

Starting Wedding Planning Business

Unit 16

Unit 16

Starting Your Own Business

You should begin with the important task of writing a business plan with a clear focus on your target audience. Once you have a business plan, you need apply a strategy for successful marketing. When potential clients start contacting you, effective interview techniques, communication skills, and knowledge of contracts become essential. This all will be covered in the sections to follow. Remember, you do not have a client until you have a signed contract.

Business Plan and Target audiences

A business plan precisely defines your business, identifies your goals, and serves as your firm's résumé. The basic components include a current and pro-forma balance sheet, an income statement, and a cash flow analysis. It helps you allocate resources properly, handle unforeseen complications, and make good business decisions. Because it provides specific and organized information about your company and how you will repay borrowed money, a good business plan is a crucial part of any loan application.

Additionally, it informs sales personnel, suppliers, and others about your operations and goals. This section outlines the basics of your business plan while also pinpointing the importance of having a target market.

Writing your Business Plan

Developing your plan is an important first step in showing the world you are serious about starting a business. After all, if you can't find the time or energy to put together a game plan for your business, how are you ever going to find the time or the energy to run a business? If you want to be taken seriously by lending institutions, vendors, colleagues, and competitors, you need a business plan to achieve your goals and objectives.

Before you begin writing your business plan, you should consider four core questions:

- What service or product does your business provide, and what needs does it fill?
- Who are the potential customers for your product or service, and why will they purchase it from you?
- How will you reach your potential customers?
- Where will you get the financial resources to start your business?

In short, your business plan will help you describe your business, select a target market, manage day-to-day operations, and handle finances. Although there is no single formula for developing a business plan, some elements are common to most business plans. They are summarized in Table below;

Starting with Section I, you will want to describe your business by first providing a mission statement, which is a clear and concise (usually one-sentence) statement of being. Begin the sentence with, “The mission of (insert your company name) is . . .” Complete the thought by stating your focus and philosophy. A more detailed description of your business can follow, which might include an overview of your vision, products, services, goals, and objectives.

In addition to the business description, the first section of the business plan should include a marketing plan, a statement detailing your competition, a clear means of operation, and a listing of personnel needs. Many consultants start out working alone, and building a staff comes with business growth. This section ends with an overview of your insurance coverage,

Section II of your business plan includes your financial data. Many consultants start out small and work from their homes, keeping them from the immediate need to apply for a small business loan. Once you have built a reputation and a staff, you will need to rent a separate space and will have the business clout to secure a loan. Your list of capital equipment and supply list details the materials you need to run your business. Equipment is permanent or reusable over a significant period of time, such as your vehicle, computer, printer, desk, fax machine, copy machine, bookshelves, file cabinets, stapler, scissors, and tape dispenser. Supplies, on the other hand, are consumed after one use or a short period of time; examples are printer paper and cartridges, pens, tape, staples, and sticky notes. Keep an organized spreadsheet that details the equipment and supplies that you utilize in your daily operations.

TABLE 22.1 Elements of a Business Plan

Cover Sheet

Statement of Purpose/Executive Summary

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Section I: The Business

- Description of business
- Marketing
- Competition
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- Personnel
- Business insurance
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- Loan applications
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- Balance sheet
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- Pro-forma income projections
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- Tax returns

- Personal financial statement
- Copy of lease
- Copy of licenses and other legal documents
- Résumé

Financial projections are critical to your business success because they help you determine your pricing structure. The third section of your business plan includes the supporting documents that are critical to obtaining loans as your business grows. Information such as your tax returns, personal financial statements, lease (if you are renting a space), licenses, and résumé should be readily accessible. You don't have to reinvent the wheel when writing your business plan; you simply need to get it down on paper. There are many resources and individuals available to assist you in this task including Web sites, books, software, and accountants. Bplans.com is an excellent resource that includes over 50 free business plans for review, including one that pertains to a wedding consultancy business.

Beyond the Business Card

Many aspiring wedding planners believe it takes little more than a business card to get started in the field. However, whether you are starting from home or leasing executive office space, you will need to establish your business as a formal legal entity before attracting your first customer. This may seem like a tedious exercise, but rest assured, prospective clients will check your credentials to ensure you are a legitimate business before hiring you. If you don't have a legitimate business, the client will hire another consultant. Getting married is stressful enough. A couple doesn't want to hire someone to manage the most important day of their lives only to find out the person wasn't properly insured or legally permitted to operate a business.

Business Name

In a word: Everything! Before you fill out the first form to register your business, you must have a business name. When selecting a business name, use your imagination and conduct research. Check out the competition. Your business name should be as unique as you are. The name can be formal, contemporary, casual, , or elegant but ultimately should reflect your style, so make the decision carefully. In creating a business name, do not make it too complicated, cutesy, or confusing. "Happily Ever After" might sound like a wedding planning business to you but it may suggest "travel agency" to someone else. An overly complicated name like Fran's Fabulous and Fancy Wedding Planning and Design is too wordy for a business card and would not lend itself to a concise logo. Be innovative but keep it simple. Potential clients are more apt to remember your business name if it is concise, unique, and interesting. In addition, many wedding planners choose to use their own first and/or last

name in their business title; for example, business names such as “Events by Holly” or “Sue Serene Wedding Planning” allow for a personal approach. You might also consider starting your company name with the letter “A.” This tactic will ensure that your company is listed at or near the top of listings such as bridal showcase directories or the white pages. After you have developed three or four possible ideas for your business name, share your thoughts with family and friends. Get their feedback and support. Often, someone else will think of a good reason to use or not use a name. Once you digest their feedback, narrow your choices to two or three.

Once you have narrowed down your selection, check to make sure the ideas for your name are unique and not already in use.

Remember, just because the name you select does not have a Web site does not mean that the name has not already been taken. Do your homework and check. If the name you like best is available, register it immediately so that you are not left out in the cold. If it is taken, move on to your second and third options.

The Corporate Structure of Your Business

Having filed your DBA, you must next determine the structure of your business. The three primary types of business entities are sole proprietor, partnership, and corporation, and many hybrids, such as limited liability companies, exist. Of these, the sole proprietorship, which is one individual operating a business, is the most common for wedding consultants because it is the simplest and least expensive type of business to set up. Be aware, however, that if your business fails, your personal assets may be used to pay off your business debts because the business does not exist separately from the owner and you accept all associated financial risks. If you open a business in your own name as a sole proprietorship, you can use your social security number for filing business taxes.

A partnership, on the other hand, is a relationship existing between two or more persons who join together to carry on a trade or business. If you elect to form a partnership, have an attorney draw up a formal partnership agreement so that each partner is aware of his or her rights and responsibilities. Don’t just assume that your best friend will understand his or her responsibilities. This is a business, so get it in writing.

A corporation is a separate legal entity from the business owner. It requires filing of articles of incorporation, electing officers, holding an annual meeting, and paying corporate taxes. It is often easier to obtain financing from banks or other sources as a corporation; thus, if you should decide to franchise your business, it will make sense to form this type of entity.

There's No Place Like Home

Many wedding planners operate out of their homes, especially when they are first getting started. If you decide to go this route, be sure to call the Zoning Commission in your local

town to check on the zoning ordinances that may govern this type of activity. Some towns prohibit home-based businesses that have clients coming and going. You will want to determine if any special permits are required for your wedding planning business. An alternative to seeing clients in your home would be to meet them at a mutually convenient location like a coffee shop.

License, Permits, and Insurance

Many communities require business owners to have a business license. It is obtained by filling out a form at your local city hall. The license is usually good for one year and the fee is nominal. Your local government's Web site will have further information on obtaining this license. You will also need to apply for a permit from your local health department if you are planning to provide food or drink for your clients. For example, if you promise your client that you will make 100 miniature wedding cakes as favours, you will need a permit from the health department. If you don't plan on baking or providing catering to your clients, you will not need this permit.

Insurance is not just for homes and cars; it is important for businesses as well, especially small businesses. While you are in the process of establishing your business, an important component of getting started is to make sure you are insured against potential damaging situations. For example, it is frequently your job as the wedding consultant to make sure the wedding gifts get from point A to point B. If a gift goes missing or a money envelope is stolen, you might be held liable; or, if you are working at a venue and accidentally drop a waterford vase, you will want to have insurance to replace the damaged item. Most insurance companies offer a variety of policies that can be designed to suit your wedding planning business. Contact a local insurance agent in your community to discuss what type of insurance is right for you.

If you already have standard homeowner's insurance, you may have a certain amount of general liability coverage. Check the amount that your policy carries. If it is too low, you may need a rider to the main policy. A rider acts as an addendum to your main policy and can cover specific items like office equipment and computers. For example, if the florist you hired backs his delivery truck into the couple's limo, you will be covered. Insurance riders can be very economical and give you the peace of mind and confidence to conduct your business with less worry and stress. For a nominal fee, you can acquire the rider you need to protect your assets. General liability policies are excellent choices for those running a home-

based business without significant foot traffic. If you wish to hire a staff that will work out of your home, you will need business owners insurance. This particular type of insurance will cover you against physical injuries to you, your clients, and your employees, damage to your

property, and other situations that may arise. This type of coverage is in addition to your homeowner's policy and is more expensive than a rider.

