding. Gazebos, resorts or estates can be suitable places for outdoor themed weddings as well.

Another, broader theme relates to popular culture. Couples often use theatre, films or books to find inspiration for their weddings. Time periods, music and plot lines or characters from stories such as Camelot, Romeo and Juliet or Alice in Wonderland can fuel people's imaginations. It's important to know the guest list when selecting a theme. Say, for example, the bride wants to incorporate her Scottish heritage into her wedding programme; it would be a good idea to explain these cultural elements in order those who are not of Scottish heritage might understand them. When planning the wedding, the planner must bear the guests in mind as well. Guests may like a horseback ride during a Country and Western themed wedding, perhaps during the time between the ceremony and reception. You will need to provide other transportation for guests who do not wish to participate in the horse-riding activity.

Destinations and Sites

Wedding sites or destinations can be selected based on the wedding theme. For example, a wedding theme based on the Great Gatsby might take place at the Great Gatsby Estate on Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, or Rosecliff Mansion, Newport, where the film was set. Another example would be a Renaissance themed wedding. It might take place in San Francisco in the James Leary Mansion which was designed by architects working in the classical style.

Destination weddings give couples the opportunity to live out their dream themes. Disney World, for example, has specialty packages which even include a Cinderella-style pumpkin coach.

Sometimes it won't be practical for clients to select a destination or site based on their wedding theme. An alternative could be to transform the site so that it reflects their chosen theme or destination. The beach theme is very popular, but if the clients don't live near a beach (or even a lake) you can still transform the wedding site by carefully selecting music, props and other elements specific to the theme.

A quick note is required here for clarity: a destination is a broader geographical location such as a city, whereas a site is specifically the physical venue and the placement within the venue. Most hotels, for example, have multiple function areas where weddings and/or receptions can take place. They also provide other options such as ballrooms or courtyards. Each one has a different feel and can therefore cater for a broad range of themes.

Very often, the wedding ceremonies will occur at houses of worship after which the newlyweds and the guests usually move to another location to enjoy the reception. There are also many sites which can accommodate both ceremonies and receptions. Common reception venues are ballrooms, country clubs, gardens, atriums, hotels, resorts and historic estates. Frequently the clients won't have a particularly clear vision of their special day and will depend on you to help them build a theme and then select an appropriate destination and site to complete the theme. In this situation you must gently lead the clients. Consider taking floral décor or design classes and ensure you keep up with all the latest wedding trends. This will assist you to sharpen your creative skills in order to help every couple determine their own unique style.

When it comes to choosing the wedding venue, make sure you pay special attention to the following:



Firstly, the capacity of the venue will tell you whether a certain facility is practical and achievable. Many garden sanctuaries, small museum sites and historic homes have a limited capacity of around 150 (or fewer). Therefore, larger weddings will be better off in a major hotel as these places can cater for up to 3,000 guests. You must establish the guest numbers in order to choose the right place. You cannot hold a 50-person wedding in a grand ballroom as it will definitely feel cavernous. These smaller intimate weddings need a more personal setting.

Secondly, you must determine the fees for hiring a place. Each property will be different and include different things. Some hotels do not have rental fees. Their pricing is on a per-person basis for food and drinks. Other venues might charge a fixed price of, say, £5,000 for a specific number of hours.

It is also vital to remember that there will probably be taxes to consider when calculating the costs. Service charges, taxes and other types of fees may be included. If a certain hotel is charging its fees on a per-person basis, it might give you an estimate of around £100 for each individual. Hence, for a wedding with 150 guests you will need to have a budget of around £15,000 for the venue alone. The important point is to make sure the tax or service charges are included; if they are not included, you will actually be charged considerably more, seriously exceeding your budget. For example, if the service charges are around 18% and the taxes 7%, this will add an extra 25% to the bill, taking the cost of the reception to £18,750, quite a difference from the first figure.

When showing clients three different proposals from three different venues, you will need to make sure you are 'comparing apples to apples'. Thus, if one of the venues is inclusive of everything and another is not, the latter will seem less expensive when in fact this is not the case. You must peel back the layers and ensure that all information provided is complete and consistent. You must also remember to include other fees such as corkage fees, cake cutting, and overtime.

