



UNIT-9

Starting Your Own Wedding Planning Business

Learning Outcomes

- ✓ Information on Starting your Own Wedding Consulting/Planning Business

Unit 9

Starting your Own Wedding Planning Business

The first thing you must do when considering starting your own business is writing out a business plan which has a clear focus on the target audience. When the business plan has been done the next step is focusing on strategies for marketing your business successfully. Once potential clients begin contacting you it will be necessary to know: how to conduct a successful interview, have good communication skills, familiarize yourself with contracts and how they work. Always remember that there is no client unless a contract has actually been signed.

The Business Plan and Your Target Audiences

A business plan is there to define your business and clearly identify the goals you've set. It can also serve as your company resume. In your business plan you will need to include a current and pro-forma balance sheet, income statement, and cash flow analysis. This will help you allocate any resources correctly, give you the ability to make good business decisions, and handle any unforeseen complications. This will provide you with specific and organised information about your business and give you an idea of how to pay back any borrowed monies. You must have a comprehensive business plan if you intend to ask for a bank loan. A good business plan also informs suppliers, sales personnel, and others about the operation of your business and your goals.

In this section we outline the basics of creating a solid business plan.

Writing the Business Plan

Developing your business plan is a crucial step and it shows people that you are serious about starting your business. If you don't have, or can't find the time to create a game plan then how will you find or create time and energy to run your business? The business plan will also make sure you are taken seriously by lending institutions, colleagues, vendors, and competitors.

You must think carefully about these four core questions before you start writing your business plan:

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

In short, the business plan you create will help you describe your business, choose your target market, manage the day-to-day operations, and handle your finances. There is not only one formula for

developing a good business plan, however, there are certain elements which are common to most plans. The Table below is a summary of these common elements.

Begin with Section 1 and describe your business by providing a clear and concise mission statement. This is usually only one sentence and it will be used as your statement of being. Start by writing: The mission of (insert company name here) is . . . and finish it by stating your philosophy and focus. A description with more detail can follow and this could include a short overview of your vision, your services, products and goals.

As well as your business description, the first part of your business plan must also include a solid marketing plan, a clear method of operation, listings of personnel needs, and details of your competition. Many times, wedding consultants begin by working on their own, and as their business grows they then hire more staff.

Section II of the business plan will include financial data. Most consultants start off small, working from home, which keeps them from immediately needing to apply for a loan. Once they get bigger, build their reputations and then need to hire staff, a larger area will be needed which will require rent. The list you have of capital equipment and supply will detail the materials you'll need to operate your business. The capital equipment and supply list will detail what materials you will need to operate the business. Equipment can be permanent and also reusable over a long period. This would include any vehicles, computers, printers, filing cabinet desks, bookshelves, and stationery items such as scissors, stapler and tape. Supplies are consumed after either one use or after only a short period will also be needed. These would be things like printer/photocopier paper, cartridges, pens, staples, and sticky notes. It is important to keep a spreadsheet which details all equipment and all supplies you use in the daily operations.

TABLE 9.1

Business Plan Elements

Cover Sheet

Executive Summary/Purpose Statement

Table of Contents

Section I: The Business

- Business description
- Marketing
- Competition
- Operating procedures
- Personnel Processes
- Business insurance
- **Section II: Financial Data**
- Loan applications

- Capital equipment and supply lists
- Balance sheets
- Income statements
- Breakeven analysis
- Pro-forma income projections
- Pro-forma cash flow
- **Section III: Supporting Documents**
- Personal financial statement
- Tax returns
- Copy of lease
- Legal documentation and copies of license(s)
- Résumé

The final projections are vital to business success as they help to determine the pricing structure. In the third section of the business plan all supporting documentation should be contained. Everything that is vital to securing loans as the business becomes larger should be included. Leases, tax returns, personal financial statements, resume, licenses should all be easily available. It is not necessary to reinvent the wheel, just get your business plan on paper. Many individuals and other resources are available to assist you with this. There are numerous websites, software, books, and accountants who can help. Bplans.com is one such website which contains more than 50 business plans to review. One of them is specifically tailored to wedding consultancy businesses.

Beyond the Business Card

Sometimes, people believe that all it takes to get started as a wedding consultant/planner is a business card. This is not correct. You must first establish your business as a formal and legal entity before you can begin dealing with clients. Prospective clients will check for your credentials before they hire you. Without a legitimate business, clients will go elsewhere. Organising a wedding is stressful as it is. People do not want any other hassles such as finding out too late that the person/company they hired to help with the biggest event of their lives does not have proper insurance or was not legally allowed to operate a business.

Business Name

Ensuring you have a business name (and preferably one that stands out) will be necessary. When deciding upon a name, conduct proper research and use your creative imagination. Make sure you check out your competition. The name you choose should be unique – just like you. Your business name could be casual, contemporary, elegant, or formal. Whatever you decide, make sure it reflects your particular style. Don't make your business name complicated or confusing in any way, or too cutesy. A very complicated business name such as "Felicia's Fancy and Fabulous Wedding Planning and Design" will not lend itself to a concise logo and is too wordy for business cards. Keep it simple and innovative. Clients tend to remember business names that are unique, simple, and concise. Many wedding consultants/planners use their own names in their business titles. For example, 'Susan Summers Wedding Consultancy' or 'Events by Chantelle.' This lends a more personal feel to the business name.

Also consider starting your business name with 'A' as this will ensure your company will be listed close to the top of directory listings.

Once you have come up with a few different possible ideas for a name, share them with family and close friends to get their feedback. Other people will sometimes give you reasons to use or not use a certain name. When you have received their feedback, cut your choices down to two or three and then down to one. Make sure you check to see if the name you have chosen is not already in use or sounds very similar to another business name. Do not only rely on the fact that your business name is not on a website. It might still be a business name so you must do your checking carefully. If you find a name you like and it is available, make sure you register that name immediately. If it is not available, move on to the second or third choice of names.

The Corporate Structure Of Your Business

The next step is determining your business structure. There are three main types of businesses: sole proprietor business, partnerships, and corporations. In between, there are many hybrids such as a limited liability company. The sole proprietor business type is the simplest and the most common one for wedding planners/consultants. It only needs one individual to operate this type of business. It is simple and the least expensive to set up. You must be careful because, in the case that your business fails, your own personal assets could be used to pay off any business debts. This is because this type of business does not exist separately from the owner. You must then accept all financial risks.

The partnership type of business is a relationship which exists between two or more people who decide to work together in business or a trade. Should you choose to go down the partnership road, make sure you have a lawyer draw up a formal agreement. This way every partner involved is aware of their rights and also their responsibilities. Even if you are going into business with your best friend whom you've known for a long time, it doesn't mean he/she knows or understands his/her responsibilities. For this reason, to protect all parties involved, get everything in writing.

The other type of business, as mentioned above, is a corporation which is a separate, legal entity from the owner him/herself. You must file articles of incorporation, you must elect officers, hold annual meetings and also pay corporate taxes. This type of business works well for those who might decide to franchise their business.

Location of Business Operation

Many wedding consultants, especially in the beginning, operate out of their own homes. If you decide to do this, call the Zoning Commission in your local area to check any legalities which might govern this type of business activity. In some cases, home-based business which have clients coming to the premises may be prohibited. You will need to check if any special permits are required for your business. If it is the case that home-based business such as yours are not allowed, then an alternative could be to meet clients at their homes or another mutually convenient location.

License, Permits, and Insurance

Most of the time, business owners must hold a legal business license. You can get a form for this at your local city hall. The license usually covers a period of one year and the fee is minimal. Check local government websites for more information.

A permit from the local health department will also be necessary if you will be providing food and beverages for clients. If, for example, you are asked by a client to make a hundred miniature cakes as favours, a health permit must be obtained. If you do not plan to do any catering for clients then this permit is not necessary.

Insurance is another expense but you must absolutely have it when running your own business. You must make sure you have insurance to protect yourself against any potential damaging situations. For example, many times a wedding planner will be asked to get the wedding gifts from Point A to B. If one of those gifts goes missing or is damaged, you will at least be covered for the cost. If you are at a venue working and you accidentally break a vase, your insurance will cover the cost. A variety of insurance policies exist so check them carefully and select the one that suits your wedding consultancy business.

If you are working from home and have home insurance, it is possible that you might already have a certain amount of liability insurance. Check the amount that your policy will cover. If it is quite low you might need a 'rider' to the main policy. This is like an addendum to the main policy and it covers specific items such as computers and office equipment. Riders can be economical and provide you with some peace of mind. A rider only incurs a nominal fee charge. A general liability policy is a good idea for people operating home-based businesses which do not have significant foot traffic. Should you decide to hire a staff member who will also work out of your home then you must get yourself business owners insurance as well. This will ensure you are covered against any physical injuries to either yourself, your employee(s), or your clients, any property damage, or other situations which may arise. The business owners insurance will be in addition to the homeowner's policy. It will be more expensive than a rider.

