

# Organisers ready to help

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Expectations of weddings are on the rise, as couples seek more elaborate events to celebrate their nuptials. Highly educated, better travelled and more open-minded than before, couples want to recreate the grand affairs they witness around them, and time-pressed brides and grooms are outsourcing the job to professionals.

Another factor contributing to these trends is a rise in the average age of marriage. According to the government's Census and Statistics Department, men are more likely to marry at 31 and women at 28, giving them greater financial freedom to spend on their wedding.

"People want to incorporate more into their wedding and put their individual stamp on it. They are willing to try different things and tie in East-meets-West concepts," says Evelyn Mills, founder and creative director at wedding planning company Marriage Maestros.

"Most couples are earning a double income, so they are able to afford a more extravagant wedding, including hiring a professional planner to help turn their dream into reality."

The average couple is rarely prepared or fully equipped to tolerate the flurry of activity that happens between their engagement and the altar. Sweet smelling bouquets, an immaculately coutured bride and an orderly table plan that guides guests to the banquet is the icing on the cake that only sets in place after months of planning.

Couples hire wedding planners to take the organisational stress off them, and as the industry grows, planners are adding new tiers to their expertise, from on-the-day services that smooth over potential kinks in the schedule to all-inclusive packages that take care of every detail as soon as planning begins.

Brainstorming themes, planning the budget, sourcing and liaising with suppliers, organising logistics, menu tasting and seating plan, etiquette advice and speech

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writing may all be included, depending on the planner. Couples are consulted at every stage and have the final say on decisions, but the planner executes every action.

"Most of the services are extremely intangible. It is about professionally managing an event, which naturally means there will be many unforeseen changes and problems to resolve," says Eva Ip, director of wedding design at Match and Fusion.

"The nature of a wedding is even more challenging as it requires personal touches, more sensibility than sense and the involvement of a group of people ... who are on-site for a party and will be less cautious."

As weddings become more elaborate, they require complex planning and behind-the-scenes logistics for a seamless event, according to planners. Michele Li, founder of The Wedding Company, says its services are in demand because couples realise they cannot achieve their dream wedding without professional help.

"We are sourcing more items from around the world, bringing

in photographers based in Australia or the US, and sourcing interesting favours and vintage items to personalise weddings," Li says.

A good planner has established relationships with vendors and can get better prices and avoid expensive mistakes. But when even a small wedding can cost upwards of HK\$100,000, many couples question the economic value of a planner, who will usually charge a percentage of the overall wedding budget.

"It is similar to hiring an interior designer," Li says. "You could definitely do it yourself, but a planner may bring together a better team or pull together a more cohesive event. On top of that, on the day the bride and her family are not left stressing about whether the cake will arrive on time or if the photographer can work overtime."

Mills says couples sourcing their own vendors may end up not getting exactly what they want the first time round, especially if they are not familiar with the industry. "This may end up costing you more in terms of money and time," Mills says.

Conway Lau, director of Pink Wedding, says couples can minimise the overall fee of a wedding planner by taking on more of the organisation themselves and hiring a professional for an on-the-day package. "The difference in cost could be as much as double. But a good planner may end up helping the couple save more money by being involved in more of the planning," Lau says.



The best wedding planners ensure a wedding day free of stress.