If you decide to establish your business outside of the home, you will need commercial business insurance. Rates for this type of insurance depend on where your business is located, the type of business you own, and state/local regulations. A knowledgeable insurance agent can help you determine if this type of coverage is right for you. Because we live in a world that is quick to litigate, it is critical that you take care of insuring yourself and your business before the first client walks through the door. This could be the most important decision you make regarding your business.

Developing a marketing Strategy

Marketing is an umbrella term that pertains to a company's activities that are associated with selling a product or service and developing a competitive advantage. Marketing has traditionally been packaged with the four Ps: product, price, place, and promotion. Product is the tangible and intangible goods and services that you offer. As a consultant, you act as the liaison between the couple and many of the tangible purchases they make; you also add the intangible elements related to design and organization. Price is the exchange value of the product—in other words, your fee structure. Place involves the radius or area that you serve, that is, the distance you are willing to travel as a planner and the primary communities that you serve. Promotion involves the advertising, sponsorship, publicity, sales promotion, and personal sales that you use to grow your business.

It is commonly thought that marketing is all about advertising and making sales. In addition, marketing is about the little things a company does to reach its target audience like driving to a client's house to make a delivery in person instead of dropping it in the mail, having an annual party to thank clients, or sending cards to vendors. If a business matches its products and services to the people who need them, then marketing has been successful. This section points out the three key factors that will allow you to develop a marketing strategy for a wedding consultancy business: determining your target audience, marketing tool development, and learning the four secrets of selling to brides.

Determining your target audience

After you have established your business as a formal entity, it is time to get the word out that your doors are open for business. The best way to do that is through marketing. But before you spend the first dollar on marketing or advertising, you must determine your target audience, which is the defined group of people you wish to serve. One of the hardest things about establishing a business is finding your style and defining it. Many consultants

struggle because they want to be everything to everybody and are afraid to turn away business, but this generalist approach means that they can't focus their energy on a specific, target market. To get focused, consider the following questions:

- Who are your customers going to be?
- Is this a growing market in your area?
- How are you going to reach your customers?
- What pricing strategy will you implement?
- What will be your specialty area of expertise?
- What will differentiate you from your competitors?

Marketing Tool Development

For a new business, the two best marketing tools you can create are your business card and your Web site. However, before you develop either of these tools, it is important to consider developing a logo for your business.

What would McDonald's be without the golden arches? Or Nike without the famous swoosh? Or Starbucks without the mermaid? Each of these businesses is known by the company's graphic representation, known as a logo, as much as the business name. When forming your company, you spent a significant amount of time selecting a business name; now it is time to work on a logo that captures your essence graphically. Once you have a logo, you can move forward with developing your associated marketing tools.

For such an important task, seek professional help from a graphic designer or artist. If you have minimal start-up funds, there are Internet-based logo design firms that are reasonably priced. Alternatively, secure the assistance of friends who have artistic talent or consider hiring an art or graphic design student to generate ideas for you. Meet with the designer in person to describe your business, style, the type of client you hope to attract, your mission statement, philosophy, and other relevant details from your business plan. Give the artist some ideas to get the ball rolling, and then allow the artist free rein to come up with designs for you to review. When the artist presents some options to you, take time to think about them. Ask yourself some questions: Which idea will carry you through many years? Which idea has the most flexibility? Which idea really personifies what you are all about? Remember, this logo will be seen on letterhead, signage, work shirts, brochures, and your Web site. Make sure the logo you select looks like a wedding planning business rather than a florist, caterer, or other wedding-related specialist. Now that you have a logo, you are ready to develop your other key marketing tools.

Business Card Basics

The business card may seem like an antiquated business tool, but it is in fact one of the best marketing tools at your disposal and also one of the least expensive. Plain or fancy, self-made or professionally designed, the business card is indispensable for marketing your

business. Since your business card is a tangible personification of your business, the style of your card should echo the style of your business. For example, if your business plan is to cater to those with small budgets, your business card should reflect that. Conversely, if you

hope to capture high-end weddings, your card should be on expensive paper and the lettering should be engraved. If you hope to target recent college graduates, your card should be modern so that it will appeal to a young audience.

Your business card should include the following information: your logo, the business name, your name and title, and your contact information, including mailing address, home telephone number, mobile telephone number, e-mail address, fax number, and Web site address.

If you are going after a certain market, reflect that with your business card. For example, if you wish to target Japanese brides, you should consider having your information printed in Japanese on the reverse side of the card. This way, when you meet with a Japanese client, you can present your card in both languages. Small efforts like this will distance you from your competition.

In addition, if your business has a specialty, you might list that on the card. Statements like “Specializing in multi-cultural celebrations” or “Fluent in English, Spanish, and French” would provide valuable information to potential clients. Have 500 cards printed and always keep a stack with you. Invest in a nice leather or metal cardholder so that when someone asks for your card, they are not tumbling out of your purse or briefcase. You always want to present a new card, not something that has been kicking around at the bottom of your bag. Remember, your card is a representation of your business. If you want to present a neat and organized image, make sure your card speaks to that.

Web Site

While your business card is a mini-billboard for your business, a professional Web site is an electronic billboard capable of reaching millions of potential clients.

- The Web is an inexpensive, proven, mass-market vehicle to communicate corporate objectives and description of products and services.
- Unlike print marketing, a Web site is easy to regularly update and keep fresh.
- A Web site is a great vehicle for creating a stimulating, 24-hour multimedia portfolio (pictures, sound, video) to sell your company.
- Web e-mail forms allow for a passive (hands-off) way to accumulate new leads and garner customer interest.
- Newsletters created in e-mail or Web form are an inexpensive means of sending promotional updates.

Your e-mail address should be linked to your Web site address. For example, if a wedding Web site is wildlandweddings.com, an associate’s e-mail might be

leanna@wildlandweddings.com. This is much more memorable, professional, and marketable than something like leanwedplnr1234@email.com.

Marketing Appeals

When constructing your Web site or other marketing materials, you should appeal to potential clients through logic, emotion, and credibility. Logical appeals answer all of the nuts and bolts questions that arise: who, what, where, when, why, cost, and contact information. Specifically, there should be a person attached to the company (who), a description of the services you provide (what), your location and/or the areas you serve (where), how long you have been planning weddings (when), and a mission statement (why). When you are brand new to the business, you probably don't want to directly state the when (e.g., "We've been in business for three months!"). Over time, however, this can add significantly to your credibility (e.g., "During the past five years we have planned over 100 weddings"). If you do not want to put your price structure on the Internet, the cost information can be alluded to by detailing the various packages you offer. Clients who want to follow up can then use your contact information to get more specific details.

Emotional appeals draw your clients more closely to your services. Specifically, many consultants include pictures from weddings they have planned as a means to personalize their Web sites. Potential clients can get a better sense of your style and specialty areas through the visual representation of past work. If your business caters to ski resort weddings, make sure that is made obvious with a number of associated photographs. Brides love looking at pictures from other weddings as this creates a sense of anticipation for their own day. When utilizing pictures, make sure that you get copyright permission from the photographer. Many consultants have excellent professional relationships with area photographers who will allow them to post pictures from weddings that showcase their work.

Appeals to credibility can come from quotes taken from letters or feedback from satisfied clients. Furthermore, if you receive any awards or outside recognition related to wedding planning, that information should be prominently displayed on your Web site. Credibility can also be obtained through related courses, seminars, or conferences that you have either attended or participated in as a guest speaker. Any involvement with event or wedding associations such as the International Special Events Society or the Association of Bridal Consultants should also be evidenced on your Web site to boost your credibility. Beyond your own Web site, advertising on wedding sites such as The Knot can be an effective form of promotion. You will be charged based on the type of listing, with premium positioning coming with an extra charge. Fees that run £150 or more a month may be cost-prohibitive at first, but if you get one or two clients from this listing, before you know it, you've covered the fee for the entire year.

The Four Secrets of Selling to Brides

SECRET # 1

Secret #1 is that you have to connect with the bride. Connecting with the bride simply means that you have to create awareness of your business in the mind of the bride. In other words, she has to be able to find you. Traditional media options such as newspapers, radio stations, or the yellow pages can be cost prohibitive. With these forms of advertising you are paying to reach a large percentage of the population; however, you are only trying to reach the 1 or 2 percent who are planning a wedding. Advertising in wedding-specific media can be much more effective. Direct marketing using mail can be cost effective because you are putting your message in the hand of a bride. You can obtain lists of brides as part of an exhibit package at a bridal show, as part of an advertising program with a Web site, or through a list broker.

The next way to connect to the bride is referrals. You ask the bride for referrals not only after the wedding, but also during the planning stages. Almost every bride knows someone else who is planning a wedding, and referrals are a huge way of getting business. Another source of referrals is accomplished through networking with other people in the business of weddings. When you are new, make appointments with all the major wedding vendors in your area so they get to know you. Join the major associations and begin to socialize with other people in the wedding business. If you establish friendships with other consultants, they will refer business to you if they are booked at a certain time or they meet someone who fits your specific niche.