Establishing your business outside of your home will require you to obtain commercial business insurance. The fees for this will depend on the type of business, where it is located, and any state/local regulations. An insurance agent will be able to help you decide which coverage is right for you. You must be properly insured before your first client comes through your door.

Developing a Marketing Strategy

The term 'marketing' is used to refer to any activities a company undertakes that are associated with selling their service or product and creating a competitive advantage. Traditionally, marketing has been presented with the four Ps. These refer to product, price, place, and promotion.

The product is both the tangible and intangible goods and also services that a company offers. As the consultant, you are the liaison between a couple and the many tangible purchases they make. You also bring into the mix intangible elements such as organisation and design. Price refers to the exchange value of a product, or in other words, your fee structure. The place refers to the area or radius that you

serve within, any distance you must travel as the consultant, and the main communities that you service. Promotion refers to advertising, publicity, sponsorship, sales promotions, and personal sales you utilise to grow your business.

When thinking about marketing, most people think only advertising and making a sale. Marketing is also about other little things that the company does to reach target audiences. These would include driving to clients' homes to make deliveries, throwing an annual party to thank your clients, or sending out cards to vendors. When businesses match their products and services to people who need them, then their marketing will likely be successful. In this section, three key factors are pointed out which will allow you to develop an effective marketing strategy for your type of business. You must first determine your target audience, develop marketing tools, and learn the four secrets of selling to brides.

Determining your Target Audience

Once your business has been established as a formal entity, you will need to get the word out that you are here and open for business. Marketing is the way to do this. Firstly, determine your target market. This is a well-defined group of people you want to serve. Something that many new business owners find a little daunting is finding their own style and defining that style. You will have to find yours. Some new consultants find they struggle because they do not turn away anybody, not wishing to lose any business. They then must become everything to everyone and of course, this is not possible. This approach means they cannot focus their energies on a specific target audience. The following questions may help you become more focused:

- Who will your customers be?
- Is this a growing market in your area?
- How will you reach your market/customers?
- What pricing strategy will you employ?
- What will be your specialty area of expertise?
- How will you differentiate your business from competitors?

Marketing Tool Development

For new businesses, the best marketing tools are a business card and a good web site. Before you begin developing either of these tools, however, you must consider developing a specific logo for your business. Think McDonald's and their golden arches. Think Nike and their famous swoosh. Think Starbucks and their mermaid. These businesses are known as much by their graphic representations, known as their logos, as much as their business names. You spent a lot of time choosing your business name; now you must work on a logo which will capture your essence in graphics. Once you've created your logo, you can then move on to developing your means of marketing.

This is a very important task and it is a good idea to seek professional assistance from a graphic artist or designer. For those who might be limited in funds, many Internet-based logo design firms exist which are reasonably priced. If this is the case, you might also try securing the assistance of any friends who might

have artistic talent, or perhaps consider hiring a graphic design or art student to give you ideas. Meet in person with the chosen designer so that you can describe your business, your style, your mission statement, your philosophy, and the type of client you wish to attract. Give your artist some ideas in order to get the ball rolling, then allow him/her free rein to create designs so you can review them. When the options are presented to you, take some time and think about them. Questions to ask yourself would be: Which idea will carry me through many years? Which idea has the most flexibility? Which idea really personifies what I am all about? Keep in mind that the logo you choose will be on all your letterheads, signage, brochures, work shirts, and your web site. Ensure the logo you choose looks like a wedding consultancy business and not a florist, a caterer, or any other wedding-related specialist. Once you have your logo, you can begin developing other key marketing devices.

Business Cards

It may seem to some that business cards are antiquated, but in fact they are some of the best marketing tools you can have. They are also one of the most inexpensive. Fancy or plain, professionally designed or self-made, your business cards are an indispensable marketing tool. They are tangible personifications of your business and so the card style should echo your business style. If, for example, your business plan is to cater to people with smaller budgets, then your business cards must reflect that. Conversely, if your aim is to become involved in more high-end weddings, your cards should be printed on expensive paper and all lettering should be engraved. Targeting recent university graduates? Make sure your cards are modern so they appeal to younger audiences. If you're targeting a certain market then make sure your business cards reflect that.

Business cards must include this information: your logo, your business name, your personal name and title, and also contact information which would include a mailing address, a home telephone number, a mobile number, an e-mail address, a fax number, and a web site address. If your business has a particular specialty. It might be a good idea to state that (your specialty) on the card but make sure you keep it brief. "Specialising in multi-cultural celebrations" or "Fluent in English, French and Spanish" would easily and briefly provide valuable information to your potential clients. Print around 500 cards and make sure you *always* have some on you. Perhaps invest in a lovely metal or leather cardholder. This will keep cards clean and fresh and old-looking cards won't be tumbling out of your bag when you need to give them to people. Remember that your business cards represent your business.

Websites

Your business cards are like a mini-billboard for your business. For an electronic billboard get yourself a professional website. It is capable of reaching thousands of potential clients.

- The Web is a communication vehicle which is inexpensive, proven, and can flow to a mass-market. Here you will discuss in more detail your corporate objectives and provide a clear description of your products and services.
- Websites are easy to regularly update and easy to keep fresh, unlike print marketing.
- A good website is an excellent vehicle for creating a 24-hour multimedia portfolio (pictures, sounds, videos) to stimulate sales.

- Website e-mail forms also allow for a passive (hands-off) means to gather new leads and to garner more customer interest.
- You can create newsletters in web form or email which are a very inexpensive way of sending promotional material.

Make sure you link your email address to your website address. If a wedding website is (for example) wonderfulweddings.com, an associate might have the email address leanna@wonderfulweddings.com. This will be easier to remember, more professional, and also more marketable than a regular email address.

Marketing Appeals

When creating your new website and other marketing materials, aim to appeal to your potential clientele through emotion, credibility, and logic.

The emotional aspect will draw clients' attention even closer to your services. Many consultants include photos from weddings they have worked on. This personalises the website. Potential clients will be able to get a sense of your particular style and your specialties through a visual representation of your work. If, for example, your particular business caters to ski resort wedding events, ensure this is obvious through a number of pictures. Brides in particular love looking at others' wedding pictures. It creates a sense of excitement and anticipation for their special day. One thing to remember when using photos on your website is to get copyright permission from the photographers. Most of the time, wedding consultants and photographers have excellent relationships.

Showcasing your credibility can be done through quotes from past clients' letters or emails. If you have received any other recognition or outside awards related to wedding consultancy, be sure to display these on the website as well. Your credibility can be shown through any related seminars, courses, or conferences you have attended or participated in as a speaker, for example. If you have had any involvement with wedding associations like the Association of Bridal Consultants or the International Special Events Society, include this as well. You can also advertise on other websites such as The Knot. There will be a charge for listing your business on these sites.

The logic is there to answer all the nuts and bolts type questions which clients may have. These would include the who, what, when, where, why, and also cost and contact information. To be more specific: a person should be attached to your company (who), a service description i.e. what is provided (what), the amount of time you've been doing this job (when), the business location and/or areas you service (where), your missions statement (why). If you are quite new to the wedding planning business it's probably best not to directly state the amount of time you've been working (the when). As time goes by, however, this information will significantly add to your credibility. For example, "During the past six years we have planned over 100 weddings" as opposed to "We opened our doors two months ago."

With regards to stating your cost structures, you might decide not to do so on your website. If this is the case, then you could allude to cost by describing some packages your business offers. Any clients who wish to follow up will use the contact information on the website to get more details.

The Four Secrets of Selling to Brides

SECRET # 1

Secret # 1 Make a connection with prospective brides. This simply means creating an awareness of your business in the bride's mind, or in other words, she must be able to find you. More traditional media options like yellow pages, radio stations, or newspapers, can often be costly. These types of advertising allow you to reach quite a large audience of people and therefore will be expensive. However, you must remember that you only want to reach 1 or 2% who are actually planning a wedding. Advertising your business in wedding-specific media will be a lot more effective. Another cost effective way of advertising is direct marketing by mail because you are placing your particular message in a bride's hands. Obtaining lists of brides from an exhibit package at a bridal show can be done as part of an advertising program with a website, or through a list broker.

Another way you can connect with a bride is through referrals. You can ask her for referrals during the wedding planning and also after the wedding. It is almost certain that every bride will know another who might be planning a wedding. Referrals are a very good way to get more business. Networking with other people in wedding type businesses is another way to get referrals. When you start out, make an appointment with every major wedding vendor in your area. This way they can get to know you. Joining the main associations and socialising with others in the wedding business is also a good idea. Establishing friendships with other wedding consultants, will likely bring business referrals your way if they are booked at a particular time or if they come across someone who matches your specific niche.

