

## The Planner

## 'Big Day,' big plans, big help

If the devil's in the details, a coordinator can be your guardian angel

By Jean Scheidnes

AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

A wedding coordinator was once a luxury reserved for big-budget weddings. But the demands on today's nuptials make coordinators almost a necessity.

No longer are couples content to have guests shuffle into the social hall of their house of worship for punch, followed by baked chicken and the bunny hop. Many weddings have become stylish, personalized, multicultural, all-weekend extravaganzas held in special locations that require endless logistical consideration.

"The great news is there are infinite options now. The downside is it's really overwhelming," says Austin wedding planner Denise Walpole.

Couples are under pressure — fueled by one-upmanship in their private circles and intensified by media attention to lavish celebrity weddings — not to have the biggest or most costly wedding, necessarily, but to have the most original wedding, with the most creative ideas, the most charming personal touches (everywhere) and the most seamless execution. They hope to give everyone memories to forever associate with that and only that couple.

Those are just the style concerns. There are social trends at work too.

"More than half the guest list comes from out of town now, so it's becoming a family reunion," creating the need to plan activities for a whole weekend, says wedding expert Carley Roney, founder of theknot.com.

On average, couples are marrying later in life, combining incomes, so their budgets are bigger, and their tastes more sophisticated. But women with careers have little time to plan weddings. (Wedding planning largely remains women's work.)

In addition, brides are sensitive about being perceived as demanding, Roney says. Call it Bridezilla backlash. If you plan on being demanding, a wedding coordinator is the perfect foil.



Deborah Lykins AMERICAN-STATESMAN

Amber Walter, left, is planning Maria Bergh's May wedding at Laguna Gloria. "I've been able to enjoy this process so much more than if I were laying awake at night, thinking about napkins," Bergh says.

Essentially, this person helps to choose and make deals with vendors in your price range — including caterer, florist, photographer, etc. — creates a wedding day itinerary, mediates between key individuals such as bride and mom, and serves as wedding day troubleshooter.

"Many people enjoy having someone who can provide the organization and frankly, the calm demeanor that are needed to plan a wedding. Emotions are riding so high," says Rosanna McCollough, editor in chief of WeddingChannel.com.

Austinite Maria Bergh has Amber Walter of Clink Wedding Consulting planning her May nuptials at Laguna Gloria.

"We have to set up tents and lighting... I'm so glad I don't have to deal with it," says Bergh. "I know some people really enjoy all those details, but I'd rather be part of the 'big picture' planning and of course, the final approval. I've been able to enjoy this process so much more than if I were laying awake at night, thinking about napkins."

Some newlyweds who've used planners say that final approval is important. One recent bride regretted not communicating

more clearly with her planner, and was thus disappointed with her wedding photos.

Wedding planners can also be somewhat expensive, especially for cash-strapped couples who are already cutting back on the wedding of their dreams. However, there is a popular option known as "day of" coordination, in which a person is brought in after vendors have been hired and decisions made, to take the reins and ensure that the big day goes as planned.

They need a month or two to contact the vendors, confirm the deals and timelines and create an itinerary for the big day.

"It takes the coordinator time to get up to speed, but for the girl who can't stand the thought of giving full credit to a wedding coordinator, it's the perfect solution," Roney says.

It also shields the bride and groom from being bothered with any logistical questions on the big day, and relieves them and their families of having to herd guests, cue the band, or anything else that might require bossiness.

Coordinators usually charge a flat fee for a set package of services, and sometimes, additional hourly fees. Experts do not

recommend paying by a percentage of the final budget, because it gives the planner an incentive to inflate costs when it should be his or her duty to keep the wedding under budget.

Some coordinators may get kickbacks from vendors, but members of Austin Wedding & Event Coordinators, a local professional society, sign a code of ethics that forbids this.

Roney says to make sure your coordinator belongs to such an organization and has professional training. Before you hire someone, planners should show you other weddings they have coordinated, right down to the timelines and budgets. Talk to past clients as well as vendors who have worked with the planner. Any time you talk to your coordinator, follow up with e-mail so there is a paper trail. And do not hire someone who doesn't use e-mail, she says.

"Ultimately it comes down to personality," she adds. Is it someone you like and trust? Does this person understand your taste and priorities?

Bergh went the full-service route. She wanted a pro in her corner who does a high volume of business with vendors, and is therefore in a position to negotiate discounts or take a hard line if they fail to satisfy. Bergh says she saved a bundle on linens because her planner knew about an unadvertised, one-weekend-only, special offer.

"That saved me tons of money," she says.

Bergh is getting Clink's second most comprehensive package, plus options from their top package, for about \$3,200.

"I've made it back in discounts and in time. It's been worth every single penny."

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