

I Planned My Wedding In 11 Weeks

And you can, too. Here's how ...

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Art and I met at the Owl Bar in the Belvedere on Wednesday, Nov. 26, 2003, the night before Thanksgiving. I had been living in Manhattan for three years, but every Thanksgiving I would always return to Baltimore to visit my family.

Art, who at the time was working and going to graduate school, also decided to visit the Owl Bar with some friends. He spotted me, introduced himself ... and the rest is history! We immediately began dating, and when Art received his MBA from Loyola a year later, he moved to Manhattan to be closer to me.

Almost three years after we met, Art proposed. Since we were both from Baltimore and our parents were still living there, I assumed that we would get married in Maryland so that is where I began my search. Immediately, I was confronted with challenges. Continually traveling to

search and immediately fell in love with one particular venue. We always hoped for a spring or summer wedding, and after doing some preliminary research, I discovered many of our favorite vendors were available on April 5, 2008. *Everyone* thought that choosing to do the wedding in April was not realistic. It was leaving me less than three months to plan it, and with our families in Baltimore, the planning would fall on my shoulders. Nevertheless, I have never been known to say no to a big challenge so with 11 weeks to go I decided April 5 would be the date and from that moment forth, it was full planning ahead!!!

Planning it so quickly was the best thing I could have done. It forced me to make fast decisions without over-analyzing and becoming crazed in the process. Just following a few simple tips will speed up the planning process for any bride and help make her dream wedding a reality.

When brides have more time to plan they begin to second-guess their choices.

Baltimore, seeing venues, and then heading back to NYC to a demanding full-time job in TV production became more of an irritation than a joyful experience. I became nervous because everyone kept telling me that it takes so much time to plan a wedding and I was not making any progress. I was so frustrated and stressed that after several months of looking, I stopped my search!

It was not until the following December, after 13 months of being engaged with no date set, that I said, "Enough is enough! Why not make it easier for Art and me and fun for out-of-towners by planning a wedding in NYC!" So I started my Manhattan

The Bride Should Make all Final Decisions

In an ideal world, the bride and groom would be in charge of making all decisions, but oftentimes it falls on the bride and family members. To speed up the process as soon as the planning begins, the bride must make a list of everything she needs to do and then make a promise to herself that she will decide on each one within a few days to a week after seeing all the options.

If the bride is indecisive, then it is good to have a point person to push her to make the decisions. Sitting on decisions only prolongs the process

ALL PHOTOS BY JIMMY RYAN FOR BARNABY DRAPER STUDIOS



Jill and Art on their wedding day

and leaves the door open for others to express their opinion, which often hinders rather than helps. It's unproductive having too many cooks in the kitchen; however, it is helpful for the bride to have two people (other than the groom) to consult about options. I chose my mother and my maid of honor with whom I consulted on the telephone about choices I had to make. We listed the pros and cons, and then I made the final picks.

Stay Focused When Wedding Gown Shopping

When contacting boutiques and wedding salons, many sales consultants laughed at me when I told them I had less than three months until my wedding. They said I would never find a gown because I needed six to 10 months for the dress to be made and altered.

Brides, don't let anyone scare you and don't get discouraged! I pounded the pavement and went to at least 10 wedding salons. I soon discovered if I purchased a dress from the rack, I would get 10 to 30 percent off the regular price. I also started reading about sample sales where I could get 50 to 70 percent off of regular prices and walk out of the store with a gown in hand.

I went to several of them. Yes, there are lines, but the major price reduction makes it well worth it. Calling and e-mailing local salons is an easy way to learn when they are having their

big sales. My dress was a Priscilla of Boston sample gown that had just been placed on the floor. It had never been worn, and it just needed to be fitted. I purchased it 10 weeks before the wedding and received 15 percent off its original price.

Many of the stores will recommend tailors to help with alterations, but lining up good tailors before the dress is purchased will also save lots of time. To avoid wasting much more time and energy when trying on gowns, it is best to have an open mind when selecting a wedding dress. I always thought I would wear a very detailed white princess ball gown adorned with lace. After deciding to try on every style imaginable, I ended up with an ivory form-fitting corset bubble bottomed gown with no lace or beading. The dress style I thought I would choose did not look right on me. If I was set on that look, I would still be searching!