As you create your website, remember that it will only work if the message is compelling enough and brides are able to find easily it. Search engines use certain criteria when ranking sites and one of them is how many other sites are linked to a particular website. Try to cross-link your site with others which are wedding-related. This will have more of an impact. Be careful, however, to not give away any of your trade secrets on your website. Brides pay for your knowledge, your contacts, and your experience. Do not give away too much information free of charge. You are actually selling an extremely personalised service which will be most effective with the opportunity to personally meet with a bride. Your website is there only to give enough information to entice brides to call you for more details.

Bridal shows are one final way you can connect with brides. Bridal shows will typically include a fashion show, demonstrations, and many different wedding-related businesses which are arranged in a trade show format. These shows give vendors an opportunity to reach a lot of prospective customers in a few hours. They also allow brides to attend one location and see all the options available for their weddings.

You must continually market your company. Your business type does not often rely on repeat business, but mostly with first-time clients. Newly engaged women constantly enter the marketplace as prospective customers, however, they exit the marketplace once they are married. Your marketing investment for your business is as important as the investment you make in your trade tools.

SECRET # 2

Secret #2 Make sure you reach the brides at the right time. Marketing will be effective only if your timing is perfect. Junk mail is just junk and spam is just spam if the message is not relevant to the one who is reading it. Convincing brides that they need you during the time they actually do need your services is the biggest challenge that you will face as a wedding consultant/planner.

If your services are full-service planning then your aim should be to reach brides shortly after they have become engaged. Providing the day-of co-ordinating services will allow you to reach brides who didn't hire a long-term consultant/planner and will also bring you valuable experience. The best time for marketing day-of services is around three to four months before a wedding.

SECRET #3

Secret #3 Secure credibility with brides. The more times you are able to get your message across to brides, the more opportunities you will have to acquire their trust. Perhaps a bride meets you at a bridal show or through a friend. She might later see your ad in a bridal magazine, and receive an e-mail from you which directs her to your site. Then another company refers her to you. This will be very positive.

It will be necessary to focus on the benefits a bride will get from your business and not only the features of it. This will add credibility. Features include such such the years of experience, your highly trained staff (which might only be you), and personalised attention. These are important but only when combined with other corresponding benefits. Let's say, for example, that a feature is "unrivalled customer service." Then the benefit would be that "you can relax and enjoy your special day." A bride is really 'buying' you in essence more than anything else. A bride will only do business with you *after* she buys you. If a bride likes you then the chances are she'll like doing business with you. Being comfortable with you as a person will lead to her being comfortable doing business with you. Be someone she knows will not take advantage of her. Become a trustworthy ally.

SECRET # 4

Secret #4 Give a bride what she wants. Brides have a lot of details they must take care of and usually limited time to do them. She has needs and also problems. Don't get too wrapped up in the splendours of your products or services. You must concentrate on how to effectively fulfill a bride's needs and solve her problems. The sales process for a wedding planner is all about the bride. It is not about you. The bride doesn't really care about your business. Her concerns are all about her wedding. Your job is to make it as easy as possible for her to do business with you. Make sure you are accessible, you answer your phone in a professional manner, and you return all calls promptly. Make sure your business etiquette impresses your clients and they will do business with you *and* refer you to friends and acquaintances.

Client Interviews, Communication, and the Contracts

Attracting your very first client is probably one of the most difficult parts of starting a wedding planning business. Getting the initial bride to sign your contract may seem like a huge task, however, if you have marketing, good planning, and creative thinking, it will definitely happen. Below we discuss certain elements which will help you secure clients, including the initial screening, the client interview details, all follow-up communication, the contracts, and also compensation.

Initial Screening

Putting effort into your marketing will eventually lead to an email or phone call requesting a meeting with a likely client. It is usually the bride who will be the main point of contact. Before grabbing your briefcase and rushing out the door, it will be necessary to have a brief conversation on the phone first. During this conversation, you will be able to screen the potential client by asking a few initial questions such as: *When is the wedding date? What is your wedding budget? Where will your wedding and reception take place?* The answers will allow you to check your calendar quickly and make sure you don't have another wedding scheduled for that day. They will also allow you to determine if the client has an unrealistic budget, thus allowing you to judge if this particular wedding will be worth your effort and time. It will also allow you to find out if the wedding ceremony and reception will take place in a location where your profits won't be eaten up in petrol. If the venues are quite far away you will have to make sure the additional transport costs and travel time are built into your fees.

Once the initial screening on the phone has been done, arrange a face to face meeting time with your prospective client. This could occur at a number of different locations such as the bride's home, your home office, or the reception venue. Strive to make the appointment as convenient as possible. Should you decide to meet your prospective client in a public area, ensure the environment chosen is conducive to conversation. It will not be effective if you have to compete with baristas making lattes in the background or, worse than that, be asked to leave the premises because they are closing.

During the screening process you must set some ground rules regarding who the bride can bring to the client interview. Her groom would be good, but a mother, father, or a sister with a newborn baby will be too much. Having a bridal entourage participate in this meeting will actually hamper the process. Remember, this will be your opportunity to hear what this potential client actually wants and as such it's an opportunity to sell yourself and your business. If competing messages or agendas are brought to the meeting, you won't be able to get the information that you need.

Client Interview Details

Imagine the client interview almost as a "first date" or a "getting to know you" type meeting. If you specialise in outdoor or country weddings, brides who visualise their weddings in chic hotel ballrooms will not be a good fit for you and your business. If you get this information during your interview, it will save everyone's time and money if you could gently steer the bride toward a more appropriate planner. Client interviews are an opportunity to discover exactly what the bride expects and wants for her wedding day.

Client Interview Questions

- How did you and your fiancé meet?
- Where are you planning to go for your honeymoon?
- What hobbies and interests do you have?
- What colors appeal to you the most?
- What type of music do you like?
- Where did you grow up?
- Where are your favorite places to travel?
- What is your cultural background, and do you want to incorporate some aspects of it into the ceremony or reception?

Special Customs or Traditions for the Wedding Day?

- How many guests are you expecting?
- What tasks have you already completed for your wedding?
- What are the “must haves” for your wedding day?
- How would you describe your personal style?
- What is your budget?
- Where do you like to shop?
- What expectations do you have of your wedding consultant or wedding planner?
- What do you fear the most on your wedding day?
- Do you have any special needs or special requests?
- Is there anything that I have not asked you that perhaps I should?

Many women have been dreaming about their wedding day all their lives so you now have a responsibility to make those dreams a reality. Make sure you dress appropriately when you meet with your prospective clients. Always be neat and professional looking and convey a sense of being well organized. No bride wants a rag-tag planner who forgets business cards or shows up late to the very first meeting. When you sit with your client, allow her to do 75% of the talking. Listen very carefully to your client, ask the right questions that will encourage her to offer more details, and always maintain eye contact. The aim of this conversation is to get as much information as possible about your potential client and her wishes for her special day.

Once the client has given you the details, you can then tell her about your experience and background, especially as it relates to her wedding. If you have just started out and have only a little experience then mention events you have assisted with, any classes or courses you've taken, or ideas you might have for her wedding day. This is a chance to make the sale and to convince the bride that she needs to hire you to help her plan her wedding.

Follow-up Communication

Immediately after your initial meeting, send more communication that reinforces what you learnt at your meeting and information that highlights reasons why this client should hire you. Brides often interview three to five consultants before choosing one they like the best. The follow-up

communication you do may just be what it takes to set you above other planners. You could simply send a thank-you note or you could write a thorough recap of your meeting and attach a wedding planning contract. Whatever you choose to do make sure your communication is flawless. Invest in elegant, personal letterhead or stationery if sending thank-you notes. All communication that leaves your work place is a reflection of you. Take the time to reread for spelling mistakes or typos, any misused words or factual errors.

Contracts

There will be times when a client will be ready to commit to hiring you during or after your initial meeting. If this occurs, immediately follow up with a contract. This will be a written set of obligations that indicate clearly the responsibilities of both the client and the consultant/planner. You can send it by surface mail or email. Whichever one you choose, make sure you have a standard version which can be customised quickly and sent out without delay. Do not wait to send out this contract as your client may secure another consultant if she doesn't hear from you immediately.

The contract should be sent out with a cover letter thanking the client for choosing you to plan her wedding and also assuring her that you are very excited about working with her on this special event. A standard contract does not exist for all planners but the following elements must be included in all contracts:

- Today's date
- The wedding date and time
- The rehearsal date and the time
- Names of the bride and groom
- Contact information for both bride and groom including addresses, all phone numbers, and e-mail address
- Conditions, including roles and restrictions
- Your compensation which should include total fees, initial deposit, and payment schedules
- Terms, including liability and other legal issues
- A list of your duties
- A Force Majeure clause, which is there to protect you from natural disasters or other "Acts of God"
- Signatures of all parties and the associated dates

Please remember that ***you do not have a client unless you have a signed contract***. Unless the contract has been signed do not start working for that client. Without a signed contract, you only have a potential client. It is suggested that you show your contract to a lawyer if you prepare it yourself. You could run it past a mentor, or a small-business advisor too.