While you absolutely need a Web site, it only works if it contains a message that is compelling and if the bride is able to find it. One of the biggest criteria that search engines use when ranking sites is how many other sites are linked to it, so cross-linking with other weddingrelated

Web sites will have a positive impact. You should be careful, however, that you do not give away your trade secrets on your site. The bride is paying for your knowledge, contacts, and experience, and you do not want to give her too much information for free. You are selling a very personalized service and you will be most effective when you have the opportunity to meet with the bride in person. Your site should only give enough information to entice the bride to call you for the complete details. A final way to connect with the bride is through bridal shows. Bridal shows typically include fashion shows, demonstrations, and a variety of wedding-related businesses arranged in a trade show format. Shows give the vendor the opportunity to reach many prospective customers in just a few hours and allow the bride to visit one location to see all of the options available for her wedding.

Once you've decided to be in the wedding business, you can never ever stop marketing your company. Unlike companies that rely on repeat business, you will be dealing almost exclusively with first-time customers. Newly engaged brides continually enter the marketplace as prospective customers but then exit the marketplace when they get

married. Your investment in marketing your business is every bit as important as your investment in the tools of your trade.

SECRET # 2

Secret #2 is that you have to reach the bride at the right time. Your marketing will only be effective if your timing is right. Junk mail is only junk mail and spam is only spam if it contains a message that is not relevant to the person who reads it. The biggest challenge for wedding consultants, bar none, is the challenge of convincing a bride that she needs you while she still needs you.

If you are selling full-service planning, your goal is to reach the bride shortly after she has become engaged. Providing day-of coordinating services allows you to capture the brides who did not hire a long-term planner and allows you to gain valuable experience. The most effective time to market day-of services is three to four months prior to the wedding.

S ECRET #3

Secret #3 is that you have to gain credibility with the bride. The more times you can get your message to the bride, the more chances you have to gain her trust. Perhaps the bride meets you through a friend or at a bridal show. She might then see your ad in a bridal magazine, receive an e-mail from you that directs her to your Web site, and then she gets referred to you from another company.

When establishing credibility, make sure you focus not only on the features of your business, but also on the benefits that will be very important to the bride. Features are things such as 10 years of experience, highly trained staff, and personalized attention. Features are important, but; only when they are combined with corresponding benefits. For example, if the feature is “unmatched customer service,” the benefit is “so that you will be able to relax and enjoy your wedding day.” More than anything, the bride is buying you. The bride only does business with you after she first buys you. If she likes you, chances are she will like doing business with you. If she’s comfortable with you as a person, she will be comfortable doing business with you. Become someone who she is certain will not take advantage of her. Become someone she trusts.

SECRET # 4

Secret #4 is that you have to give the bride what she wants. The bride has lots of details to take care of and not a lot of time to take care of them. She has problems. She has needs. Do not get wrapped up in the glories of your product or service. You need to concentrate on how you solve the bride’s problems and how you fulfill the bride’s needs.

The wedding sales process is about her; it’s not about you. The bride really does not care about your company. She cares about her wedding. You have to make it as easy as possible for the bride to do business with you. Be accessible, answer your phone professionally, and return calls promptly. Maintain a business etiquette that will impress her and she will not only do business with you but will also refer you to her friends.

The Client interview, Communication, and Contractors

One of the most difficult aspects of starting a wedding planning business is attracting your first client. Getting that initial bride to sign a contract can seem like a Herculean task, but with good planning, marketing, and creative thinking it will happen. This chapter discusses the elements of securing a client, including the initial screening, client interview details, follow-up communication, contracts, and compensation.

Initial Screening

Through your marketing efforts, you will eventually receive a telephone call or e-mail requesting a meeting with a potential client. By and large, the primary point of contact will be the bride. Before you grab your briefcase and rush out the door, it is wise to have a brief conversation over the telephone. During the conversation, you can screen the potential client by asking her a few preliminary questions such as: When is your wedding date? What is your wedding budget? Where will your wedding and reception take place? These questions will allow you first to quickly check your calendar to make sure that you do not have another wedding scheduled for that day; second, determine if the bride has an unrealistic budget, allowing you to judge whether this wedding will be worth your time; and third, find out if the wedding and reception are taking place in an area where your profits won't be eaten up at the gas pump. If the venues are significantly far away, make sure you build the additional travel time and transportation costs into your fee.

After the initial screening over the telephone, arrange to meet with your prospective client face to face. This meeting can take place at any number of locations such as your home office, the bride's reception venue, or the bride's home. Try to make the appointment as convenient as possible. If you elect to meet with your prospective client at a public place, make sure the environment is conducive for a long conversation. You do not want to compete with the sounds of baristas making lattes in the background or, worse, be asked to leave.

During the screening, set some ground rules regarding whom the bride can bring to the client interview. The groom is a good addition to the meeting, but the mother, father, and nursing sister with a new baby are too much. A bridal entourage participating in the meeting will hamper the process. Remember: this is your opportunity to hear what a potential client wants, and it is your chance to sell yourself and your planning business. If there are competing messages and agendas at the meeting, you will not get the information you need.

Client Interview Details

Think of the client interview as a "first date" or a "get to know you" meeting. If you have decided to specialize in outdoor country weddings, a bride who has visualized her wedding in a chic hotel ballroom will not be a good fit for your business. If this information

comes out during the course of your interview, it will save everyone time and money if you gently steer the bride toward another planner. The client interview is a golden opportunity to find out what the bride wants and expects for her wedding day.

TABLE 24.1 Client Interview Questions

- How did you and your fiancé meet?
- Where are you going on your honeymoon?
- What are your hobbies and interests?
- What type of music do you like?
- What colors are appealing to you?
- Where are your favorite places to travel?
- Where did you grow up?
- What is your cultural background, and would you like to incorporate special traditions or customs into the wedding day?
- What tasks have you completed for the wedding?
- How many guests are you expecting?
- What are your “must haves” for your wedding day?
- How would you describe your style?
- Where do you like to shop?
- What is your budget?
- What are your expectations of your wedding planner?
- What are your greatest fears for your wedding day?
- Do you have any special needs or requests?
- Is there anything that I have not asked that I should?

Chances are she has been dreaming of this special day all her life, and now it is your responsibility to translate those dreams into reality. When you meet with your prospective client, remember to dress appropriately. You should look neat and professional while conveying a sense of good organization. No bride is going to hire a rag-tag planner who forgot business cards or shows up late to the initial meeting. When you sit down, allow the bride to do 75 percent of the talking. Listen carefully to your client, maintain eye contact, and ask questions that encourage her to offer details. In order to start the conversation flowing, Table includes a list of open-ended questions you can ask. The objective during this conversation is to find out as much as possible about your potential client and her wishes for her wedding day.

Once she has sketched out the details you can pick up the conversation by telling her about your background and experience, especially as it relates to her wedding. If you don't have much experience, tell her about events you have assisted with, the classes you have taken, or the ideas you have for her wedding day. This is your chance to make the sale and convince her that she needs to hire you to plan her wedding.

Follow-up Communication

Immediately after the meeting, send additional communication that reinforces what you learned at the meeting and that highlights why the bride should hire you. Often, a bride will interview three to five planners before selecting the one she likes best. Your follow-up communication may be just what it takes to set you apart from the other planners. You can send a simple thank-you note or you may write a more thorough recap of the meeting with a wedding planning contract attached. Whichever path you select, your communication must be Flawless. If sending a thank-you note, it is wise to invest in some elegant personal stationery or letterhead. Any communication that leaves your office is a reflection of you. Take time to review for typos, spelling mistakes, misused words, and factual errors.

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Contracts

Sometimes, either during or after the initial meeting, a potential client will express readiness to commit to hiring you as a wedding planner. This excellent news should be followed up immediately with a contract. A wedding contract is a written set of obligations that clearly spells out the responsibilities of the consultant and the client. Whether you send the contract via e-mail or surface mail, it is important that you already have a standard version on hand that can be quickly customized and sent out without delay. If you wait a week or two to mail the contract, your potential client may have already secured another planner.

Send your contract out with a cover letter thanking the bride for selecting you to plan her wedding and reassuring her that you are excited about working with her on this event. While there is no standard contract for all planners to use, the following key elements should be included in all contracts:

- Today's date
- Wedding date and time
- Rehearsal date and time
- Name of the bride and groom
- Contact information for both including address, all phone numbers, and e-mail address
- Conditions, including roles and restrictions
- Your compensation including total fees, initial deposit, and payment schedule
- Terms, including liability and other legal issues
- A listing of your duties
- A Force Majeure clause, which protects you from natural disasters or other "Acts of God"
- Signatures of all parties and the associated dates

Important! You do not have a client unless you have a signed contract. Until you have the executed contract in your hands, you should not begin working for that bride. Without a contract, a bride is only a potential client. No contract, no client! A sample contract is included in Figure below and can be used as a guide. In preparing your own contract, it is recommended that you show your contract to a lawyer, mentor, or small-business advisor.

