

Valuable Wedding Reception Information And Party Tips

By Wedding Entertainer R.J. Mitchell

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Here are some observations that I've made while providing entertainment for over 1,000 wedding receptions and parties as a band leader and DJ, along with some suggestions and ideas that might help improve your party. There are many variations when it comes to weddings, like time and location of the wedding and the size of the party. Most weddings that I performed at were between 125 and 175 guests, but ranged from 50 to 400. Budgets went from a few thousand dollars to approximately \$40,000. (I was not in an area where huge budget "Hollywood" weddings were common.) I've worked small parties that were instant wild parties, and parties of 200 that required a lot more technique and skill to get things going. Every party is different. These are my opinions, and hopefully they will give you food for thought in preparing for your perfect wedding.

1. VOLUME - The volume of the music is one of the most important factors at a wedding. It is a good idea to be considerate of those with sensitive hearing, and seat those who might prefer a lower volume of music at a table furthest away from the speakers. If people sitting close to the speakers complain about the volume (believe me, they will if they feel it is too loud!), the volume must be turned down to accommodate them. What will happen is that your guests on the other side of the room will be unable to hear anything. One of my secrets to success was to start on the softer side. People will become accustomed to the volume and as the party progresses and gains energy, the volume can be raised to "party" level and nobody will even notice.

2. LIGHTING - The lighting in the reception room is very important. Most people are uncomfortable dancing in bright light, so it would be wise to arrange that the lights be dimmed. Many banquet facilities will automatically do this. Of course, there are exceptions to every rule.

3. PARTICIPATION - If the bride and groom, bridal party, and parents of the bride and groom dance early and often, the rest of the guests will quickly follow. The bridal party can also help get other relatives involved by asking them to dance.

4. KEEP THE PARTY IN THE MAIN RECEPTION ROOM - Try to keep your guests in the main reception room. If the bridal party leaves the main reception room for an extended period of time (to check out the view on a nice day, to have lengthy pictures taken, or to linger at a bar in another room), your guests will follow and your party will fizzle. If you lose the flow and energy of a party, it might not return. Portable bars can usually be set up in the main reception room.

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5. MAKING PLANS – Most entertainers and banquet facilities will meet with the bride and groom in advance to find out what their preferences are. It is fun and exciting to organize your big event. One thing to consider is that besides being the “stars of the day,” you are also the “party hosts” with the responsibility to show all of your guests a good time. You have invited family members and friends to celebrate your wedding with you. They probably have to spend a lot of money to do this (travel, hotels, food, new outfits to wear, and a wedding gift). Don’t exclude any age group from the celebration. I’ll comment more on this under music.

6. MUSIC - Music makes every event! (“A Wedding By The Lake” creates an elegant mood for a wedding ceremony, cocktail hour and dinner.) Of course, the bride and groom’s input is important. I always suggested that they requested a few “must play” songs, give me a general direction of what their expectations were and let me work my magic. I know what songs are “sure fire” party songs, their tempo, and how to bring the dance floor to a frenzy without letting things get out of control. If you really like classical music or smooth jazz, these styles can be easily incorporated during the cocktail hour and dinner. Once it is time to party, you need to play party music or your guests will leave. If you attend many weddings, you will notice that some of the music is similar. When people go to weddings, they expect to hear certain music - songs they know and enjoy. You might consider some of them corny and overplayed, but they still help build the momentum of your party sooner. During the first dance set, I usually played several familiar wedding party songs (“Celebration,” “Mony Mony,” “The Twist,” for example). This made the dance floor inviting to all age groups. Once people are comfortable with dancing, you can ease your way into the more current and hip music. If at the beginning of the first dance set, I had blasted out the current number one party hit song, half the guests would have left! While group dances like “The Electric Slide,” “Macarena,” “Cha-Cha Slide,” “Cupid Shuffle,” and others might not seem current and hip, under certain circumstances they work very well. People truly enjoy them. Some parties take longer to get things going, so it's best to keep an open mind. I always suggested that couples allowed me to use my professional discretion; some parties are hopping right from the start, and others need the boost of a few standards and group dances to get things moving. My philosophy was to entertain all guests, of all ages, in a way that they all would stay to the end of the party and have a wonderful time celebrating with the bride and groom. **IMPORTANT NOTE:** Today, many entertainment companies allow the bride and groom to choose all the musical selections that they want played at their reception. "Customize your wedding the way you want it!" Sounds great, doesn't it? Well, maybe not. Many great songs are actually very difficult to dance to - do you know which ones they are? What if your guests don't enjoy the songs you've chosen? I would have passed on a wedding that limited me to playing only certain songs. If the DJ's or band's hands have been tied by a hard and fast playlist, and the party does not go well, there's not much that can be done to save it. An experienced wedding entertainer knows how to incorporate the styles of music that you prefer, along with the styles that your guests like. The end result will be a wedding reception where everybody has a good time and great memories that will last for years.