Compensation

When you began writing your business plan, it is likely you thought about setting the fees for your business. Begin by determining what other consultants in your area are charging. Once you know what the market will be in your particular area, you can set your fees. If you are a new consultant with little or

no experience, do not expect to charge as much as an experienced consultant. Start out small and increase your fees gradually as your reputation grows. Charging for your services can be done in different ways. These would include: an hourly rate, a flat fee, a package deal, a certain percentage of the wedding budget, or a day-of fee. Each one of these options has both pros and cons. You have to work out which fee structure type will best suit you.

It matters not which approach you take, but don't expect to support yourself full-time from the beginning. Most of the time wedding consultants start out as part-timers and build their businesses gradually.

A flat fee is a good option for clients who want you to manage their weddings from start to finish. With this type of fee there is no need to keep track of billable hours, and you know exactly how much you'll earn based on the set price.

Hourly rates work well if your clients only want a few things from a consultant. An example would be if a client wants you to provide her/them with a list of venues that have a piano or perhaps recommend a few florists who will have both silk and live flowers. Sometimes clients hire a consultant on an hourly basis but realise they need the planner for a lot more tasks than originally thought. When you have your meeting with a client, try to determine exactly what needs she has. Only then can you suggest an appropriate compensation package.

Wedding planners/consultants often have clever names for their package deals and use names like gold, silver, and bronze, or diamond, emerald, and sapphire. With every title include a clearly defined list of services, where fees increase as the number of duties do. Some consultants charge a percentage fee of the overall wedding budget which is usually around 10% and is a simple and very effective way to charge for services. If your experience is limited, however, it is best to avoid this particular charging method. When you first start out you will probably have weddings with more modest budgets. If you charge a percentage of a modest budget, the fee you receive will likely to be quite small.

One final point to think about is that many consultants/planners, especially those who are new, will take on day-of weddings. This is when you agree to do only a small amount of work before the wedding day which usually involves confirming the vendors, and on the wedding day you will be on hand to ensure all the bride's plans are carried out. This service type will incur a day-of fee.

In some cases, more seasoned planners specialise in day-of services as well as new planners who find this kind of work a good way to break into the wedding planning industry. If you are only hired for the day-of duties it does not mean you are free from the responsibility of producing a trouble-free wedding. "It wasn't me who hired the DJ" is not an excuse when you are faced with a microphone-hogging bore who is dressed in a tux and is belting out commands rudely. You will still have to intervene when necessary and make sure the wedding is lovely even if it wasn't you who planned it. Take the appropriate time up front and get to know as much as you can about the venues, the vendors, and the VIPs for each day-of wedding you are responsible for.

Whether you have been hired to plan the entire wedding or hired to just manage the day-of duties, you are the one responsible for meeting your client's expectations. Remember, a wedding of impressed clients and guests can often lead to more work in the future.

Vendor Relations, Networking and Negotiation

One of the most effective and least expensive marketing strategies you can use is to get out there and personally meet your fellow wedding vendors. This is a valuable exercise and it will pay dividends to your business for many years to come. You will soon learn that wedding professionals are a close-knit community. The stationers know all the calligraphers, the caterers know the rental companies, and so on. The ideal situation would be for all of those vendors to know you. The following few pages will highlight how important it is to establish vendor relationships, how to properly network, and how to engage in effective negotiations.

Establish Vendor Relationships

Introduce yourself to as many other wedding vendors as you can because they will become vital as a source of referrals for your business. For example, Angela Davis has just become engaged. She rushes out with her mother to find the ideal wedding dress. They make an appointment at an exclusive boutique and begin their search. During this process Angela becomes quite overwhelmed and the assistant hears her say, "If choosing the wedding dress is this hard, how am I going to handle the rest?"

The assistant at the boutique might casually ask Angela if she's thought about hiring a wedding planner to help her and ensure a beautiful and stress free wedding day. Angela's mother might perhaps mention that they haven't thought about this because Angela only just got engaged a week ago. Her interest might be piqued, however, and Angela's mother might ask the assistant for wedding planner recommendations. It is right here, at this point, that your cultivation of a sterling reputation with other vendors will really pay off. The assistant could mention your name. Wedding vendors get to know each other by working for the same clients at the same events. They will begin to develop a sense of camaraderie and quickly figure out who is reliable and who is not.

Over time, they start to trust each other and develop a sense of enthusiasm and morale-building for the entire team that works on a wedding. Usually, a couple begins their wedding planning process by securing just one or two elements for their wedding. As they continue planning on their own they might decide it is very difficult and time consuming and decide that hiring a planner is a good idea. If the local country club events manager has a high regard for you and your work, he or she might refer a new client to you. If you have perhaps successfully guided other brides down the aisle of a specific church, then the altar guild would be there to recommend your services.

You never know where your next referral might come from. This is why it is very important to get out there and meet everyone in the same business. Start thinking beyond the usual vendors and touch base with local travel agents, makeup artists, or ballroom dance teachers. Make sure you also introduce yourself to every local wedding consultant in your market. Other planners can actually be an incredible source of leads.

Let's use 4 hypothetical planners— Susan, David, Holly, and Greg— to illustrate how many benefits can come from working with other consultants. Let's say that Susan is a long-established planner in your market. When she gets a phone call from a bride with only a small budget, she decides not to take that job. Susan might then be very happy to pass on your name and number to that bride. In this way she has assisted the bride and you as well.

Another planner, David, might get a call for day-of help. He does not offer this service, so he passes on your name and number if he knows that you do offer day-of assistance. If another consultant, Holly, is already committed on a certain date, she might refer a bride to you if your calendar is free. Let's say a bride is looking for a particular style or specialty such as knowledge of Asian wedding customs. That's when Greg, who knows you have expertise in this area, might give the bride your contact information. See how it works? Cultivate friendships with other wedding planners because it is a great way to expand your business.

Make a List

Once you identify and meet other wedding vendors in your area, make sure you create a list of specific individuals that you would like to meet. This list could be created from many different sources. You might like to check:

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

When you have your name list, aim to meet a certain number of those vendors every week. Depending on the time commitments you have, you could meet two or up to five new vendors per week. Meeting all the players in your area will set you up as a player, too. The way to begin is by calling each vendor and arranging a brief (approx 15 minute) appointment to introduce yourself. By calling in advance to make an appointment time you show you have respect for the other vendors' time and you are also conveying a professional image. Don't just drop in on a vendor unannounced. It is best to make appointments for early in the week as most vendors tend to become busier later in the week. Also remember the busiest wedding months - May, June, September, and also October. It would be a better idea to schedule your appointments during January, February, and August as these are considered the quieter months.

Once you have an appointment, work out what you will say in advance. Familiarise yourself with the vendor's websites. Read about their products and services. This will be of help to you during your meetings. If, for example, you are about to meet with a local florist, make a note of any recognition or recent awards he/she/they have received. Apart from doing proper research on the vendor, you could also practice what you want to convey about your own business. If you have a completed business plan as discussed earlier, you will be well prepared to answer any questions with confidence.

A final point you need to consider is what you can do for the vendor. Vendors will remember you if you have a unique specialty, a shared interest, a helpful skill, or if you are able to cross-market their goods and services with a link to their business on your business website. When you go even a little out of your way for another vendor, you will increase the chance of that vendor going out of his or her way for you.

Sharp and Centred

When meeting with the vendors, dress the same as you would when meeting clients. Look neat, tidy and professional. Do not come in looking rumpled or wrinkled. Remember, you are representing your own business and first impressions will last. Remember to bring extra business cards to meetings in case the vendors ask to keep a few to share with clients.

Another piece of advice is: give the vendor you are meeting with your full attention. Focus your energy on the vendor during the meeting. Make sure your mobile phone and other devices such as a pager, are turned off. Do not allow yourself to feel flustered if a vendor does not extend a similar courtesy to you and the meeting is sometimes disturbed by phones ringing, staff with questions, or clients who might need the vendor's attention. You are on their time at that moment, and patience is a necessary personality trait for wedding consultants. Sometimes, a vendor might not really be willing to take time out to meet with you. He/she may not be welcoming or helpful during your interaction. Do not take this personally. It is likely that particular vendor treats everyone the same way. In the majority of cases, however, you will see that wedding vendors are quite friendly, generous with their time, and eager to meet with consultants.

Networking

Networking: **"The Relationship Of Entrepreneurs And Their Small Businesses With The Outside World."**

The best way to begin your networking program is to join organisations where those involved in the wedding business gather. A very popular networking group for wedding planners is ISES, which is the International Special Events Society. This group has chapters in most major markets. It offers a broad range of services, such as professional and educational development, professional resources, discounted business services and listings for all members on their website and subscription to Special Events magazine. It is best to join ISES if you are still a student because the annual student membership fees are only £35. Fees for professionals are £450. The membership fee for professionals is tax-deductible as a business expense and so joining this group works out as a win-win situation once you start your business.

