

setting your budget

Once you've prioritized the big decisions, the smaller ones will fall into place. Here, ways to get you started.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN PLANNING all the details of your dream wedding, you need to figure out how you'll pay for it. A budget can help you have the event you want without spending your life savings or going into debt. More than just dollar signs and numbers, a budget is your road map for setting goals, negotiating with vendors, and keeping financial worries at bay before, during, and after the event. Sticking with your budget means starting with one that's realistic.

Where do we begin?

Talk with your fiancé about the big picture, says psychologist Dale Atkins, coauthor of *Wedding Sanity Savers* (Broadway Books, 2005). Discuss what kind of wedding each of you has in mind, how much you think you can spend, how paying for this event might affect other plans, such as buying a house or starting a family, and whether your families will help out. "Describe your fantasy wedding," she says. "Then talk about what is really possible."

How much will it cost?

On average, couples spend more than \$25,000 on their wedding. Of course, the bill—as well as the breakdown of each expense—will vary greatly depending on where and when you marry, how many people you invite, and your individual choices. Many expenses, such as location and cater-

ing, are directly influenced by the number of guests, says Barbara Steinmetz, a financial planner in Burlingame, California. So have an idea of your guest list before anything else.

Figure out what things cost in the area where you're having your wedding by talking to other brides. If you

hire a wedding planner, she can give you a good range. Or you might call a few vendors directly to get estimates of their fees. Some—such as reception halls—have set prices; caterers may provide a range; and photographers may have a fee for the day and a separate price list for prints.

How much will we be able to spend?

Even if you're picking up most of the tab, speak with your families first, says Alan Fields, coauthor of *Bridal Bargains* (Windsor Peak Press, 2005). If they want to pitch in, find out how much. "They may give you \$10,000 to use as you wish, or they may want to pay for specific things," says Fields.

Meanwhile, start saving. Though their parents were paying for most of their February 2005 wedding, Weslie Hamada and Gavin Nakamura began

setting aside \$1,000 a month to cover deposits and the photographer's fee.

Avoid using credit cards to finance the wedding. No couple wants to begin their life together in debt; besides, there are countless ways to trim costs and still have a wonderful event. If you must use credit, search for a card with a low rate, or if you own a home, consider a home equity loan or line of credit. Then do your best to pay back any amount you borrow within a year.

How should we divide the pot?

What you pay for the various details of your wedding will depend on what vendors you select and what's most important to the two of you. When setting your budget, it can be helpful to start with the following basic breakdown. About half the budget typically goes toward the reception—the location, catering (including the cake), and bar service—the rest gets divided pretty evenly among the couple's attire, flowers and decorations, photography, stationery and favors, music, and other details. If you know right away that your location will consume more or less of your budget, adjust these percentages accordingly.

When Christie Edwards and fiancé Brian Emrich found out that the reception site for their August 2005 wedding in Oregon would cost \$1,500 more than they had initially budgeted for, they decided to substitute inexpensive bowls of lemons for traditional centerpieces. "I've been to so many weddings and don't remember the centerpieces," she says. "So it was the right choice for us."

While you will undoubtedly end up spending more than you planned in certain areas, at some point you will run out of wiggle room. "Make vendors understand what you can spend, and don't feel pressured to decide on the spot," says Atkins. Shop around, and talk to the vendors you like about how you can get the effect you want and stay within your price range. As you begin to fill in your budget with the specifics, try to account for every possible expense, including tips and taxes, to avoid surprises later.

for a wedding is like buying a house: what you think you can afford; next you go to the hardware shop to see what things really cost, then adjust the budget and look at what's within reach."

Susan Cordogan, founder, Big City Bride, a wedding-planning service in Chicago

How soon will we have to start spending?

As soon as you commit to a vendor, expect to pay anywhere from 25 to 50 percent of the total fee as a deposit, though everyone is different. "My rule is never give anyone more than 50 percent up front," says Susan Cordogan, founder of Big City Bride, a wedding-planning company in Chicago. The balance is typically due the week of the wedding. Make sure the contract details what services will be rendered

and for how much, as well as the cancellation policy. "Typically, vendors will refund all of your deposit if they can rebook for that date. If they can't rebook or have already put work into your event, they will generally keep the deposit," says Cordogan.

Remember, you may still have bills to pay after the wedding is over and the last guest has gone home. Just after the event, expect to square away things

like tips, the bar tab, or extra money for the band or DJ if they played an extended music set. Later, you might pay to obtain proofs and an album from your photographer, or to have your wedding dress dry-cleaned and packaged for storing. By including these items in your budget from the very beginning, you won't still be paying off your wedding expenses well past your first anniversary.