Make Musical Entertainment a Top Priority

In my opinion, music is most important and sometimes the most difficult decision in the planning process. The music is what gets the guests up on their feet and in a party mood. I believe both the bride and groom should be actively involved in this choice.

The couple needs to compile a list of their favorite DJ and bands' availability before committing to the venue. The availability of the musical

group should help determine the date to book the venue. Finding the perfect venue under the assumption that one's choice in musical entertainment is also available could easily result in disappointment and wasted time searching for another musical act that may or may not meet the couple's needs. I refused to sign a contract at my venue until I knew that at least two of the bands from my list of favorites were available on April 5.

Pick Menu Before Signing a Contract

Once the bride confirms that the music and venue/caterer have the same day available, it is time to talk food! For major time saving, I suggest choosing a menu before signing the caterer's contracts. The venue I selected had its inhouse caterer with whom I spent several days working out every single detail of the menu before I booked. Choosing the food right away is time- and cost-effective. In many cases, once the contract is signed, everything is a done-deal so if extra appetizer stations are added or the menu is enhanced in any way, it will probably cost more.

Negotiating the specific details related to the food before the contract is signed will give the couple the menu they want and will keep them in control of the price per person. I negotiated everything from the number of appetizer stations to flavored welcome martinis and specific butlered desserts like mini cupcakes and milkshakes, before I even put my deposit down. I did not have to think about food until the final food and cake tasting several weeks before the wedding. It is fine to make minor adjustments with the food after signing, but working out most of the details in advance takes another thing off the bride's plate!

Do Homework Before Florist Appointments

Before going to any florist appointment, the bride should pull images from online and print magazines of the colors/types of flowers, centerpieces and *chuppah* styles she hopes to have at her wedding. She should never arrive at the florist empty-handed.

Florists are not psychic, and they are not going to know what will work best for each particular bride's wedding by just meeting her for a few minutes. I made the mistake of going to a few florists without an idea of

what I wanted. Before I knew it, they were telling me what to like and what would be best for my wedding. I was not comfortable with any of their choices, and it was wasting my time!

I quickly regrouped and collected as many images that appealed to me as possible. I decided I wanted deep purples and whites and a simple but chic *chuppah*. I asked florists to show me photos from their portfolio that fit my requirements. I also asked to see photos of centerpieces they had done at my venue so that I would be certain that the colors and height would look extraordinary in my ceremony and reception space. The florist I picked won my heart when he showed me different photos of the amazing work he had done at my venue. After one hour of meeting, my centerpieces, *chuppah*, bouquets and boutonnières were all chosen.

If it is not offered, brides should insist on having the florist produce a mockup centerpiece several weeks before the wedding. When the bride sees this centerpiece, she can immediately tell the florist the changes she wants and then give the go-ahead once she is happy with the final product. This eliminates the need to return to the florist every week to modify the centerpieces. Once everything is approved, I recommend taking a photo so that there is a record of what everything should look like for the big day.

I have many friends that have tied the knot, and I now realize often, when brides have more time to plan, they begin to second-guess their choices or they become tired of dealing with all the details over such a long period of time. By the time their wedding day comes, many are so anxious, they can hardly wait until it is all over.

I never felt that way. When my wedding day arrived, I was completely relaxed and I felt confident that everything would work out. I may have had less than three months, but in that short time, I had set goals for myself and moved forward accomplishing all that was needed to ensure that our wedding would be one that reflected who Art and I were, what we had envisioned, and most importantly, the love we felt for one another and for our family and friends.

Our wedding was truly magical! Art and I enjoyed the entire evening from start to finish, and so did our

Jill and Art kiss under the *chuppah*. >

guests. All night long they kept saying, "What an amazing wedding; I can't believe you planned it in 11 weeks!" □

Jill A. Meister is a Baltimore native who now lives in New York City.



^ Floral arrangements

Wedding cake >



^ The wedding guests get their groove on.

Back view of Jill's gown >