ISES holds meetings each month at different venues. Vendors who are associated with the society will supply the catering, linens, floral arrangements, invitations, entertainment, and other elements as a way of showcasing their businesses. Frequenting these gatherings is actually a great way to meet other wedding consultants and vendors. Just remember that networking will take time and you'll get out of it what you've put into it. A lot of people join associations but then feel frustrated or give up after only one or two meetings because they think they are not meeting the right people or they feel left out because it seems that everyone has a set social group already. You must remember that in most cases, those relationships took years to cultivate, and you will also get there over time.

There are other groups you should consider such as the Association of Certified Professional Wedding Consultants, the Association of Bridal Consultants, and the International Festival and Events Association. Like ISES, these groups encourage ongoing education and training, and professional development. They host conferences and meetings that will allow you to connect with other people with similar interests and goals. Also, make sure you familiarise yourself with business-related groups in your area. Your local Chamber of Commerce would be one such group. The Chamber holds monthly meetings where leaders can introduce new members and initiate conversations about issues which the business community as a whole is facing.

Other networking groups which offer you opportunities to meet interesting people who might need wedding consultants include the Young Democrats/Republicans (in the U.S), the Junior League, Toastmasters, “Friends of” or the event planning arm of any major museum or art gallery, or the alumni association of your college or university. All these groups are excellent resources for community networking.

Negotiation

The ability to negotiate is a very valuable skill and one you will definitely need. You will often be faced with situations where you will have to think on your feet, from a bride who wants a fee discount from you to a vendor who wants to charge your client a premium just for delivering the ice cream in August. Your time will be spent honing your negotiating skills. For example, one of your clients ordered apple green linens for their wedding, but the rental company has delivered green linens which are a shade different to what your clients ordered. It will be up to you to negotiate with the rental vendor and secure the exact type of linen in time for your clients’ wedding. Or perhaps you have a meeting with your clients and the wedding reception venue manager. During this meeting you learn that the clients want the “cherry drop ice” for their signature drinkable dessert which the venue usually offers. The director of catering for the venue tells you this specialty drink isn’t available in the month your clients will be getting married due to fresh cherries being extremely expensive at that time. It will be your job to then negotiate with the venue and make sure your clients will get what they want for their special day.

How Do You Negotiate?

Money Magazine’s Michael Kaplan states that there are 7 rules for getting what you want on your terms. They are all applied below for the wedding consulting business.

1. Do not look at a deal as an either/or proposal. Good negotiating is about compromise. Give a little and get a little. To get the cherry drop ice mentioned earlier, your clients may have to forego one of the expensive hors d’oeuvres, this way offsetting the cost of getting their out-of-season cherries.
2. Know what you can part with—then part with it hard. Prioritise what you really want as a result of the negotiations. Don’t lay your cards on the table but be clear in your mind what will make you feel good about the outcome of the deal. If you know your client is not all that worried about the exact linen colour and the vendor offers a discount to spare an extra trip to the warehouse, letting go is an easy decision.

3. Work out the other side's timetable and use it. Is the gown shop ready to bring in next season's gowns but hasn't yet discounted the one that your bride loves? Suggest a reasonable discount and begin negotiating the price. Dresses become outdated rather quickly. Use this knowledge to your advantage.
4. Show people that you understand their position.
5. Here, the skill of empathy comes in handy. You have to convince the distressed mother from the Consultant in Action case that you empathise with what she's going through. You don't have to agree with her but let her express her feelings and thoughts. Ask open-ended questions to get more information and to validate her feelings. The stationery vendor will surely notice how you balanced the bride and her mother's emotions in a calm and reassuring manner.
6. Restrain your emotions. Stay on point and leave personalities out of it. Do not burn any bridges with clients or vendors. You don't have to like a particular vendor or a particular client in order to have a successful working relationship with them.
7. Do not believe everything, but make sure you do not call anyone a liar. Negotiations are actually a strategy. Each side knows that the other is trying to gain the upper hand. Let's say a local florist insists she cannot do any better on the price for centerpieces. You might say that you accept that, but let her know that your clients will need to re-evaluate their options for a floral designer.
8. Have a backup plan. Before entering into negotiations, think carefully through all your options. If a client wants a particular ballroom for the reception but you find out it isn't available, present her with a few other options she may not have considered. Keep at least another three venue options in mind, or you could encourage the client to consider changing the date of the wedding if it is early enough in the planning process.

Whether you are just starting to develop skills that will create positive vendor relationships or you want to hone what you've already learned, networking and negotiation skills are very valuable and worth cultivating. As with any complex interpersonal skill, your 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 organising 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.

Work Environment Organisation

If you are planning to work from home, start by checking the furniture you currently have and see what could work in a home office. A solid desk which has good working space will be the most important item. It should have enough room for a computer, and space for reviewing guest lists, spreadsheets, and sample books. Remember you will also need space for a scanner, printer, perhaps a fax machine, and other equipment. They should all be located close by.

One of the difficult tasks you will have as a wedding consultant is keeping track of all the details which go into planning a wedding. How you decide to manage the information will be up to you, however, some options would be three-ring notebooks, spreadsheets, a day timer, 3 x 5 cards, or a file folder system. Filing cabinets, storage bins, and bookshelves, help enormously by using vertical space and by hiding clutter. Invest in a chair that is comfortable that fits your body and offers good support. There are many ergonomic type styles you can choose from and can easily be found at a local office store. Measure the desk height to ensure the chair you choose will comfortably fit underneath the desk while you're sitting in it.

As a planner/consultant, you understand the value of good lighting for weddings. It will be the same for your office. Check your office area lighting. If the overhead lighting isn't adequate, buy a floor lamp or desk lamp that will allow you work efficiently at any hour. If you do not have everything you need to set up your home office, buying equipment doesn't need to be expensive. You can also attend garage sales or thrift shops where you might find affordable furniture or equipment.

As well as finding your office style, consider setting yourself ground rules. For example, have a work schedule which fits in with your body's time clock and lets you work a reasonable number of hours every day. If you are a morning person it makes sense to start your workday at 5:00 A.M. If you manage better later on in the day, consider starting later, perhaps in the afternoon. Remember, you are your own boss, and you set your own hours for maximum profit and productivity. You might like to limit the time spent surfing the Internet or making personal phone calls, or taking a break every hour or two, not eating in your office, having lunch at the same time each day, or any other policies that will help you work more effectively. Rules exist in every office and your home office is no exception.

It is important to note one thing: working from home can be lonely, especially when you are beginning to build your business. To avoid climbing the walls, make appointments to meet with vendors, as discussed earlier, while building your own client base. If you are at home with no opportunities to interact with the world, you will risk isolation, boredom, and depression. Balancing your outside meetings with quiet work time at home will help you feel more energised and productive.

If you realise that working from home isn't for you, you can always lease an office space. You can find information on office space leasing through browsing real estate ads online or national websites such as www.offices2share.com. You could lease office space on a month-to-month basis or only for special client meetings. Many executive suites are located in business parks, they include furnishings, are internet ready, and have certain optional add-ons like receptionist services, mail pick-up, and conference space access. Whether you prefer day-to-day office space or space once in a while, leasing a well-equipped space is much easier than you think.

Selecting Software and Hardware

You will be spending quite a lot of time on the road so seriously consider buying a laptop computer instead of a desktop system. Besides having all your files on hand, a laptop will allow you to give visual presentations such as showing photos of recent weddings to prospective clients. It doesn't matter which system you choose, make sure your computer has plenty of storage space, enough memory for running

numerous programs at once, and a reasonably fast processor. For graphics work, including any photographic images, animation, or illustrations, you will have to maximise the processor speed, the hard drive storage space, and also the memory (Obringer, 2006).

Once you have bought the hardware you need, you will also have to purchase software applications. As a minimum, you will need software for the following functions: word processing, e-mail, presentations, computer maintenance, spreadsheets, virus protection, Portable Document Format (PDF) reading, a tool for graphics and image editing, and internet browsers. In some cases, software can be downloaded free online, but business software usually comes in packages like Microsoft Office (Obringer, 2006). You need to have a high speed internet provider because so much of your work requires Internet access. You will also have to invest in spam and virus protection. Constant pop-ups and dial-up Internet can paralyse your computer.