Compensation

When you were writing your business plan, you probably thought about setting the fees for your business. Start off by determining what other consultants in your area are charging. After you have a good idea of what the market will bear in your area, it is time for you to set your fees. If you are a new planner with little or no experience, you cannot expect to charge as much as a seasoned wedding consultant. You must start out small and gradually increase your fees as your reputation grows. There are various ways to charge for your planning services, including a flat fee, an hourly rate, a package deal, a percentage of the wedding budget, or a day-of fee. Each of these options has pros and cons, so you must decide which type of fee structure will work best for you.

Regardless of the approach you take, do not expect to be able to fully support yourself full-time from the onset. Most consultants start out part-time and gradually build their businesses.

A flat fee works well when you have a client who wants you to manage the wedding from start to finish. With a flat fee you do not have to keep track of billable hours, and you know exactly how much you will earn based on the set price.

An hourly rate works well when your client only wants a few things from a planner; for example, you may be asked to provide a list of venues that already have a piano or

recommend three florists who carry both live and silk flowers. Sometimes a client will hire a consultant on an hourly fee basis and end up needing the planner for many more tasks than

initially thought. When you meet with your client, try to determine what the exact needs are and suggest the compensation package accordingly.

Many wedding planners come up with clever names for various types of package deals for their services using names like gold, silver, and bronze, or diamond, emerald, and sapphire. No matter what titles you apply, include a defined list of services for each option, where the fee increases along with the number of duties. Some planners charge a percentage fee of the overall wedding budget, generally in the vicinity of 10 percent. This is a simple and effective way to charge for your services. However, if you do not have a fair amount of experience, this method should be avoided. As a new planner, you will probably start out with weddings with modest budgets, and if you charge a percent of a modest budget, your compensation is likely to be very small.

Lastly, many consultants, especially those who are new to wedding planning, will take on day-of weddings. What this means is that you will agree to do a small amount of work prior to the wedding day (usually just confirming vendors), and then you will be on hand the day of the wedding to carry out all the plans the bride has made. For this type of service, you will charge a day-of fee.

Some seasoned planners specialize in day-of service, while many new planners find this type of work a good way to break into the field. If you are hired for day-of duties only, this does not remove you from the responsibility of producing a trouble-free wedding. “I didn’t hire the DJ” is no excuse when a consultant is faced with a microphonehogging bore dressed in a tux and belting out commands. You still must intervene when necessary to pull off a lovely wedding even if you didn’t plan it. Be careful to invest the time up front getting to know as much as possible about the venues, vendors, and VIPs for each day-of wedding. Whether you are hired to plan the entire wedding or just manage the day-of duties, it is your responsibility to meet your client’s expectations. After all, a wedding full of impressed guests can lead to more work for you down the road.

Vendor Relations, Networking and Negotiation

While waiting for your first client to walk through the door, one of the least expensive and most effective marketing strategies you can employ is to systematically get out there and meet your fellow wedding vendors. Meeting vendors is a valuable exercise that will pay dividends to your business for years to come. As you will learn, wedding professionals form a close-knit community. All of the stationers know the calligraphers, and all the caterers know the rental companies. Ideally, all of these vendors know you. This chapter highlights the importance of establishing vendor relationships, networking, and negotiation.

Establishing Vendor Relationships

Introducing yourself to other wedding vendors is critical because they will become an endless source of referrals for you. For example, Ashley Davis has just become engaged. She and her mother rush out to find the perfect wedding gown. They make an appointment and begin their search at an exclusive boutique. During the process of trying on gowns, Ashley becomes overwhelmed and says, “If picking out a wedding gown is this tough, I don’t know how I will handle the rest!”

The boutique assistant might casually ask Ashley if she has thought about hiring a wedding planner to help ensure a beautiful and stress free wedding day. Ashley’s mother might say that they hadn’t thought about this option because Ashley has only been engaged for a week. Her interest piqued, however, Ashley’s mother might ask the assistant if she has any recommendations for a wedding planner. It is at this point that cultivating a sterling reputation with other vendors will pay off, as the boutique assistant might mention your name. Wedding vendors get to know each other by working for the same clients and at the same events, during which they develop a sense of camaraderie. They quickly discover who is reliable and who is not.

They grow to trust each other, and they develop an esprit de corps, meaning a sense of enthusiasm and morale-building for the entire team that puts on a wedding. Often, couples begin the wedding planning process by securing one or two elements for their wedding. Somewhere along the way, they might decide to hire a planner to help them with the numerous decisions that have to be made. So, if the local country club event manager thinks highly of you and your work, he or she might refer you to a new client. Or, if you have successfully guided many brides down the aisle of a specific church, the altar guild of that church is usually more than willing to recommend your services.

You never know where your next referral might come from, which is why it is so important to get out there and meet everyone in the business. Think beyond the usual vendors by touching base with local makeup artists, travel agents, or ballroom dance instructors. In addition, make sure you introduce yourself to all the local wedding consultants in your market. Other planners are not your competition; instead, they can be a tremendous source of leads.

Four hypothetical planners—Sue, Dave, Heather, and Gary—will be used to illustrate the benefits of working with other consultants in your area. Imagine that Sue is a long-established planner in your market. When Sue gets a call from a bride who has a small budget and she does not want to take the job, she might gladly give the bride your name and number. That way she has helped the bride and you at the same time. Another planner, Dave, might get a call for day-of help, and, if he does not offer this service, he might pass along your name and number if he knows that you offer day-of assistance. If another consultant, Heather, is already committed on a certain date, she might refer the bride to you if your calendar is free. Last but not least, if a bride is looking for a certain style or

specialty such as knowledge of Asian wedding customs, another planner, Gary, might give the bride your contact information if he knows that this is your area of expertise. Cultivating friendships with other wedding planners is an excellent way to grow your business.

Marking a List

As you begin identifying and meeting other wedding vendors in your area, you should develop a list of specific individuals you would like to meet. You can develop this list from a variety of sources, such as:

- The Yellow Pages
- Vendors close to your home base
- Local vendors listed on The Knot
- A “best” list, often compiled in regional magazines
- By category; for example, you may want to meet all florists
- Vendors who specialize in what you specialize in (e.g., Mexican weddings)
- A listing of vendor names in a bridal show program or local wedding publication

After you have compiled a list of names, set a goal to meet a certain number of vendors each week. Depending on your time commitments, you might meet two or even five new vendors each week. By systematically meeting all the players in your area, you will set yourself up to be a player, too. After you have your list, call each vendor to arrange a brief (e.g., 15- minute) appointment to introduce yourself. By taking the time to make the call, you are showing respect for the vendor’s time and you are conveying a professional image. You don’t want to just drop in on a vendor unannounced. Make the appointments for early in the week because most vendors get busier as the week unfolds. Also, keep in mind that the busiest wedding months are May, June, September, and October. With that in mind, try to schedule your appointments during the quieter months of January, February, and August.

After you have secured the appointment, you should sketch out what you are going to say in advance. Learn about vendors by familiarizing yourself with their Web sites. Reading about their products and services will help you during these meetings. If you are going to meet with a local florist, you might make a note of any recent awards or recognition the owners have received. In addition to doing your research, you might practice what you want to convey about your business. If you have completed your business plan, as discussed earlier, you will be prepared to answer any questions about your business with confidence.

The last point you will want to consider is what you can do for the vendor. Vendors are going to remember you if you have a unique specialty, shared interest, or helpful skill, or if you can cross-market their goods and services with a posted link to their business on your Web site. Anytime you go out of your way for another vendor, you increase the chance of that vendor going out of his or her way for you.

Sharp and Centered

When you meet with vendors, you should dress as you would for a client meeting. You should look neat and professional, not rumpled and wrinkled. Remember that you are representing your business and that first impressions are lasting. Don't forget to bring extra business cards to each meeting in case a vendor asks to keep a few on hand to share with clients.

One last piece of advice: give the vendor your full attention. Centre all of your energy on the vendor during the meeting. Turn off your cell phone, BlackBerry, and/or pager. Keep in mind that vendors may not extend the same courtesy to you, so do not get flustered if the meeting gets broken up by telephone calls, staff questions, or clients who require the vendor's attention. For that moment, you are on their time, and patience is a key personality trait for any wedding consultant. Also, a certain vendor may not be willing to take the time to meet with you or may not be helpful or welcoming during the interaction. Do not take this personally, because the vendor likely treats everyone in the same manner. By and large you will find that wedding vendors are friendly, generous with their time, and eager to meet with consultants.

Networking

Networking "denotes the relationship of entrepreneurs and their small businesses with the outside world"

The best way to start your networking program is by joining the organizations where people involved in the business of weddings gather. One of the most popular networking groups for wedding planners is ISES, the International Special Events Society. ISES has chapters in most major markets and offers a wide variety of services such as educational and professional development, professional resources, subscription to Special Events magazine, discounted business services and listings for all members on their Web site. If you are still a student, the time to join ISES is now because annual student membership dues are only £35, whereas professional dues are £450. The professional membership fee, however, is a tax-deductible business expense, so joining is a win-win situation once you have started your business.

