

# BUSINESS & CAREER



## Planning a Stress Free Wedding

by Nicole Dun

Many people may dream of the perfect wedding but turning it into reality can be a taxing job. So more and more Hong Kong couples are now turning to the experts – wedding planners – to help make sure their big day goes without a hitch.

A wedding is a joyous moment, but wedding planning is a painstaking process. If couples have to go through every detail of the plans themselves, arguments are bound to ensue.

When 30-year-old Beardsley Kwong Wai-kuen and his now wife Kiwi Kwok Nam-chi decided to get married in November this year, they did not hesitate to book a venue that provided wedding planning services.

Mr Kwong said there were many things to handle in planning a wedding. He and Kiwi had to decide everything from the songs to be played to the games they should include at their wedding dinner. Overwhelmed by the decision-making process, the couple sometimes found it hard to reach a consensus.

Take the music for the wedding dinner for instance – Mr Kwong said he and Kiwi found it hard to figure out what would be suitable, “we are not professionals,” he said. To his surprise, things were settled quite easily when they met the wedding planner and his bride-to-be was convinced by the “professional”. They finally decided to let the wedding planner pick the music for them. “We didn’t have to plan everything ourselves with the wedding planner.”

Music and games can be planned ahead, but not everything in a wedding is predictable. Couples may have to deal with unexpected situations.

“We need to have someone to handle any emergency,” said Mr Kwong. He believes the professionals could handle things properly, which could help make his wedding smoother. “I will just marry once in my life, I want to make it perfect...It’s worth spending money in exchange for a better memory.”

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A wedding cake can suddenly collapse, an ex-girlfriend may suddenly show up, even the wedding video might get mixed up. The unexpected can sometimes be quite embarrassing. A good wedding master of ceremonies (MC) can turn around an embarrassing situation with just a few words.

For instance, a hundred guests are watching a big screen in the banquet hall when the wedding video of the couple next door plays. What should the MC do?

“Wow, it’s a very happy day indeed. You see, even the couple in the next banquet hall have come to celebrate with us,” said Tim Lau Chi-yan, a



wedding MC and wedding planner of Wedding Unique.

Mr Lau, who has five years' experience and has hosted more than 400 weddings, stopped the video seamlessly and got the correct one back.

"Being a wedding MC or wedding planner, you have to act and decide quickly when dealing with contingencies," said Mr Lau, "The key to handling an awkward situation is to divert guests' attention with a joke."

As a veteran in the field, Mr Lau knows very well that guests sitting at the same table may not be familiar with one another. He incorporates ice-breaking games which university students used to play at their orientation camps into wedding dinners to create a harmonious atmosphere.

The checkpoint game is one of them. Different tables are given a street name, when the MC calls the street name, the guests at that table would

have to do a simple task together with the couples, like drinking beer or doing the same movement.

Mr Lam said he is trying to change a formal dinner into a fun evening party. "Hong Kong people are not used to making conversation with strangers. These games give them a chance to interact and start to get to know each other," he added.

Innovative games are only one of the tactics to lighten up a party. Mr Lau also draws on topical issues to create atmosphere. He once organised a wedding dinner for a couple who married on their tenth anniversary of being together. Mr Lau kicked off proceedings by asking, "How many decades are there in one's life?"

The meaning is that life is short and people should treasure their loved ones. It is a catchphrase from a popular TV drama – *Rosy Business*. The line was even used by casino tycoon,

Stanley Ho Hung-sun at the Global Gaming Expo Asia and as soon as Mr Lau uttered the words, the hall burst into warm applause.

A quick-witted MC would definitely make a wedding dinner more enjoyable for guests and the bride and groom. But couples nowadays do not just want a smooth and joyful wedding, they want a unique one, custom-designed to reflect their character and love story.

Mr Lau recalled a couple whose romance began when the man gave a *gashapon* toy – a small toy in a plastic capsule that can be purchased from vending machines – to the woman every day.

"We chose capsule toys to tell their love story," Mr Lau said. A little note bearing the love story of the couple and a key ring was put inside each capsule. Guests could get their toy by twisting the button of the vending machines at the entrance.

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Tim Lau Chi-yan (front) thinks the key to handling an awkward situation in a wedding is to be humorous.



COURTESY OF MONICA TAM HOI-YAN

Monica Tam Hoi-yan (left) says more couples approach wedding planners to spend wisely on each part of wedding.



We can expect to see more creative ideas from wedding planners now that couples can be creative not only with wedding favours for their guests, but also with the theme and venue of their wedding.

**"This change prompts couples to create innovative and unique weddings."**

"2006 was a turning point due to the change of the Marriage Ordinance," said Monica Tam Hoi-yan, chief wedding planner of the Hong Kong Professional Wedding Planning Association. Before the changes, marriages could only be celebrated in the office of the Registrar of Marriages. "The whole process lasted just 15 minutes, so there was no novelty in weddings," she added.

The amendment of the Marriage Ordinance in 2006 allows weddings to be solemnised by civil celebrants. Therefore, couples can celebrate their weddings anytime and anywhere. They

can get married on the beach, and even at a chicken stall. "This change prompts couples to create innovative and unique weddings," said Miss Tam.

Some couples want to become Hollywood stars at their weddings. Instead of using traditional slideshows to tell their story, some couples now make short videos acting out how they fell in love. "Some even dressed in student uniforms and acted how they met each other, just like a little film," Miss Tam added.

Their relatives and friends sign not on a cloth placed on a table but a big board resembling the one at the Oscars, placed at the entrance to the wedding banquet. The guests can also pretend they are celebrities. "They pose in front of the board and feel like they are stars," Miss Tam said, laughing.

To organise a bespoke wedding is no easy task and demand is growing for wedding planning services. The industry as a whole has not suffered much from the financial tsunami last year. "Couples want to spend carefully, so their budget may be less than usual. However, more couples approach us to spend wisely on each part of wedding,"

said Miss Tam. Their revenue remains more or less the same as before the economic downturn.

According to Miss Tam, couples spend on average \$200,000 on a wedding, half of which goes towards the wedding dinner. A wedding planner usually charges 10 per cent to 15 per cent of the total sum. So a wedding planner can get \$20,000 to \$30,000 for organising a wedding.

Given the optimistic prospects and attractive income, more and more people, especially young people are entering the industry. Unlike the UK and the U.S., Hong Kong does not have any recognised qualification for wedding planning, but some private certificate or diploma courses are taught by veteran wedding planners.

Veteran wedding planner, Tim Lau Chi-yan who earns up to \$40,000 a month during the high season, started teaching wedding planning courses this year at the Lingnan Institute of Further Education and the School of Continuing and Professional Education in City University of Hong Kong. These lessons are also elective courses in Project Yi Jin.

Lau Sin-kwan, a 20-year-old wedding planning student, is not concerned about whether her certificate will be recognised. She is optimistic about the future of the wedding planning industry. She believes Hong Kong people want to get things done quickly so prefer to hire wedding planners rather than do it themselves.

She plans to gain experience by organising weddings for her relatives and friends after she finishes the one-year course. "With more experience, I will work in big wedding planning companies. After that, I will start my own company," said Miss Lau hopefully. ▣



COURTESY OF BEARDSLEY KWONG WAI-KUEN

Beardsley Kwong Wai-kuen (right) thinks a wedding planner can help make his wedding go more smoothly.



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Mr Lau started teaching wedding planning courses this year, most of his students are young people at their early twenties.