Fourthly, you must take care to find out about any special requirements or restrictions when choosing a venue. Certain facilities, such as academic sites or historic chapels, will only be made available to people who actually belong to those communities. Sometimes, a nominal membership fee might be paid in order to gain access, and at other times you will not be able to use the facility at all. Some venues will only open their availability if the bride or groom, or one of their immediate family members, has an established relationship through any on-going or noteworthy financial contributions.

In some cases there are special requirements, and certain things can or cannot occur at these facilities. Historical buildings in many instances have policies to maintain the integrity of the building or any artefacts contained therein. This may restrict certain wedding elements because they may stain or cause some damage, such as red liquids (tomato or cranberry juices, chocolate fountains, flower petals, or even candles). Sometimes restrictions apply to the type of rentals that can be used. For example, some rental chairs might scratch the flooring and will therefore be prohibited. Those venues that have strict guidelines will usually provide lists of accepted vendors with whom the venues have a trusting relationship. Hotels will have their own catering services, for example, and you will probably have to purchase only their food or drinks, and sometimes even the wedding cake. It is imperative that you, as the wedding consultant, make yourself fully aware of the regulations and policies of the wedding sites in your particular area. In this way you will be able to assist clients to make informed decisions.

Lastly, you must consider the set-up time that is available to you in order to organise everything. You will need to know when vendors are able to come in and prepare for the guests' arrival. This can be quite a problem with highly popular venues which stage back-to-back receptions. One may finish at five PM while the next begins at six PM. This will leave you with a very tight timeline in which to work. Make sure you have a frank conversation with the manager of the venue to determine whether the staff can actually achieve the following within an hour: ensure previous guests leave in time, take their gifts away, vacuum carpets, turn the room, reconfigure tables to suit, replace all linens, and clean the bathrooms. While this is happening, you will need to set up the escort card table, the food, cake, floral décor, lighting, musicians, and any other elements.

You need to know that short turnaround times don't allow for any problems, challenges or emergencies that may arise. In general, a set-up time of four hours or more is desirable. If you have to settle for less than this, ensure that you have plenty of assistance on hand. With larger weddings, it is advisable to recommend that your clients choose a venue which handles only one event per day. This will ease the stress of setting up and also breaking down at the end. You will also need to ascertain whether the venue works with unions as this will have an effect on the time orientation. Most unions tend to work only within the very specific nature of their contracts and their members may leave if things do not occur as scheduled.

One way of finding answers to all the key questions about the venue is to send a request for proposal (RFP) to all the venues under consideration. RFPs give details on any specific requirements of your client's wedding and give potential vendors a chance to bid according to the provided guidelines. Send the same RFP to all the venues and ask them to address the same issues. In this way your clients can easily compare information when deciding on the venue. Decisions should not be made solely on budget competitiveness. You and your clients must also assess the completeness, the organisation, the creativity and the feasibility of each proposal. As a wedding planner/consultant, you should not just blindly send out RFPs and hope for the best. Begin with a list of trusted venues and let your clients choose the one they feel is the best fit for them.

Consultant Checklist and Reminders for Theme, Destination and Site Selection

- Ensure the theme resonates with the individual couple.
- Stay with just the one primary theme and remain consistent in applying that theme.
- Do not overdo any theme as it can easily take away from the true meaning of the day.
- Keep the guests' comfort level and knowledge base in mind.
- Keep the agreed budget in mind, because the implementation of certain themes can be cost-prohibitive.
- Choose sites and destinations based on the wedding theme or, alternatively, transform the venue to reflect the specific theme.

When assisting clients to compare venues, be very familiar with:



Further Reading:

- ✓ *How to Plan Your Own Wedding and Save Thousands: Without Going Crazy* By Tracy Leigh
- ✓ *E-plan Your Wedding: How to Save Time and Money with Today's Best Online Resources* By Crystal Melendez, Jason Melendez
- ✓ *A Priceless Wedding: Crafting a Meaningful, Memorable, and Affordable Celebration* By Sara Cotner