ISES holds monthly meetings at different venues, and vendors associated with the society supply the linens, floral, catering, entertainment, invitations, and other event elements as a way to showcase their businesses. Attending these gatherings is an excellent way to meet wedding vendors and consultants. Keep in mind that networking takes time and you will get out of it what you put into it. Many people join associations and get frustrated or give up after one or two meetings because they feel they aren't meeting anyone or feel left out because it seems that everyone already has a set social group. Keep in mind, however, that many of those relationships took years to cultivate, and you will break in over time.

Other groups to consider are the Association of Bridal Consultants, the Association of Certified Professional Wedding Consultants, and the International Festival and Events

Association. These groups, like ISES, encourage ongoing training, education, and professional development and host meetings and conferences that allow you to associate with people who have similar goals and interests. You should also familiarize yourself with business-related groups in your area such as your local Chamber of Commerce. The Chamber will have monthly meetings where leaders introduce new members and initiate conversations about issues facing the business community as a whole.

Other networking groups that will offer you the opportunity to meet a range of interesting people who may need a wedding consultant include the Young Democrats/Republicans, the Junior League, Toastmasters, the “Friends of” or event planning arm of any major museum or art gallery, the American Cancer Society, Habitat for Humanity, or the alumni association of your college or university. These are all excellent resources for community networking.

Negotiation

Another valuable skill that you will need is the ability to negotiate. Whether you are working with a bride who wants a discount on your fees or a vendor who wants to charge your client a premium for delivering ice cream in August, you will be faced with many situations that call for thinking on your feet. Much of your time will be spent honing your skills in the art of negotiating. For example, suppose your clients have ordered apple green linens for their wedding. The rental company arrives with green linens, but they are a shade off from what your clients wanted. It is your job to negotiate with the rental vendor in order to secure the exact linens for your clients in time for the wedding.

As an additional example, assume you are meeting with your clients and the manager of their chosen wedding reception venue. During the course of your discussions, you learn that your clients want the venue’s “cherry drop ice” for their signature drinkable dessert. The catering director for the venue might say that this specialty drink is not available during the month of your clients’ wedding, because fresh cherries are prohibitively expensive at that time. It will now be up to you to negotiate with the venue to make sure your clients get what they want for their wedding day.

How Do You Negotiate ?

Michael Kaplan from Money Magazine (2005) tells us that there are seven rules for getting what you want on your own terms, each of which is applied below to the business of wedding consulting.

1. Don’t look at a deal as an either/or proposition. Good negotiating is all about compromise. Giving a little, getting a little. In order to get the cherry drop ice mentioned earlier, your client might have to forego one of the hors d’oeuvres to offset the cost of getting a multitude of out-of-season cherries.

2. Know what you can part with—then part with it hard. Prioritize what you really want as a result of the negotiation. Don't lay your cards on the table but know in your own mind what it will take for you to feel good about the outcome of the deal. If you know that your client is not truly worried about the exact colour of the linens, and the vendor offers a discount to spare an extra trip to the warehouse, letting go is an easy decision.

3. Figure out the other side's timetable. Then use it. Is the dress shop ready to get in next season's gowns but hasn't yet discounted the one your bride loves? Suggest a reasonable discount and negotiate the price. The dresses will soon be outdated. Use this knowledge to your advantage.

4. Show people that you understand their position.

Here's where the skill of good empathy will come in handy. You must convince the upset mother from the Consultant in Action case that you empathize with her feelings. You do not have to agree with her, but allow her to express her thoughts and feelings. Ask open-ended questions to solicit more information and validate her feelings. The stationery vendor will be sure to note how you calmly balanced the emotions of both the bride and her mother.

5. Stifle your emotions. Stay on the issue and leave personalities out of the discussion. Remember: you don't want to burn any bridges with vendors or clients. You do not have to like a given vendor or even a given client in order to have a successful working relationship.

6. Don't believe everything, but don't call anyone a liar. Negotiations are a strategy. Both sides know that each is trying to gain the upper hand. If, for example, a local florist says she can't do better on her price for centrepieces, you might accept that statement, but then let her know that your client will need to step back and re evaluate the options for selecting a floral designer.

7. Devise a backup plan. Before entering into the negotiations, think through your options. If your clients want a specific ballroom for their reception that you learn is not available, present some other options that they might not have considered. Have at least three other venue ideas in mind, or encourage your clients to consider changing the wedding date if it is early in the planning process and their hearts are set on the venue. So whether you are just beginning to develop skills that will establish positive vendor relationships or want to hone what you have already learned, networking and negotiation are two valuable talents to cultivate. Like any complex interpersonal skill, proficiency in networking and negotiation will develop over time.

Office Management

If you are just starting out as a wedding consultant, it is crucial that you lay a solid foundation for your business by making good business decisions right from the start. Whether you work from home or lease office space, there are many facets to good office management, including organizing your work environment, selecting hardware and software, gathering other business equipment essentials, and building a staff. These office

management essentials are the building blocks of a successful wedding consultancy business.

Organizing Your Work Environment

If you plan to work from home, get started by taking a survey of your current furniture to see what might work in your home office. The most important item is a desk with good workspace, plenty of room for a computer, and an area to review spreadsheets, guest lists, and sample books. Don't forget about space for a printer, scanner, fax machine, and other equipment that will need to be located nearby.

Keeping track of all the details that go into a wedding will be one of your most difficult tasks as a wedding planner. How you choose to manage the wealth of information is up to you, but some options include spreadsheets, three-ring notebooks, 3 x5 cards, a day timer, or a file folder system. Bookshelves, file cabinets, and storage bins help tremendously by utilizing vertical space and hiding clutter. You will get a lot of mileage from investing in a comfortable chair that offers good support and fits your body. There are many ergonomic styles to choose from, so take a trip to your local office superstore and test out a few different models. Also, measure the height of your desk to make sure the chair you select will fit comfortably underneath your desk with you sitting in it. You don't want to hit your knees every time you sit down to work.

As a consultant, you know the value of good lighting for weddings, and it is no different for your office. Check the lighting in your office area. If overhead lighting is not adequate, purchase a desk or floor lamp that will let you work efficiently at all hours. If you don't have everything to outfit your home office, buying office equipment doesn't have to be expensive. Beyond frequenting office superstores, you can scour garage sales and thrift shops for affordable furniture and equipment.

In addition to deciding what your office will look like, consider setting some ground rules for yourself. For example, decide on a work schedule that fits with your body's time clock and allows you to work a reasonable number of hours each day. Are you a morning person? If so, then it makes sense for you to begin your workday at 5:00 A.M. If you operate better later in the day, then consider starting later in the afternoon. Remember, you are your own boss, and it is up to you to set your own hours for maximum productivity and profit. Other ground rules to consider for your home-based business might include limiting your time spent surfing the Internet and making personal phone calls, requiring yourself to take a break every hour or two, eating lunch at the same time each day, not eating in your office, and other no-nonsense policies. Every office has rules, and your home office should be no exception.

A word of caution: working from home can be very lonely, especially when you are just starting to build your business. To avoid going stir crazy, make a point to meet with new vendors, as discussed in Chapter 25, while you are building your client base. If you are home alone without the opportunity to interact with the rest of the world, you risk boredom,

isolation, and depression. If you balance your outside meetings with your quiet work time at home, you will feel more productive and energized.

If you decide that working from home is not for you, leasing office space is always a viable option. From browsing real estate ads to using national Web sites such as www.offices2share.com, you can find a wealth of information on leasing office space month-to-month or just for special client meetings. Many of these executive suites are located in business parks, include furnishings, are Internet ready, and have optional add-ons such as mail pick-up, receptionist services, and access to conference space. Whether you want day-to-day office space or just space once in a while, leasing well-equipped space is easier than you think.

Selecting Hardware and Software

Because you will spend a fair amount of time on the road, seriously consider buying a laptop computer rather than a desktop system. Besides having your files with you, a laptop will enable you to give a visual presentation at the drop of a hat, such as showing photographs of recent weddings to a prospective client. Regardless of which system you select, make sure the computer has plenty of storage space, sufficient memory for running several programs at once, and a moderately fast processor. For graphics work, which includes anything involving photographic images, illustrations, or animation, you will need to maximize processor speed, hard drive storage space, and memory (Obringer, 2006). In addition to a computer, some other hardware purchases to consider (adapted from Obringer, 2006) can be found in Table 26.1.

Now that you have purchased your hardware, there are several software applications that will be necessary. Minimally, you will need software to complete the following functions: e-mail, word processing, spreadsheets, presentations, virus protection, computer maintenance, Portable Document Format (PDF) reading, a graphics and image editing tool, and Internet browsers. Some of this software is available free online, whereas business software is often bundled in packages such as Microsoft Office (Obringer, 2006). Because so much of what you will do requires access to the Internet, you need to select a high speed Internet provider, and you absolutely must invest in virus and spam protection, as dial-up Internet and constant pop-ups can literally paralyze your computer.