Other Business Equipment Essentials

As a wedding planner it is vital that you have a reliable vehicle. You do not want to have a break down on your way to a job. If you cannot afford a premium vehicle because you have just started out, buy or even lease the most reliable one you can afford. On a rainy and cold evening at midnight, you will be very thankful your car starts and takes you home safely after an all-day wedding. Both the interior and exterior of your vehicle should be well maintained and clean. Your car's appearance is another reflection of you and your business. Another element that is absolutely essential is a smart business wardrobe. It should include professional casual wear for setup, suits for client meetings, and also elegant but functional formal attire for actual wedding days. Your clothing should be as nice as you can afford, even if it is only one good suit. Every time you wear your suit ensure it is clean and ironed. You should project the image of a cool, calm, professional wedding planner and not someone who slept in his or her clothes. Never look out of place or draw unnecessary attention to yourself during a wedding. Think carefully about your work wardrobe in advance and add any appropriate pieces as necessary.

There will not be any time to shop for a suitable outfit the day before a wedding. You must be ready before your first client signs the contract. Without a doubt, a good and comfortable pair of shoes is the most important wardrobe purchase you will make. It is vital to your safety and comfort that you have a pair of sensible, good-looking, non-slip shoes. As a consultant/planner, you will likely be on your feet for long periods of time.

Something else to consider, and this is important when picking out your shoes, is that wedding planners often walk through kitchens to communicate with catering staff. There you will encounter wet and slippery floors. If the shoes you are wearing have slick soles it would be easy to slip and take a fall, even injuring yourself. If you are not fond of wearing practical shoes, remember that oftentimes a wedding planner will wear dress shoes at the beginning of a wedding but change into sensible shoes after the wedding starts. No matter what you decide, always go for safety over fashion.

Building Your Staff

Even when starting out with a very tight budget of your own, you should still consider having a small staff. That could simply include a volunteer assistant for day-of implementation support. Assistants can manage ceremony activities and this frees you up to oversee reception details. If you are working on a large wedding, you may need two (or even more) assistants to ensure everything runs smoothly. Assistants are able to complete such tasks as directing vendors for setup, gathering bridal parties for photographs, or rushing to complete any last-minute errands. With a little guidance, an assistant can do almost anything to help you manage a wedding.

Finding qualified assistants can be a challenge. Many people will definitely be interested in learning the ropes as your assistant, but not all of them will have the necessary skills to succeed. Interview candidates and see who has the most enthusiasm and/or experience for the position. Students from local universities or colleges are usually willing to volunteer their time for day-of operations to gain some experience. If they happen to be studying a related area, (business or events management, for example) they might even work with you over a longer time period for course credit in association with a practicum or internship experience. Check the details with the internship co-ordinator of the program to clarify any restrictions and also requirements of working with students for credit. Normally, students will complete 400 hours for an internship and 150 hours for a practicum over a 10 to 15 week period. Therefore, you must make sure that you have sufficient work to justify a student's experience for credit.

A point you will need to make clear to any candidate you hire is that most weddings will take place on Saturdays and they must be available on Fridays for a rehearsal, on the wedding day itself, and possibly also Sunday. If your candidate cannot do weekend work you'll have to continue your search. See Table 9.2 below for further skills that assistants are required to possess.

Pay and Non-competing Clauses

Some assistants will be willing to work to gain experience, however, you should be prepared to pay your assistants for the effort and time they put in. Experienced assistants can earn up to \$25 an hour or even more in some cases, especially in large cities. You can always negotiate a flat fee if paying on an hourly basis does not suit your needs and budget. Something like £100 for the entire wedding would be an option, depending on what duties your assistant will perform. Get advice from your tax advisor regarding appropriate document payment for short-term assistance. It is typical for consultants to hire the same assistants again and again. This is ideal because, over time, the same assistant will develop a feel for your needs and expectations even before you ask for them. Sometimes, it will be two or three wedding planners who share the same assistant. If you workover a long time with the same assistant, taking on an intern, or, most importantly, when you hire your first associate, you must have a non compete clause as part of the arrangement. This is very important.

Many wedding consultants hesitate to host an intern through fear that he/she might work with them for 14 weeks and then move on and open their own business using all the secrets and information they learned. Successful wedding consultants have taken years to establish a workable system, and are justifiably protective of their methods and materials. A non-compete clause found in an employment statement, is a condition of employment that indicates a time frame that the assistant, upon leaving the

company, cannot work for the competition. This is used to prevent former employees from leaking trade secrets to a competitor or start a similar type of business. The clause might state, for example, that an employee is not permitted to work for a competing consulting firm or start a wedding consulting business within 18 months of leaving the position.

Non-compete clauses determination and enforcement are governed by state law, so it is advisable to consult alawyer when drawing up this document. A potential employee/assistant who refuses to sign should not be hired. If he/sheviolates the clause, the former employee and his/her new company could be sued.

The non-compete clause can also include a radius clause. This indicates an exclusive region to which the agreement applies. The radius clause might state that employees are not permitted to start a wedding planning business or work for a competing business within 18 months of leaving their position if the new business is located within a 200-mile radius. A former employee can start his/her own business immediately only if it is located outside the specified radius.

Skills to Look for When Interviewing Assistants Table 9.2

Able to follow instructions	
Composure under stress	
Politeness	
Attention to detail	
Does not gossip	
Maintains a professional demeanor	
Bright personality	
Effective multitasker	
Well-organized	
High energy levels	
Can stand on his/her feet for long periods	
Common sense	
Self-confidence	
Looks comfortable	
Quick and creative problem solver	

Competition, Obligations, and Ethics

Competition isuseful up to a certain point but no further. Co-operation is what we must really strive for and begins where competition ends.

It is no longer a luxury to hire a wedding planner and it is not reserved only for the rich and famous. Consultants are now hired by people with different budget types to manage various aspects of their wedding day.

In this section we discuss the increasing demand for wedding planners/consultants which has created a greater level of competition. We will also discuss the obligations and the ethical practices which make a successful wedding consultant.

Demand and Competition

There is significant competition between consultants who specialise in the same type of wedding. For example, if a bride needs a planner who specialises in Jewish weddings, she will interview planners in the area who have that particular focus. The bride you meet today could interview your competition tomorrow. When there is a high-budget or high-profile wedding, planners will put their best efforts forth to land that prominent client.

This competition benefits the wedding profession in general because it encourages consultants to continually raise the bar in terms of practices and standards. Competition will keep planners/consultants up to date and sharp, and urge them to continually be on the lookout for new ideas and trends. It inspires them to create something unique for each client. Some competition also encourages continual education through workshops, classes, and seminars. Wedding consultancy is a business, and, like any business, the people involved must continually study their market and hone their skills to remain on top. Competition has taken ugly turns in the past with questionable actions being taken. We continually emphasise the need for ethical, respectful, and trustworthy interactions with vendors, clients, and other consultants. Dishonest or antagonistic practices might help a consultant in the short run, but word eventually gets out and vendors and clients alike will turn away from such a planner.

Obligations

Your obligations as a wedding planning professional are important and include obligations to vendors, clients, your own business, the wedding profession, and, of course, yourself and people in your social network. You will have to manage all the responsibilities that compete for your time and you must do it with finesse and with grace. As a consultant/planner, your main business obligation is to your clients, usually the bride. If you have been hired by the bride's parents then your obligations are to them as well. As a rule of thumb, if the bride is happy, then everyone around her will be happy. Your job is to make the bride happy, and this will sometimes mean that you have to negotiate with vendors to ensure the bride's satisfaction. Let's say that a bride has chosen a historic Federal style hotel for her wedding reception in late November. The hotel has a beautiful staircase which leads to the front door. It has always been the bride's dream to be photographed outside on the staircase. On the actual wedding day, the photographer tells you he prefers not to take the outside photographs as it is too cold. Your diplomatic skills will come into play now; your obligations to your client will rely on them. You must tell the photographer tactfully that the bride still wants to be photographed outside on the staircase despite the

cold as it has long been her dream and therefore this photo is not negotiable. You might then mention to the photographer that you'll have hot coffee/chocolate sent out to everyone to keep them warm.

Wedding planners/consultants also have obligations to their vendors, therefore in the example above, you will have to accommodate both the photographer's desires and the bride's wishes. It can sometimes be a balancing act but if you have to choose, the bride's needs must almost always come first. Be careful, however. If you treat your vendors poorly and anger them, they may refuse to work with you again. Treat all vendors with courtesy and respect, and they will continue to recommend you.

As discussed earlier in this course, you must also feed your vendors. No-one works well on an empty stomach. When you determine the final headcount for the catering, remind the clients to include the vendor meals in the total number. Your responsibility will be to ensure that your clients fully understand the importance of feeding vendors, including yourself and any assistants you have. It is also up to you to tell the vendors when their meals are ready and where they can take a break to eat. Well-fed staff are very productive staff.

Planners/consultants must also ensure that vendors are given water and other hot or cold beverages while setting up. If a tent is being installed in August on a 30-degree day, the staff members will surely appreciate you and recommend you to others after you show up with some ice-cold beverages. The same holds true in the winter. Installing floral arrangements or moving in catering equipment outdoors can be difficult in the cold. Ensure you have hot tea and coffee on hand. This small courtesy will go a long way toward getting the job done on time.

