



hours with Evelyn Mills

The founder of Marriage Maestros tells Caryn Yap that the key to a successful wedding-planning business lies in remaining calm under stress, working long hours and being flexible for erratic clients anxious about their "big day".

I never planned to become a wedding planner. I've been organising functions for as long as I can remember – even birthday parties when I was a teenager. I studied hotel management and catering in Switzerland and I worked in the hospitality industry for 12 years before becoming an assistant producer of events.

I love weddings and have helped lots of my friends plan theirs but what really pushed me into the business was my own. Certain elements were very stressful and I didn't want other brides to go through the same. At my wedding I worried about the little things such as whether everyone was happy and the cake would arrive on cue. I was so busy worrying about everyone else, I arrived late.

I don't have a typical day. It depends on whether I have a project or not, which also dictates the time I wake up. On a good night, I get an average of five hours' sleep. If I have a project, I tend to get up at about 3am – if I even went to bed the night before, which usually I don't as we would be finalising the last details of the schedule. On wedding days, I need energy so I make sure I eat a full English breakfast with two or three eggs, bacon, sausages – the works. If the event is happening at a hotel, we'll book a room so we're on site.

I am on site by 4am to make sure all the vendors are setting up. Hair, make-up and the floral team will arrive at about 5am or 6am to prepare the bride and the bridal party. I then call in all the cars so the floral team can start decorating. We then send them off to pick up family members. I brief my team at about 5am and split them up into groups, each with its own senior co-ordinator. I have a core team of about four to six people. For a big wedding of about 80 tables, the team will consist of more than 100 people.

From about 6am, I am running around making sure everything is on time. We order lunch boxes or grab a sandwich when we can, but sometimes I don't get to eat the whole day. I will stay until the last guest has left and then the dismantling team will come and take everything down. So my typical working day will end at 2.30am or 3am. It's a full 24-hour day.

We're happy but we're well aware that if one thing goes wrong, people will remember it. We've had to remove drunken guests discreetly from banquets and on one occasion the best man placed the ring in his pocket and it



Ricky Chung

slipped into the seam. We had to take him out, remove his jacket and cut open the pocket to get the ring. But luckily, we haven't had any huge disasters.

I only choose clients I get along with, otherwise it would be selfish to take the job because, at the end of the day, if they don't like what I do because we're on different wavelengths, it could ruin their special day. For many couples, a lot of issues come up when they're planning their wedding; things they've never had to discuss before, which makes them look deeper into the relationship. Planning a wedding is a good gauge of how well a couple can plan a life together.

In many cases, the bride will be very excited about the wedding and won't take no for an answer so the groom will back off. She takes over and eventually starts to become overwhelmed and feels she's been left to do everything, which can lead to arguments. At this point, I become like a shrink to the couple.

The most important thing about my job is to be flexible and able to change according to what the client requires. We do all kinds of weddings: Chinese, Western, Indian. We had a gay wedding once – it was a recognition ceremony as opposed to a legal ceremony – it was private and intimate. We are open-minded, flexible and patient as people often change their minds.

My husband is an engineer and has an irregular schedule so if possible – when I'm not working – I try to spend some time in the morning with him as we are rarely together at night. If we are at home at the same time we eat breakfast together. If not, I usually start off the day with a glass of hot water with fresh ginger, lemon, honey and mint. It's a detox drink and it helps me re-energise and wake up.

We have a lot of pets as we always pick up strays – I can't walk past an animal in distress without helping it. We have

three cats and two dogs. On Sundays, we like to go to Big Wave Bay in Shek O and rent a junk with friends, mainly because the dogs can get a good run and a swim as they are banned from most beaches in Hong Kong.

For relaxation, I practise yoga and meditate when I can. I also write poetry and essays, which I hope to publish one day. I usually write about love, as I'm in the love business. I like to go swimming and for walks on the weekends but I'm not a health freak – I'm allergic to gyms. I believe in inner peace, balance and having my *chi* in harmony but I think sometimes you have to be a little bit of crazy to have some sanity in life.

I eat everything unless it's moving, so when I am off I am always cooking or trying new restaurants. I suppose I'm a bit of a hypocrite because I love animals but I'm also a bit of a carnivore. I definitely eat to live – I enjoy steak, good wine and cheese. When I'm working, I like to go to restaurants in Soho or Lan Kwai Fong. I often go to Post 97, Delicious and Life. On special occasions, I will go to Cafe Deco, the Mandarin Grill or Ruth Chris – usually steak houses.

The wedding season usually lasts from September to March. April to May is a quieter and I sometimes try to get away somewhere, usually to a beach. I am learning how to surf but it's taking a while as I don't have much time and I don't have much balance either!

Wedding planning is a high-paced job, but it's only as stressful as you make it. There's a lot of pressure but as long as it all happens before the wedding, it's fine. Sometimes unforeseen situations pop up and you have to be ready for that. The most important thing is to never show stress in front of a client – no matter how stressed you are. I switch into Zen mode. I like the pressure of organising weddings – it's a positive stress, an adrenaline rush.