Other Business Equipment Essentials

In addition to hardware and software, it is essential for a wedding planner to own a reliable vehicle. The last thing you want is to break down en route to a job. If you can't afford a premium automobile because you are just starting out, buy or lease the most reliable one possible. On a cold, rainy evening at midnight, you will be thankful your car starts and carries you safely home after an all-day wedding. Both the exterior and interior of the vehicle should be kept clean, as the appearance of your car is a reflection of your business. A smart business wardrobe is also essential equipment for a wedding consultant. This wardrobe should include suits for client meetings, professional casual wear for setup, as

well as elegant but functional formal attire for the actual wedding day. Your clothing should be as nice as you can afford, even if you can only purchase one good suit. Each time you wear your suit; make sure it is clean and pressed. You want to project the image of a calm,

cool, professional wedding planner rather than someone who slept in his or her clothes. You should never look out of place or draw unnecessary attention to yourself during a wedding. Take the time to think about your working wardrobe in advance and add the appropriate pieces as necessary.

You will not have time to shop for something suitable the day before a wedding. Make sure you are ready to go before you land your first client. Without a doubt, the most important piece of clothing you will need is a good pair of shoes. It is essential to your comfort and safety that you own a pair of good-looking, sensible, nonslip shoes. As a wedding planner, you can expect to be on your feet for long stretches of time. Don't find yourself in a situation like the one presented in Consultant in Action, Case 26.1.

Another important point to consider when selecting your shoes is that a wedding planner must often walk through the kitchen in order to communicate with the catering staff. Kitchens are notorious for having wet, slippery floors. If your shoes have slick soles, you could take a fall and perhaps injure yourself. If the thought of wearing practical shoes makes you cringe, bear in mind that many wedding planners will wear dress shoes at the beginning of a wedding and then quietly slip into their sensible shoes after the wedding starts. Whatever you decide, opt for safety over fashion.

Building a Staff

Even if you are just starting out and money is tight, it is important to consider having a small staff, which might simply include bringing in a volunteer assistant for day-of implementation support. An assistant can manage the ceremony activities, freeing you to oversee the details at the reception. If the wedding you are planning is large, you may even need two assistants to make sure everything runs smoothly. Assistants can complete tasks such as directing vendors for setup, gathering the bridal party for photographs, or running out to complete last-minute errands. With guidance, they can do almost anything to help you manage a wedding.

Finding a qualified assistant is a challenge. Although many people will be interested in learning the ropes as your assistant, not all of them will possess the skills necessary to succeed. Interview a few candidates to see who has the most experience and/or enthusiasm for the position. Students from a local college or university are often willing to volunteer for day-of implementation to gain experience. If they are studying a related area, such as events management or business, they may be able to work with you over an extended period of time for course credit, in association with a practicum or internship experience. Check with the internship coordinator of the associated program to determine the restrictions and requirements of working with students for credit. Typically, students complete 150 hours for a practicum and 400 hours for an internship over a period of 10 to

15 weeks; you will therefore want to make sure that you have enough work to justify a student's for-credit experience.

One point you will want to stress to your candidates is that most weddings take place on Saturdays, so they will need to be available on Fridays for the rehearsal, the wedding day itself, and possibly Sunday. If weekend work is not possible for your candidate, you need to keep searching. In addition to weekend availability, a good assistant should possess the 15 skills listed in Table 26.2.

Pay and Noncompeting Clauses

Although some assistants will work for the experience alone, you should be prepared to pay your assistants for their time and effort. An experienced assistant can earn as much as \$25 per hour and up, especially in a large city. If you do not want to pay on an hourly basis, you should negotiate a flat fee for the entire wedding, such as \$100, depending on the duties that the assistant is required to perform. Consult with your tax advisor regarding how to appropriately document payment for short-term assistance. Many wedding consultants hire the same assistants over and over. This is the perfect scenario because, over time, the assistant will develop a feel for what the planner expects and needs, even before the planner has to ask for it. Sometimes, two or three wedding planners will share the same assistant. When working with the same assistant over time, bringing on an intern, or, most importantly, when hiring your first associate, it is in your best interest to have a non compete clause as part of the arrangement.

Most wedding consultants are hesitant to host interns because they fear that an intern might work with them for 15 weeks and then turn around and open a business using all of the information and secrets they have just learned. It takes successful wedding consultants years to establish a system that works, and they are justifiably protective of their materials and methods. A noncompete clause is a condition of employment statement found in an employment agreement that indicates a time frame during which the employee, upon leaving the company, cannot work for the company's competition. The purpose is to prevent former employees from taking trade secrets to start a similar type of business or to work with a competitor. For example, the clause might state that an employee is not permitted to start a wedding consulting business or work for a competing consulting firm within 18 months of leaving the position.

Noncompete clause determination and enforcement are governed by state law, so you are advised to consult with an attorney when drawing up this document. A refusal to sign is a justifiable means for not hiring. If the clause is violated, both the former employee and the employee's new company can be sued.

A noncompete clause may also include a radius clause, which indicates a region of exclusivity to which the agreement applies. To extend the preceding example, the clause might say that an employee is not permitted to start a wedding consulting business or work for a competing consulting firm within 18 months of leaving the position if the new

company is located within a 200-mile radius. This clause allows a former employee to start a business immediately if and only if the new business is located outside the specified radius.

TABLE 26.2 Skills to Look for When Interviewing Assistants

- Able to follow • Composure under stress
- Politeness instructions stress
- Attention to details • Does not gossip • Professional demeanor
- Bright personality • Good multitasker • Organized
- Can stand on feet • High energy level • Self-confidence for many hours
- Common sense • Looks comfortable • Quick and creative even when it is hot problem solver or cold

Competition, Obligations, and Ethics

Competition has been shown to be useful up to a certain point and no further, but cooperation, which is the thing we must strive for today, begins where competition leaves off.

Hiring a wedding planner is no longer a luxury reserved for the rich and famous. Couples with all types of budgets are hiring consultants to manage various aspects of their wedding day.

This section sets forth the increasing demand for wedding consultants, which creates a level of competition, and then discusses the obligations and ethical practices that are key factors for successful wedding consultants.

Demand and Competition

Also, significant competition exists between consultants who specialize in the same type of weddings. For example, if a bride is looking for a planner who specializes in Jewish weddings, then she will interview all the planners in the area who have that focus. The bride you meet today may very well be interviewing your competition tomorrow. When a high-profile or high-budget wedding is at stake, planners will put forth their best efforts in order to land the prominent client.

This sense of competition can actually benefit the wedding profession as a whole by encouraging consultants to constantly raise the bar in terms of standards and practices. Competition keeps planners sharp and up to date, urges them to be constantly on the lookout for new trends and ideas, and inspires them to create something unique for each client. Competition also leads to continuing education through classes, workshops, and seminars. Wedding consulting is a business, and, like any business, those involved in it must consistently study their market and hone their skills to stay on top. Competition can take an ugly turn, and it would be false to say that it never results in questionable actions.

Throughout this text, we have emphasized the necessity of ethical, trustworthy, and respectful interactions with clients, vendors, and other consultants. While antagonistic and dishonest practices may help a consultant in the short run, once the word gets out, vendors and clients will shy away from working with such a planner.

Obligations

As a wedding planning professional, you will have many important obligations, including those to clients, vendors, the wedding profession as a whole, your own business, and, of course, to yourself and those in your social network. The challenge is to manage all of these responsibilities that compete for your time with grace and finesse. As a consultant, your primary business obligation is to your client, typically the bride. If the bride's parents have hired you, then your obligation is to them as well. As a rule of thumb, if the bride is happy, then everyone around her will be happy. It is your job to make the bride happy, even if that means negotiating with your vendors to ensure the bride's satisfaction. For example, suppose a bride has selected an historic Federal style hotel for her late November wedding reception. The hotel has a lovely staircase leading to the front door. It has long been the bride's dream to be photographed outdoors on the staircase on her wedding day. The wedding day arrives, and the photographer tells you that he would prefer not to take the outdoor photographs because it is too cold. This is where your obligation to your client comes into play. You must diplomatically tell the photographer that the bride still wishes to be photographed outside despite the cold because being photographed on the staircase has long been the bride's dream and this photo is therefore nonnegotiable. You then tell the photographer that you will have hot coffee sent out to keep everyone warm.

Wedding planners also have obligations to their vendors. So, in our example, the planner should try to accommodate both the bride's wishes and the photographer's desires. Sometimes this is a balancing act and, if the planner must choose, the bride's needs almost always come first. However, be careful. If you anger your vendors and treat them poorly, soon they will refuse to work with you. Treat your vendors with respect and courtesy, and they will recommend you time and time again.

As discussed in Chapter 11, you have an obligation to feed your vendors. No one works well on an empty stomach. When determining the final headcount for the caterer, remind your clients to include the total number of vendor meals. It is your responsibility to make sure that your clients understand the importance of feeding the vendors, including yourself and any assistants you have. It is also your duty to tell the vendors when their meals are ready and where they can take a break to eat. A well-fed staff is a highly productive staff.

Planners should also make sure that vendors are given water and other cold or hot beverages while setting up. If a company is installing tenting on a 95-degree day in August, the staff members are sure to appreciate you and recommend you to others if you show up with a cooler full of ice-cold beverages. The same holds true in the winter. Moving in catering equipment or installing floral arrangements outdoors can be a difficult job in cold,

raw weather. Make sure you have hot coffee and tea on hand. This courtesy will go a long way toward getting the job done on time.

