

## LESSON 1

### Creating a Wedding-Friendly Culture

#### About brides today

Today's bride is older, more educated and career-oriented than ever before. With an average age of 25, she is more business-savvy and more likely to ask questions than her predecessors. And very often the bride is footing the bill for her own wedding.

Many of today's grooms are also playing an increased active roll in the wedding planning. According to a recent survey of Directors of Catering, there has been a 20% increase in groom inquiries and planning since 2004.

Unlike previous generations, very few parents of the bride take over planning the wedding. While the bride's family often plays an active role in the wedding planning – still paying for the wedding in many cases – the majority of the decisions are the bride's. Most families want their "little girl" to be happy and will still defer decisions to her, so that her wedding will be the day of her dreams.

Those dreams are one thing that has not changed. Chances are that since childhood, today's bride has cherished images of her "perfect" wedding and knows exactly how she wants it to look. This dream, combined with reality television shows that offer hundred thousand dollar weddings as giveaways, can sometimes create an unrealistic expectation that she can afford everything she wants. Often brides will come to you with grandiose ideas but have no clue of the price tag involved. It is your job to help her recover from sticker shock by using your creative and professional talents to assist her to make choices while allowing her to feel like she is still having the day of her dreams, but a day that is within her budget.

#### Creating a Wedding-Friendly Culture

To attract today's brides, the first thing you need to do is establish a wedding-friendly culture. The expression, "you never have a second chance to make a first impression" is never more critical than with a bride. A "wedding-friendly culture" is an environment that caters to the bride's visual senses as well as her emotional need for VIP treatment. Even if she doesn't know she wants to be treated as a VIP, it is your job to treat her as one anyway.

Many brides have had no experience having an event at a hotel, club or other wedding venue. She will be unaware of how complicated a process it is and how many decisions she will have to make. The more gracefully she is guided through the initial introduction, the more successful the relationship will be.

Building business and profits is about building relationships. Your bride is one of the most lucrative business relationships you and your property can possibly have. A wedding brings multiple revenue streams: from the food and beverage revenue for the Banquet and Catering Department to the hotel rooms the bride and her guests occupy during their wedding weekend to restaurant revenue for the guests to possible repeat business. Sometimes Directors of Catering are surprised to learn of new wedding inquiries that were a result of the new brides attending a wedding at their hotel and being so impressed that they wanted their weddings at the same venue. This should be no surprise if those at the wedding venue are doing their job properly.

### **Creating a Wedding-Friendly image for the outside world**

To get a bride in your door, your “wedding-friendly culture” must begin with all images you have *outside* the door. And the image you set forth must be one that romantically (but accurately) portrays your venue. These images should include a wedding-friendly Website (more on how to design this Website later), attracting your potential clients to explore your venue and services, and printed collateral material that is beautiful and romantic. While both your Website and printed collateral should describe your wedding packages, it is not recommended you list your pricing in either place. Pricing often changes and it is not economically practical to have to re-print or re-design every time there is a price change. But an even more important reason for not listing pricing is that you want to give the bride a reason to contact you so you can entice her to come into your world and have the opportunity to sell her the dream.

Any advertising or publicity you do should project this same romantic and inviting image of your property. And every phone contact should be welcoming and inviting, from the way the staff answers the phone to your “on-hold” message to your voicemail message. The goal of every interaction you have with the outside world is to get the bride to walk through your door.

### **Creating a Wedding-Friendly image when they enter your property**

#### **In-House: The “Front Line” Staff**

Whether the potential bride is a “walk in” with no notice that she is coming or a pre-set appointment, your entire front line staff need to be on board with customer service. Front line staff includes bell captains, parking attendants, concierge, gift shop, restaurant maitre d’ and front desk/reservation staff. These are all the first people a bride will encounter on her visit to your property. It is paramount that they are not only customer service oriented, but they are also aware of how to be appealing to the bride.

