

Getting hitched minus the fuss

Roaring business for wedding planners as couples seek professional help for their big day

➔ **A SACRED** union or a headache from hell? For many couples, planning a wedding tops the list as one of the most momentous tasks organised in one's lifetime. In a time and age where every action can be outsourced to a professional, more women are leaving the planning of their big day to those who know better in order to focus on being the blushing bride of the day.

Wedding planning is quick becoming a new subdivision of the already burgeoning domestic wedding industry. Wedding planners are a new breed of professional entrepreneurs who deal with the whim demands of brides, affectionately known to the public as bridezillas.

The numbers do add up for such demand of wedding planners. About 200,000 marriages take place every year in Malaysia according to government statistics. Generally, a couple spends an average of RM30,000 to RM40,000 for their wedding.

Though it is not compulsory for couples to engage a wedding planner, one in five wedding couples in Malaysia engage the services of these professionals, according to the Association of Wedding Professionals (AWP) president Leticia Hsu. The need stems from young brides-to-be juggling a career while trying to plan the wedding of their dreams. A lack of time often drives them to engage wedding planners for help.

"You cannot be the bride in a gown and check on the flower arrangements or make sure the band has turned up. You could be lucky enough to have family or friends to do so but the real worth of wedding planners is to have us worry about everything else while you enjoy your big day," explains Hsu.

A wedding planner typically manages two to three weddings a month while some could manage up to six weddings a month, and up to two weddings a day.

Most weddings take place over the weekends, hence hotels, photographers, makeup artists and planners are easily snapped up for auspicious dates. "Many wedding planners are usually booked from September to December and many couples avoid getting married at the beginning of the year," adds Hsu.

She recommends couples to plan a year in advance in order to secure wedding planners at the most competitive price.

Elusive characters and price wars

However, the industry is currently plagued by fly-by-night planners who do not deliver their promises or undercut existing players by offering lower prices. "There are many planners out there who are secretaries by day and wedding planners by night," explains Hsu. These young planners are usually brides who planned their own weddings and feel they are capable of doing the same for others.

However, most of them do not last long. There are many reports of wedding planners failing to provide satisfactory



by BEHONCE BEH

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FABULOUS CHAPTER

About 200,000 marriages take place every year in Malaysia according to government statistics

services or even making off with the deposit paid, leaving wedding couples in a quandary.

The latest such fiasco that made news was the marriage of a Penang couple whose wedding luncheon in November last year turned sour when their guests were served stale food. The family of the bride, Nazurah Romai, plans to sue the wedding planner, who has been in business only since May 2012.

"Many people condemned wedding planners saying we are all unprofessional. It is because of these odd cases the industry got a bad name," clarifies Hsu.

AWP was established to improve the professionalism and credibility of the wedding industry. Its members consist of wedding planners, photographers, bakers, decorators and gown designers, among others.

Through AWP, one of the upcoming challenges faced by Hsu is to introduce a ceiling price for vendors to avoid undercutting by new players.

The more inexperienced planners, she adds, charge less than the industry average. "The newcomers are dropping prices and couples are obviously opting for the cheaper ones."

Having a price floor ensures uniformity in charges and ultimately the level of service provided. That however, can be tough as not all vendors are keen to abide by such regulations.

Separated by colour

Although opportunities abound



BONNIE YAP

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for those in this business, most are comfortable servicing the needs of the respective racial groups in Malaysia.

For Floral Works and Décor Sdn Bhd, whose four-year-old operation serves the wedding needs of the Indian,

Christian and Malay communities, competition is growing by the day. "There are many individual players who work freelance on decorations, which is a big thing for Indian, Christian and Malay weddings," says its director Vikneswaran Vadiveloo.

Floral Works and Décor's operation sits on the thin line between wedding planning and decoration as there is a demand for a one-stop solution for wedding planning.

Although it is not a problem for the company to survive on wedding planning alone, Vikneswaran sees the need to diversify into complimentary services such as decorations. Floral Works and Décor aims to secure RM750,000 sales by the year end.

Such expansion goes in line with many wedding couples' intention to stand out and have an elegant wedding with the minimum amount of money.

"We have had clients arriving by helicopter or by horse carriage to their wedding venue. Many want to show off and have a wedding that everyone will talk about," says Vikneswaran.

He believes Ipoh and Penang are two up-and-coming markets for wedding planners as outstation couples choose to have their wedding at their respective hometowns.

"The success of the business boils down to the portfolio, recommendations and years of experience in this field. You have to have those to gain the client's confidence to choose you." FocusM

Surviving bridezillas, ensuring business longevity

THE survival rate of wedding planners in Malaysia is relatively slim as newcomers rarely last more than two years without the gusto experience.

According to Association of Wedding Professionals (AWP) president Leticia Hsu, there are many ways wedding planners cope with dwindling demand or slow periods of the year.

"One of the main challenges

of the business is marketing as we are dependent on word-of-mouth. Couples will make their decision based on what they see and hear.

"For things to work out it is a matter of the couple interviewing the wedding planners and vice-versa to make sure their taste suits yours."

Patience too goes a long way in this business. "The

younger planners do not last as they may lack the patience to deal with brides. It is important to be organised and make sure everything is in place," she adds.

Floral Works and Décor Sdn Bhd director Vikneswaran Vadiveloo says connections play a major part in ensuring longevity in the business.

He cites certain halls in town

require couples to enlist the services provided by panel vendors if they are keen to have their weddings at such halls. "These halls do not simply take you on to be part of their panel. You need to be known in the industry and certain fees have to be paid."

Although not all halls enforce such ruling, it is important to be in everyone's good books.