In addition to obligations to the client and vendors, wedding consultants have an obligation to the wedding profession. Since wedding planning is a relatively new career path, it is important for consultants to give back to the profession in order for all facets to move ahead.

Most important are your obligations to your business, yourself, and those closest to you. When you are in business for yourself, it is entirely up to you to ensure that your company succeeds. Part of that success will be driven from the decisions you make on a daily basis. One of your most important business policies is to always collect your final payment at least two weeks prior to the wedding day.

Once a wedding has ended and your services have been provided, it is often impossible to collect the money without the assistance of a legal professional. Rather than learning a lesson the hard way, always collect the final payment well in advance of a wedding to give the check enough time to clear the bank. If there is a problem such as insufficient funds, you will still have the leverage of not managing the wedding day. The vast majority of couples do not set out to intentionally defraud their wedding consultants. However, as the wedding approaches, couples face many financial pressures and may look for ways out of making final payments. Ultimately, it is up to you to ensure that you are paid for your wedding consulting services.

You also have obligations to yourself in terms of balancing your career and your personal life. Chapter 28 details numerous ways to manage the stress that is associated with wedding consulting as a career. Top planners emphasize that you have to remember that the more clients spend for your services, the more they expect from you. This adage includes the fact that your personal crises are not your clients' crises, and it is the case that your clients will expect to come first. Consultant in Action, Case 27.2, highlights one such scenario.

Ethics

In the wake of such high-profile business scandals as Enron, World-Com, and Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia, it becomes easy to believe that the business world rewards bad behavior. However, the fact remains that there is a documented connection between strong morals and business success (Lennick and Kiel, 2005), which is why it is imperative that you become a business owner with clear ethical principles right from the start. From your first day in business you must lead by example and show others that you are honest, fair, responsible, compassionate, and just.

For example, assume you have back-to-back appointments with two different brides who are considering your services. The first bride, Maria, asks what the fee would be for your comprehensive planning services and you tell her \$3,000. Later in the day, the second bride, Jean, asks you the same question. You notice that Jean is wearing an expensive designer outfit and showing off her 5-carat diamond engagement ring. For her, you quote your

comprehensive planning fee as \$5,000. Both weddings will require the same amount of work on your part, yet you have quoted two different fees based on what you believe each

bride can afford. Imagine the consequences if these women are friends and compare notes of their meetings with you. Your inconsistent pricing structure will be exposed, your credibility will become suspect, and neither bride will hire you to plan her wedding.

When discussing your fees with potential clients, remember that you must be consistent in your pricing structures regardless of what you think the bride can afford. If you want a flexible price structure, set forth your fees as a firm percentage of the overall budget, which allows for a consistent application and addresses the fact that a \$100,000 wedding is likely to be more labor intensive than a \$20,000 wedding. But do not just randomly throw out fees based on appearances, because you will come across as disorganized, in particular if you are unable to remember the amount that was quoted at a later date. Your fee structure should have no ambiguity whatsoever. Entertainment specialist David Fletcher, introduced to you in Chapter 16, offers the following gem of wisdom regarding honesty in the wedding profession, “I’m a truthful person, not because I’m a good person, but because it is easier to remember.” The bottom line is that it is much tougher to keep a series of lies straight than it is to be honest in your practices.

A second ethical issue pertains to kickbacks, which were introduced in Chapter 25. Take for example the scenario of the wedding planner, Chris, who always takes clients to meet with the same florist, regardless of a couple’s floral vision. Whether the couple wants romantic, contemporary, Asian-influenced, English garden, or herb-inspired wedding flowers, Chris takes them to “Lily’s Florist” because Chris and Lily are friends and Lily will give Chris a percentage of the total order placed by the couple. This practice does a disservice to both the client and the wedding planning profession. A more ethical approach involves listening to your clients’ requirements, directing them to a few carefully chosen vendors, and ultimately letting them make the final decisions. If, after doing repeat business with a vendor, the vendor decides to give you a discount, it is only fair to pass along that savings to your clients. After all, the couple has hired you with the hope that through your contacts and expertise you will be able to save them money. This is the perfect opportunity to show your clients just how smart of an investment it was to hire you as a consultant.

Some consultants go so far with kickbacks that they ask vendors what sort of deals they will cut. For example, a consultant may approach a caterer and say, “I will refer you to my bride. How much will you pay me to do that?” The practice of kickbacks has caused a great divide in the wedding profession between those who do and those who do not engage in the practice. Most consultants and vendors avoid kickbacks for three reasons. First, the consultant’s vendor recommendations are based on who will kick back the most, which has nothing to do with what will ultimately be best for the bride and groom. Second, vendors will jack up the price to cover the amount of the kickback, causing an artificial inflation of the prices of goods and services.

Third, regardless of the money, kickbacks encourage consultants and vendors to cultivate dishonest relationships with their clients. Ethics also pertain to private information that your clients share with you. As you begin working with a couple on their upcoming wedding, you will become privy to all kinds of secrets about the bride, the groom, and the families. It is

your responsibility to treat this information with the utmost discretion. What is told to you in confidence must remain between you and your client. Imagine the consequences if

comments such as “I’m not crazy about my new father-in-law,” “Please keep Aunt Cheryl away from the booze,” or “I’ll just die if my boss speaks to the other guests during the wedding” were made public. As the wedding pressure begins to build, the bride, the groom, and other family members will let off steam by telling you how they feel. A good wedding consultant will listen intently and empathically, and then keep their clients’ secrets forever.

Sometimes during a reception, guests may come over to you and strike up a conversation, usually beginning with an innocent compliment about the wedding. After you acknowledge their comments, they might slyly ask you how much your clients have spent on a certain item. A conversation might go like this:

Guest: What a great idea for dessert. I don’t think I’ve ever seen such an elaborate chocolate fountain before. And the flowers are magnificent. My, the Jones family has certainly outdone themselves with the reception tonight. How much do you think an event like this would cost?

Wedding Consultant : I couldn’t agree with you more. The décor and special touches are fabulous. In fact, this is one of the most spectacular weddings I’ve ever managed. As for the cost, that’s between me and my client.

The ability to keep your clients’ secrets is a quality every planner should possess in abundance. If you have this skill, it will serve you well.

Finally, it is the responsible consultant who thinks of those in the community and makes a point to give back when feasible. For example, any floral arrangements that your clients do not want and that are not carried off by the guests might be delivered to a nearby hospital to cheer those most in need. Small gestures will make the world a better place and will make you a better wedding consultant.

Stress management and career enrichment

Though not as nerve-wracking a profession as being a 911 operator or an air traffic controller, wedding planning is not for the faint of heart. It is a stressful job with demanding clients and little margin for error. In order to succeed, a top-notch wedding planner must be part diplomat, part counselor, part cheerleader, part negotiator, and part sponge. Sponge? That’s right. As a consultant, you have to be part sponge because you are hired in large part to absorb the wedding stress and pressure from the couple. It is the planner’s job to stress over the details so that the couple can enjoy their wedding day. If the cake has not arrived, the officiant has caught a cold, or the maid of honor is missing in action, it is the wedding planner who worries while the bride and groom are blissfully unaware of these potential disasters. First, this chapter presents stress management tips that will help keep you calm and energized. Second, career enrichment techniques are highlighted to keep you feeling fresh and moving forward.

Stress Management Tips

Because wedding consultants often find themselves in pressure packed situations, they must learn to be effective stress managers. Imagine the stress level that would occur if during an upscale wedding reception, two tables of guests complain that the band is too loud and demand to be moved immediately. An easily flustered consultant might fly off the handle and tell the guests to sit down and deal with it. This flippant response will only anger the guests and encourage them to take matters into their own hands. The last thing you want is to have anarchy among wedding guests. A composed planner will jump into action to resolve the problem with the least amount of disruption possible to both the guests and the couple. Issues arise at weddings, and, if you remain calm and can think on your feet, you will be able to handle anything that might be thrown your way. While it is the planner's job to deflect wedding tension from the bride and groom, who will take on the job of helping to manage the consultant's daily pressures? As an independent wedding planner, it is up to you to recognize the stressful nature of the job and to take the appropriate steps to reduce the stress level in your life.

One of the best methods for reducing anxiety is to know the details of each wedding inside and out. The more familiar you are with the details, the less nervous you will be. For example, have you confirmed with all the vendors? Do you have copies of the contracts? Have you finished the seating assignments? Have you thought about event security? Do you have a Plan B in case of inclement weather? Have you checked in with the couple to see if there are any last-minute changes? If you plan your work and work your plan by organizing and confirming each element in advance of the wedding, you will lower your stress level and feel confident that everything is under control.