As well as your obligations to clients and vendors, wedding planners/consultants have obligations to the wedding profession itself. Since wedding consulting/planning is a relatively new career type, consultants must give back to their profession to help all facets of it to advance.

The obligations you have towards your own business, to yourself, and to those closest to you, are the most important. When you have your own business, it is up to you to make sure your company succeeds. Daily decisions will form part of that success. One of the most important policies you use will be to always collect final payment at least two weeks before the wedding day.

Once a wedding has occurred and your services have been provided and no longer needed, it is near impossible to collect money owing without legal assistance. Instead of learning this the hard way, always collect final payment well in advance of the actual wedding. This way you will have enough time to ensure that any cheques have cleared. If a problem occurs, such as insufficient funds, you will have leverage in terms of not managing the wedding on the day. Most couples don't intentionally decide to defraud their wedding planners, but as their wedding approaches, they face a lot more financial pressures and perhaps begin to search for a way out of making any final payments. It is ultimately up to you to make sure you are paid for your services.

You will also have other obligations to yourself. These will be balancing your personal life and your career. There are numerous ways to manage stress associated with wedding planning as a career. Top planners understand that the more clients pay for your services, the more they will expect from you. This includes understanding that your personal problems or crises are not your clients' and your clients expect to come first.

Ethics

It can be easy to think that in the business world bad behavior is rewarded if you look at cases such as Enron, Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia, and World-Com. The fact remains, however, that a documented connection exists between solid morals and having business success (Lennick and Kiel, 2005). This is the reason you must become a business owner with very clear ethical principles right from the beginning. From the first day you open for business, you must lead by example and you must show others that you are fair, honest, responsible, just and compassionate.

For example, you have back-to-back appointments with two prospective clients who are considering your services. The first bride, Marla, asks about your fees for the comprehensive planning services. You say they are \$3,000. Later on, the second bride, Jane, asks the same question of you. You see that Jane is wearing an expensive designer outfit and has a 5-carat diamond engagement ring. You quote her \$5,000 as your comprehensive planning fee. Both of the weddings will need the same amount of work on your part, but you have quoted them two different fees based on what you *think* each bride can afford. Imagine now that these two brides are friends. The consequences to you and your business if they happen to be friends will be felt. They will discuss their individual meetings with you and compare notes. Your inconsistency in pricing will be exposed and you will lose credibility. Neither client will then hire you to plan her wedding.

When discussing the fees you charge with potential clients, you must always be consistent in your pricing structures despite what you believe a client can afford. If you prefer a more flexible price structure then set your fees as a percentage of the overall wedding budget. This will allow for consistent application and addresses the fact that a \$90,000 wedding is likely to be more labor intensive than a \$25,000 wedding. Do not randomly mention fees based on appearances. You will seem disorganized, especially if you're unable to remember the amount you originally quoted later on. The fee structure you utilize should not have any ambiguity whatsoever. David Fletcher, an entertainment specialist, offers this 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 truth is that it's much harder to remember a series of lies than it is to engage in honest practices.

Another ethical issue is regarding kickbacks. For example, a wedding planner, Chris, always takes his clients to meet the same florist, despite the couple's floral vision. It makes no difference if a couple wants contemporary, romantic, English garden, Asian-influenced, or herb-inspired wedding flowers, Chris will take them to "Laney's Florist" because Chris and Laney are good friends and Laney will give Chris a certain percentage of the total order placed by any client he brings. This is a practice which does a disservice to both clients and the wedding planning profession. An ethical approach would involve listening to the clients' needs, directing them to a few carefully chosen florists, and letting them make the final decision themselves. If, after doing a lot of business with a particular vendor and he/she decides to give you a discount, it is only fair to pass this on to your clients. After all, the couple has hired you in the hope that, through your contacts and expertise, you will be able to save them some money. This would be the perfect opportunity to show clients what a great investment it was for them to hire you as a consultant.

Some consultants go as far as asking vendors what kind of deals they will cut. A consultant, for example, might approach a caterer and say, "I'll refer you to my bride. How much will you pay me to do that?" Using kickbacks has created a huge divide in the wedding profession between planners who do and planners who don't engage in this practice. Most consultants and vendors will avoid kickbacks for 3 main reasons. Firstly, a consultant's vendor recommendations are based on who will kick back the most and has nothing to do with what will ultimately be best for the couple. Secondly, vendors will up the price in order to cover the kickback amount and this will cause an artificial inflation of the price of goods and services. Thirdly, regardless of the amount of money, kickbacks always encourage consultants and vendors to develop dishonest relationships with their clients.

Ethics also relate to any private information your clients share with you. Working with a couple on their upcoming wedding will make you privy to all kinds of information about the bride, the groom, and their families. You have a responsibility to treat all information with the utmost discretion. What you are told in confidence should remain only between you and your client. Imagine the consequences if comments such as "I'm not really crazy about my new mother-in-law," "Keep Uncle Bob away from the booze," or "I just hope my boss doesn't speak to any other guests at the wedding" became public. As the pressure for the wedding begins to build, the couple and other family members may let off steam by telling you how they feel. A good wedding consultant will listen with empathy and keep clients' secrets forever.

Sometimes at the reception guests might come over to you and strike up a conversation. It usually starts with an innocent compliment about the wedding. It might continue and they might slyly ask you how much your clients have spent on certain items. The conversation might perhaps go something like this:

Guest: This dessert was a great idea. I've never seen such an extravagant chocolate fountain before. And the flowers - magnificent. The Smith family have really outdone themselves with this reception tonight. How much do you reckon an event like this would cost?

Wedding Consultant : I couldn't agree with you more. The décor and the special touches are just 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 clients.

Keeping your clients' secrets is a quality that every consultant/planner must possess. This skill will definitely serve you well.

Finally, a responsible consultant will think of those in the community and make a point to give back when possible. For example, any floral arrangements that clients don't want and are not taken by the guests could be delivered to the local hospital to bring cheer to those in need. Small gestures like this will make the world a better place and you a better wedding consultant.

Stress Management and Career Enrichment

Despite not being as stressful as an air traffic controller, wedding consulting is really not for the faint hearted. It is stressful with demanding clients and indeed little margin for error. To be successful, a top wedding planner should be a diplomat, a counselor, a cheerleader, a good negotiator, and a sponge. Sponge? Yes, you read right. As a consultant or planner, you have to be part sponge because you are the one who will have to absorb the wedding stress and pressure and take it off the couple. It is the

planner's job to stress over all the details so that the couple can actually enjoy their wedding day. If, for example, the officiant has a cold, the cake hasn't arrived, or the maid of honor is missing, it is you, the planner, who must worry while the bride and groom are blissfully unaware of these potential disasters.

In this section we will discuss some stress management tips that will help you stay calm and energised. We will also discuss career enrichment techniques. They will be highlighted and designed to keep you feeling fresh and to keep you moving forward.

Stress Management Tips

Wedding consultants will often be in pressure packed situations and because of this reality they have to learn to manage stress effectively. Imagine what stress would occur during an upscale wedding reception if two tables of guests demand to be moved complaining that the band is too loud. A consultant who is easily flustered might fly off the handle. He/she might tell these guests to sit there and deal with it. This type of flippant response will likely anger the guests and perhaps even encourage them to take matters into their own hands. Having anarchy among the wedding guests is something to be avoided. A planner who is calm and composed will leap into action and resolve the issue with the least amount of disruption possible to both the couple and the guests. Issues will often arise at weddings but if you stay calm and are able to think on your feet, you'll be able to handle anything that comes your way. A planner's job is to deflect wedding stress from the couple, but who will help you manage your daily pressures? As an independent consultant, you must recognise the stressful nature of your job and take all appropriate steps to reduce this stress in your life.

One way to reduce anxiety is to know all the details of a wedding inside out. The more aware you are with all the details, the less stressed and nervous you will be. Ask yourself if you have confirmed with all the vendors. Do you have copies of all the contracts? Have you completed the seating arrangements? Have you considered event security? Have you got a Plan B in the case of unexpected weather? Have you checked with the couple to see if there have been any last-minute changes? If you carefully plan your work and effectively work your plan by organising and confirming every element prior to the wedding, your stress levels will be lessened and you will feel more confident that everything is well under control.