You can accomplish this by setting up a training session in conjunction with your General Manager for all of the front line personnel to ensure everyone knows how the property does weddings – at least on a basic level. No one expects a bell captain or concierge to be able to sell weddings like the sales staff. However, a wedding venue that wants to be a cut-above the competition will ensure that all related staff has some basic working

knowledge of why your property is unique for weddings. Front line staff should have the following working knowledge:

- Where ceremonies are held
- Where receptions can be held
- What honeymoon suite(s) is/are like
- The unique aspects of your property (i.e. ocean /mountain/lake views, historical landmark, spa services)
- Front line staff should be invited to a tasting of an average (above average is even better) wedding reception menu provided by your Executive Chef. That way staff can taste the cuisine you offer and will be able to truthfully recommend the quality and presentation of catering at your property.
- If possible and if appropriate, front line staff should be allowed to preview a pre-set wedding ceremony or reception before it starts so they can see the diversity and possibilities of set up and décor at your venue. This will allow them to point out to potential clients on the many options and beautiful possibilities if the client holds the wedding there.
- Finally, your wedding packets (the packets which promote your wedding packages and pricing) should be in a central location such as the concierge desk or front desk, and every front line staff person must be aware of where this location is. This will insure that in your absence no potential client ever leaves without being given information while on site. Always make sure these packets are kept well stocked.

However, front line staff should never quote pricing or check dates for potential clients. That can only spell disaster. You are in your position to manage events, and it is critical that only you or your staff provide this information.

In addition to the training and tasting, it can be a good business move to offer some sort of incentive to the front line staff for their assistance in promoting your department. From monetary bonuses to coupons for complimentary coffee or baked goods at your local coffee shop to a free dinner at your restaurant (subject to your General Manager's approval), think of ways you can thank your front line team. Building business is about building relationships, and you should start with your in-house staff first to create the foundation to expand your outside business and revenue streams.

### **In-house: The Meeting Area, Setting the Mood**

Once your potential client is in the door, the setting in which you meet with her is critical to your success. No matter what your sales desk looks like, always ensure the area in which you meet clients is clutter-free and conveys an image of serenity and romance. Remember, your bride is most likely a career woman and offering her an area she can relax in during her appointment or planning sessions with you allows her to feel she is being pampered. By treating her this well up front, she is more likely to see you as someone capable of handling her special day, and she will trust you. Trust usually brings

more sales because she will feel you care for *her* as a person and want her event to be a success.

Here are some ideas for establishing a wedding-friendly meeting area to set the mood:

- Walls painted in neutral colors
- Plants – or even a fountain- to create serenity
- Your wedding portfolio(s) nearby for her to look at (more on how to create your wedding portfolio later)
- Current wedding magazines on display
- Fresh floral arrangement(s) in or around the room (Note: many local florists are eager to establish a relationship your venue and may donate a floral arrangement each week in exchange making their business cards available and sending them referrals.)
- If you have the space, displaying a sample place setting which is truly luxurious featuring elegant linens, china, crystal, placecards, etc.

This meeting room should be separate from heavy traffic areas and, if at all possible, completely away from your sales office and department working area. You don't want your client to overhear other negotiations going on or, even worse, crises that you or your staff are trying to handle. If you do not have a private client-only meeting area and cannot get one funded at this time, see if you can arrange for a portion of your lobby to be used for meetings with clients.

Some Directors of Catering have made lobby meeting space work for them as a sales tool by leaving their Wedding Portfolio as well as Wedding Packet and business cards next to a beautiful floral arrangement all the time. This encourages guests who might not even be thinking of their venue for weddings to consider the possibility because of the enticing photos and presentation.

### **In-house: Special treatment for your potential clients**

No matter where you meet, your potential client and her fiancé and those accompanying her should always be offered a refreshment. It can be simply water or tea, but if you want to make it memorable and special, having one of your staff offer a tray of pre-poured champagne flutes with sparkling cider can create a great impression. If your budget allows, it is also nice to offer some fresh snacks or homemade cookies during the initial meeting with the bride. When you serve the food, you can also say something like, "Our Chef sent these for your meeting with his/her compliments." This personal touch will make your clients feel like VIPs.