A structured approach will allow you to focus on execution rather than being overwhelmed by an issue that was neglected. This is not to say that unexpected emergencies will never crop up. However, knowing that you have covered all the essentials will give you the flexibility to pass responsibility on to an assistant if you need to troubleshoot. Another great way to reduce stress is to recommend vendors you trust based on successful past experiences. These go-to vendors should have a stellar reputation for superior service, professionalism, and punctuality. Each vendor recommendation is a reflection of you and your business. You will be calm when you are absolutely certain that a recommended vendor is an excellent fit for the couple and will come through on the wedding day. Will the florist drive through a snowstorm to deliver flowers to the wedding? Will your caterer find authentic sake cups for your Japanese clients? Will your tent company search high and low to find the exact shade of blue that you require for your tent liner? After you have planned many weddings, you will know which vendors are dependable and trustworthy. Surrounding yourself with a team of dedicated, reliable, and knowledgeable professionals will greatly reduce your stress and make your job easier.

Even with months of dedicated planning and the profession's top vendors working by your side, there is no escaping day-of wedding stress. Regardless of how long you have been in business or how many weddings you have planned, most wedding consultants admit to

feeling some degree of stress on the day of each client's wedding. This is only natural. You just have to know in your heart that you have done everything possible to prepare for the wedding and that it will run smoothly. Simultaneously, make a point of learning and applying stress management skills. Perkins (2003) offers a series of effective stress busters, adapted to apply specifically to wedding consultants, as summarized in Table 28.1.

Stressful situations come in all shapes and sizes, and how you handle them will often determine how much of a production they become. Avoid making a mountain out of a molehill. For example, assume you are checking on the preparations for a 6:30 P.M. reception. You enter the ballroom of a downtown hotel only to find a DJ's equipment set up where the couple's dinner buffet table is intended to be. By being prepared and catching the mistake early, you can remedy the situation quickly and use your sense of humor. Instead of making a negative statement such as, "Move this equipment now or I'll scream!" you can joke with the DJ that he is supposed to enhance the meal, not be the meal.

By working in a few stress busters each day, you will greatly reduce your desire to snap at clients and chew out vendors. Remember, brides and grooms will take their cue from you. If you are stressed, they will be stressed. Conversely, if you exude a sense of quiet calm, the couple will pick up on this vibe and be able to relax. If you ask 10 wedding consultants what they do to relax, you will get 10 different answers. There is no one-size fits all relaxation strategy.

One consultant, a dedicated exerciser, gets up at 5:30 A.M. and goes for a power walk regardless of the weather. Another takes time out of her busy schedule each week to have a pedicure. She gets a kick out of having her toes painted in funky colors and styles and uses this as a conversation starter during her events. A third loves to refinish furniture purchased from thrift stores and garage sales. Whatever hobby or interest you enjoy, continue to pursue it. You will be a much happier person.

TABLE 28.1 Stress Busters for Wedding Consultants

1. Learn to say no. Building a business from the ground up is a daunting challenge. While you are establishing your business, don't be afraid to say no to such requests as babysitting your niece and nephew, researching your family tree, or rewriting the bylaws for your local volunteer organization. Give yourself permission to say no to any request that will not further your new business, especially during your busiest times.
2. Don't overdo it. If you know you need at least eight hours of sleep in order to function at top speed, don't push it by pulling a series of all nighters before your first wedding. No one will thank you for it. What counts is your ability to think on your feet and manage the wedding. If you are running at half-speed, your clients will suffer.
3. Take breaks. If you are working from home, don't chain yourself to the phone or computer for 10 hours straight. Take a break. Listen to music. Go to the gym. You will return to your work with a fresh perspective.
4. Pace yourself. Break tasks down into manageable steps. Give yourself adequate time to meet your deadlines. If you are facing a large task such as assigning the seating for 200

people, break the job down into three or four smaller steps. That way you won't feel so overwhelmed.

5. Plan ahead to rest. Schedule resting periods after events that you know will drain you. The last thing you want to do is schedule a meeting with a potential client for the morning after a large wedding. Give yourself time to catch your breath and get reinvigorated.

6. Take a relaxing bath without interruptions. Don't answer the phone. Fill up the tub, light a candle, and relax while reading a magazine or the latest book by your favorite author.

7. Listen to music. Music is a great way to bust through the stress and tedium of day-to-day details. Listening to your favorite musical artist can help to relax you and put you in a good mood.

8. Get out. To break up your day, schedule a site visit to meet with a vendor who is located at or near a beach, lake, zoo, or park. After the meeting is over, stroll around and take a quiet moment or two for yourself.

9. Participate in activities that are meaningful to you. Many new wedding consultants complain that they don't have a life, since they are always working on the weekends. Find a club or activity that has gatherings during the week or plan an evening to get together with friends for dinner and a movie. Don't let your business take this away from you. You will want to keep as much joy and fun in your life as possible.

10. Eat a healthful, balanced diet. Consultants running on sugar and caffeine will be edgy and lack the staying power needed for day-of implementation.

11. Develop insight. Deep breathing, yoga, meditation, and prayer are all ways to touch base with what is meaningful to you. Engage in the activities that are most soothing to you.

12. Exercise. The release provided by regular exercise operates to burn calories and stress. It will also keep you trim and healthy.

13. Vent. If you are angry or excited about something, talk it over with a close friend, family member, or another consultant. Just by talking it over, you will begin to feel better.

14. Take a nap. If time permits, take a 20-minute power nap. It will revive you and help to calm your nerves for the tasks ahead.

15. Keep your sense of humor. Make sure you take the time to laugh, as humor is great for the spirit. Every wedding has its ridiculous moments. If you can see the humor in the lunacy, you are well on your way to successfully managing the situation.

Career Enrichment

In addition to monitoring your stress level, it is also important for wedding planners to seek out opportunities to enrich their careers. Instead of waiting until you are bored with managing the same type of wedding over and over, sign up for a floral design class to learn about different styles of floral arranging. Maybe branch out by learning calligraphy. Perhaps take a seminar taught by a leading catering expert. By attending workshops and classes, consultants from all over the world learn about new ideas and products and begin incorporating them into the weddings they plan.

The last thing that you want to hear a guest say at one of your weddings is, "This must be an event planned by (insert your company name), they always use the tuxedo strawberries arranged around the cake." You don't want your clients to think that their wedding will look

exactly like the last five weddings that you planned. Clients want something new and different. It is this ability to present the unexpected that will keep a planner in demand.

Travel is another excellent way to enrich your wedding planning career. With the explosion of multicultural brides and grooms, it is particularly helpful to your clients if you have traveled and experienced different cultures. If you have toured Asia extensively, you will be better informed to plan the wedding of a Japanese bride and a Vietnamese groom. You can always read about Asian customs and solicit advice, but nothing takes the place of travel in opening your eyes and giving you cultural insight.

Career Shift

After you have built a successful career as an independent wedding consultant, you might find yourself growing tired of the business. You may wistfully dream of the day when you won't have to leave your house at the crack of dawn on a lovely Saturday morning in June to head off to work. The important thing to remember about a career as an independent wedding planner is that you can accept as many or as few jobs as your time and budget will allow. If you want to take the month of August off, then do it. Your schedule is entirely up to you. Planning flawless weddings week after week can become tiring. Seasoned planners frequently move their businesses in a different direction, with perhaps less stress and more manageable hours. This is called a career shift. As you break into wedding planning, you might think that there is nothing you would rather do than plan weddings for the rest of your life. The good news is that you can, or, alternatively, you can take your business down a different path.

Many consultants will keep their hand in planning while exploring other opportunities, usually still related to the business of weddings. For example, Laura Weatherly, a top Washington, DC consultant, is now writing mystery novels in addition to planning weddings. Her debut novel *Better off Wed* and the follow-up *For Better or Hearse* are exciting whodunits in which the super sleuth is a wedding planner and the victims are a nasty mother-of-the-bride and a haughty hotel chef. Wendy Joblon, a sought-after planner in the southeastern Massachusetts

area, recently opened her own invitation and stationery boutique, much to the delight of her clients. Joyce Scardina Becker, a very popular northern California wedding planner, teaches a wedding consultant certificate program at California State University—Hayward. Celebrity wedding consultants are no different. For example, Colin

Cowie has written wedding and entertainment books and has a home décor line with JCPenney, Sharon Sacks has a line of clothing, makeup, and leather goods, and Preston

Bailey has authored several books and partnered with Sandals Resorts to create his signature WeddingMoons (Muhlke, 2005).

Whether you plan two weddings a year or have a team that plans two hundred, a career as an independent wedding consultant is rewarding, challenging, and meaningful. You will

have the privilege of working with clients as they prepare for one of the most important events of their lives. Because of your hard work, their wedding day memories will be of their commitment and carefree enjoyment rather than the nuts and bolts of planning.

Whether you long for a career in wedding planning or you simply long for your own perfect wedding day, it is our sincere hope that Wedding Planning and Management: Consultancy for Diverse Clients has inspired you to think about the cultural significance of weddings and the intricacies of the wedding profession. These are exciting times for wedding consultants, with trends such as the growth of destination weddings, the changing family, an increase of multicultural traditions, and the legalization of same-sex unions broadening the scope and visibility of this career. Now, perhaps more than ever, the wedding profession needs consultants who understand and respect today's diverse clients and can translate their needs into extraordinary weddings.