An approach which is well-structured will allow you to concentrate on the execution instead of being overwhelmed by any issue that might have been neglected. This does not mean that unexpected emergencies won't come up, but knowing that all the essentials have been covered will allow you flexibility to hand some responsibilities over to assistants if you have to troubleshoot. Another way to reduce stress is to recommend vendors that you know you can trust based on successful past experiences. These vendors must have a reputation for excellent service, stellar professionalism, and of course, punctuality. Every vendor recommendation will reflect back on you and your business. You will feel calm when you know with absolute certainty that a recommended vendor will be the perfect fit for a couple and can be trusted to come through on the wedding day. Will your recommended florist drive through snowstorms to deliver the flowers to a wedding? Will your caterer go to the trouble of finding authentic sake cups for your Japanese clients? Will the tent company you use search everywhere to find the exact shade of green that the clients require for their tent liners? After you've worked on and plan more weddings, you will get to know which vendors are trustworthy and dependable. Surround yourself

with a team of reliable, dedicated, and knowledgeable professionals. This will reduce your stress levels enormously and your job will be easier.

Even if you have done months of careful planning using top vendors, you cannot completely escape the day-of wedding stress. It makes no difference how long you've been in business or how many weddings you've worked on, most consultants/planners feel some degree of stress on each client's wedding day. It is natural. In your heart, however, you must know that you've done everything to prepare for the wedding and that everything will go smoothly. Still, make sure you learn and apply stress management skills as mentioned earlier. Perkins (2003) gives a series of valuable stress busters which are adapted to specifically apply to wedding planners. Please see Table 9.3 below.

Stressful situations of all kinds occur daily but it is the way you handle them that often determines how out of control they become. Do not make mountains out of molehills. For example, you are checking on preparations for a reception at 6:00 P.M. You walk into the ballroom of a fancy, downtown hotel to see the DJ has set up his equipment where the couple's buffet table should be. By making sure you are prepared and by catching this mistake early enough, you can fix the situation quickly and make use of your sense of humor. Instead of making a disparaging comment, you could joke with the DJ that he is supposed to improve the dining experience, not be the dining experience.

By working on some stress busterteachniques each day, you will reduce your need to snap at vendors and clients. Remember that the bride and groom will watch you. If you are stressed, they will also be stressed, but if you project a sense of calm, the couple will see and feel this and they will be able to relax. Every wedding consultant has his/her different ways of reducing stress. There is no one-size fits all regarding relaxation strategies.

One consultant, gets up at 5:00 A.M. and has a power walk no matter what the weather. Another consultant takes the time each week to get a pedicure. She gets a kick out of getting her toes painted in funky styles and colors and she uses this as a conversation starter during her events. Again another planner refinishes furniture from garage sales as stress reduction. Whatever interest or hobby you enjoy, pursue it. It will make you a much happier person.

Table 9.3

Wedding Consultant Stress Busters

- Learn to say no. Building a business from scratch is challenging. While establishing your own business, do not be afraid to say no to requests like babysitting for your friend, helping a relative research the family tree, or rewrite the bylaws for your local volunteer organisation. Give yourself permission to say no to requests that do not further your new business, especially during the busiest times.
- Do not overdo it. If you require eight hours of sleep to function at your best, do not pull a series of all nighters just before your first wedding. No-one will thank you for it. It is your ability to think on your feet and manage the wedding that counts. If you are operating at half-speed, your business and clients will suffer.

- Take breaks. If you work from home, do not chain yourself to the computer or phone for 12 hours straight. Take breaks. Go to the gym or listen to some music. This way you will return to work feeling fresh and with a clearer perspective.
- Pace yourself. Break your tasks down into better manageable steps. Make sure you give yourself enough time to meet deadlines. If you have a big task such as assigning the seating for 300 people, break the job down into three or four smaller steps. This way you will not be so overwhelmed.
- Plan ahead to rest. Schedule resting periods after certain events you know will drain you. Do not schedule a meeting with a potential client the morning after a big wedding. Allow yourself the time to catch your breath.
- Give yourself time for a relaxing bath without interruptions. Do not answer the phone. Fill the tub, light a candle, and relax while reading a magazine or the latest book by your favorite author.
- Listen to music. Music is an excellent way to cut through the tedium and stress of day-to-day details. Listening to your favorite music can help you relax and get you in a good mood.
- Get out more. Break up your day by scheduling a site visit to meet with a vendor who is located at or near the beach, a lake, the zoo, or a park. After the meeting you could stroll around and have a quiet moment for yourself.
- Take part in activities which are meaningful to you. Many new wedding consultants say that they don't have a life, since they always work on weekends. Find an activity or club that organizes gatherings during the week or plan an evening get-together with friends for dinner and a movie. Don't let your business take this away from you. You will need to keep as much fun and joy in your life as possible.
- Eat a healthy, balanced diet. Planners running on caffeine and sugar will be edgy and lack the stamina needed for day-of execution.
- Develop insight. Yoga, deep breathing, meditation, and prayer are ways to connect with what is meaningful for you. Engage in activities that are the most soothing to you.
- Exercise. This provides stress release and also burns calories.
- Vent. If you feel excited or angry about something, talk it over with a family member or close friend, or perhaps another trusted consultant. It will help you feel better.
- Take a nap. If time permits, have a 20-minute power nap. It will revive you and help calm your nerves for the tasks ahead.
- Retain your sense of humor. Take the time to laugh. Humor is good for the spirit. Every wedding will have its ridiculous moments. If you can see humor in the craziness, you are well on your way to successfully managing the situation.

Career Enrichment

As well as managing your stress levels, as a wedding planner you should seek opportunities to enrich your career. Don't wait until you become bored with managing the same type of wedding again and again. Sign up for a calligraphy class or floral design class and learn something new. Perhaps attend a seminar by a leading catering expert. By attending classes and workshops, planners from around the globe can learn about new products and ideas and start incorporating them into the weddings they plan. You really don't want to hear a guest at a wedding say, "This must have been planned by (insert your company name). They always use tuxedo strawberries arranged around the cake." Clients must never think that their wedding will be exactly the same as the last six or seven weddings you planned. Clients always want something individual, different and new. The ability to offer and display the unexpected will keep you in demand.

Another way to enhance your wedding planning career is with travel. There has been an explosion of multicultural couples and it is especially helpful to clients if you have travelled and experienced different cultures. If you've been to Asia and travelled extensively, you will be better informed and able to plan a wedding for a Korean bride and a Japanese groom. You can also read about Asian customs and solicit advice, but there's nothing like experiencing things for yourself as this opens your eyes and gives you cultural insight.

Career Shift

Once you have become a successful, independent wedding consultant, you may find you become tired of the business. You may begin dreaming of a day when you don't have to get up and leave the house at the crack of dawn or go off to work on a beautiful Saturday afternoon. Remember this however: your career as an independent wedding consultant/planner has advantages. You get to accept as many or as few jobs as your time and budget will allow. Perhaps you want to take August off and just relax. You can do this. You control your schedule. It can be tiring planning perfect weddings week after week. Experienced planners often move their businesses in different directions, perhaps with less stress and also more manageable hours. This would be referred to as a **Career Shift**. When you first start out in the wedding planning business, you may think that the only thing you want to do is this for the rest of your life. The good news is that you can. Alternatively, you might decide to take your business in a different direction.

Many consultants keep their planning businesses while exploring other opportunities. These are often related to the wedding business. Laura Weatherly, a top Washington, DC planner/consultant, is also writing mystery novels as well as planning weddings. Her debut novel was *Better off Wed* and there is also a sequel titled *For Better or Hearse*. They are exciting whodunit novels and the main character is a super sleuth wedding planner. The victims are a horrid mother-of-the-bride and a snooty hotel chef. Another consultant, Wendy Joblon from Massachusetts, is a sought-after professional who has also opened her own stationery and invitation boutique, and her clients couldn't be happier. Yet another wedding planner, Joyce Scardina Becker, teaches a wedding consultant certificate program at California State University—Hayward as well as running her wedding planning business.

Celebrity wedding consultants do the same. Colin Cowie, for example, has written books on wedding and entertainment and also has a home décor line with JCPenney. Preston Bailey has written several books and has now partnered with Sandals Resorts to create his signature WeddingMoons, and Sharon Sacks has her own clothing line, leather goods, and makeup (Muhlke, 2005).

Whether you plan three weddings per year or you have a team that plans three hundred a year, a career as an wedding planner/consultant is rewarding, meaningful, and challenging. You have the privilege of working with people as they prepare for one of the most important events of their lives. It is your hard work that makes their wedding day special and provides memories of their commitment. Couples can enjoy their special day without the stress.

Whether you strive for a career in wedding planning or you long for your own perfect wedding, our sincere hope is that this course has inspired you to think about the cultural significance of weddings and the particulars of the wedding profession. It is an exciting time for wedding planners/consultants. There are popular trends such as destination weddings, changing families, many more multicultural traditions, and the legalisation of same-sex unions. All of these broaden the scope and the visibility of this particular career. Now, perhaps more than ever, the wedding profession needs consultants who respect and understand today's diverse clientele and can transform their needs into remarkable weddings.

Further Reading:

- ✓ *How to Start a Wedding Planning Business, (2005), By Sherrie Wilkolaski*
- ✓ *How to Start a Home-Based Wedding Planning Business, (2009), By Jill S. Moran*