### **In-house: Follow up**

Creating a "wedding-friendly culture" does not stop with the first in-person visit. The follow up is important to keep the bride feeling and remembering that you care about her and her wedding needs. How you handle your post-appointment follow ups as well as

your day-to-day business in your office also dictates how wedding-friendly you and your venue truly are.

Sometimes brides will ask for specific information, like group guest rates or special arrangements, that either cannot be given on the spot or needs time to prepare. It is important to get them this information promptly, and this gives you even more reason to continue following up with them. When brides make these sorts of inquiries, you can also offer them right of first refusal on the date they have chosen for one week while they go over the information you will be providing them. This is clearly a hold, but one with a short deadline that can create a sense of urgency.

Whenever possible, any in-person bridal appointment should be followed up with a handwritten thank you note. Invest in some nice notecards with your monogram or your venue's name on them and take three minutes to handwrite a note to your potential client. The note should address the recipient personally, mention the fiancé or anyone else attending the appointment, thank them for considering you as the host of their special day and then mention one or two things that are unique to the bride. You can include any information that was requested by them at this time. For example,

*Dear Ms. Finnes,*

*Thank you for visiting The Grand Hotel today. It was a pleasure meeting you and your fiancé, Matthew. I am delighted you are considering us as your preferred venue for your most special day. We are confident we can offer you and your guests a wedding to remember. We specialize in customization and welcome your ideas. You had mentioned you would like a horse-drawn carriage to take you for your arrival to the ceremony gardens, and I have just the vendor for you. I would like to also recommend your guests be greeted with passed champagne upon their arrival to add to the special occasion and set the mood for romance.*

*Please let me know how I may be of further assistance to you.*

*Warm regards,  
Anne*

With this kind of a personal note, sign your first name only and enclose a business card with your full name and contact information.

### **In-house: Communicating day-to-day**

Making sure that your day-to-day tasks with which you interact with your potential clients are done properly will tell them how you handle your business, and therefore *her* wedding day. These are important to instill confidence in the bride that you will be there for her.

**Phone calls:** Your voicemail greeting should always give your name, title and be changed daily to reflect what your plans are for the day so callers know you are on top of it. If appropriate and you have a company cell phone, let the callers know your business cell phone number for emergencies. It should also include your website address so the caller can go there to immediately get more information. A sample greeting may be:

*“Hello and thank you for calling. You’ve reached the desk of Anne Collins, Director of Catering. Today is Tuesday, June 25<sup>th</sup> and I will be in and out of appointments all day but checking voicemail periodically. If your call is urgent, please feel free to call me on my cell phone at: 805-890-9909. If you are requesting initial information on our wedding services, you can visit our Website: [www.ChezMontmartre.com](http://www.ChezMontmartre.com). Otherwise, please leave your name, number and the nature of your call, and it will be my pleasure to return your call as soon as possible.”*

If you don’t have your own wedding website (more about that later) but have your property showcased on a third-party wedding website, you can suggest the caller visit your site there.

It is imperative that you return all calls within two business days if at all possible. It is unacceptable to keep any client waiting, but especially a bride whose sense of time is often very different from your average event client. Even though you may have hundreds of clients, she needs to feel she is your one and only.

If you know you will be out of the office and it will be several days before you can return their call, say so on your outgoing greeting so the expectation is managed up front. If you set your clients up to expect “A” and then deliver “A”, they will be happy. With today’s working bride who may already be stressed out at work and having to plan her own wedding, the last thing she needs are surprises and instability. If you are going on a two week vacation, you should personally call or email your brides or inquiries to let them know when you’ll be back and who will be handling inquiries in your absence.

**Email:** Because so much of business is now conducted online, apply the same philosophies to email. All emails deserve a response – generally within 2 days. Email should always be polite, to the point and cordial and never typed in all capital letters, which in affect is the same thing as “yelling” at the recipient. When you are going to be away for more than two days, turn on your emailer’s “auto response” on your email so any incoming inquiries are immediately sent a response letting them know you are away. Your auto response should also state when you will be back, when they can expect a return response, and who to contact in your absence should they need immediate assistance.