7. PICTURES - Weddings are wonderful times to have precious family pictures taken. Try to have all your family group pictures taken during the cocktail hour or towards the end of the party to avoid slowing down the momentum of the party. During the reception, the bridal party should be free to participate in the formalities and to dance.

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8. SMALL CHILDREN - Small children quickly become bored and restless at wedding receptions, and they can be a hazard on the dance floor. Their parents probably won't really enjoy themselves, either. If you have invited children to your reception, consider making arrangements for the children to make a brief appearance, and then go home with a baby sitter. Many facilities can recommend a baby sitter or have a room set up with a pizza party and a movie for the little ones to watch.

9. NEVER OPEN PRESENTS AT THE RECEPTION - Don't open wedding gifts at the reception. This will stop a party dead in its tracks.

10. HIRE PROFESSIONALS WHO YOU TRUST - Enjoy your own wedding. If you hire good people, let them worry about the details. The less stress you have, the more fun you'll have!!

11. REQUESTS – Bands usually have a certain playlist, but might be able to learn a special song if asked well in advance. DJs usually have large music libraries and can play most requests. Guests enjoy being able to request a song, but the DJ needs to screen the songs played to avoid any hard feelings and to keep the flow of the party going. Another thing to consider is to have a required age to make a request or a limited number of requests. If you have some young folks at your wedding who are used to making many requests at their school dance, they might not understand that what 12-year-olds like might not work well at a party of mixed ages.

Example #1: When cocktails and dinner are over and it is time to dance and party, an easy listening or classical piece really isn't appropriate. (This is NOT the time to play "A Wedding by The Lake!") I always had dance sets that would make all ages and musical tastes feel welcome. If something is played that is really offensive, it will kill the dance floor. REMEMBER, IF THEY LEAVE, THEY MAY NEVER COME BACK. People tend to dance more to music they are familiar with.

Example #2: Beware of songs that have people's names in them. While some friends might think it is funny to bring up past relationships or actions, a wedding is not the time or place. A situation like this could become very uncomfortable or embarrassing.

12. CLEAN EDITS – I subscribed to a professional record pool that delivered clean edits of current hits to me each month. Even with "clean" edits, the topics of certain songs are not suitable for certain audiences. Do people really listen to all the lyrics? Maybe yes...maybe no. I always played things on the safe side. There are other songs with similar beats that will keep the party going.

13. ALCOHOL – The choices are: no alcohol (dry wedding), full open bar, open bar for cocktail hour with free beer and wine for dinner, and a total cash bar. I AM IN NO WAY PROMOTING OR DISCOURAGING ALCOHOL USE. Here are some thoughts on the subject.

In my early years as a party entertainer, I was hired to perform at a dry wedding. My customers always received 100 % effort on my part, but what happened really shocked me and taught me a lesson to never have a preconceived notion of how a party will be. It was a group of 150 Mormons...nice people. Let me tell you, from the first note of music, they were out on the dance floor and partied until the end of the reception. Great party!

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I think most guests appreciate at least having alcohol available, whether it be free or a cash bar. Years ago, wedding receptions were far more elaborate. Times have certainly changed! Drinking and driving laws are fortunately stricter, and keep us all safer. Party buses have become more popular in recent years. If your guests are staying in a hotel away from the reception site, or if some of your guests want to keep partying after the reception, rent a bus and keep everyone safe.

14. BE REALISTIC – Your party will be unique! You will be with your family and your friends at a location that you choose. As the old saying goes, you cannot compare apples to oranges. A party of 400 wild and crazy people will be different than a smaller group consisting of mostly aunts, uncles and older relatives. They both can be fantastic. They are just different.

15. INVITE SOME PARTY PEOPLE – In general, people don't want to be the first ones on the dance floor. What happens if they are the only ones who dance to a particular song? I don't think anyone wants to do a dance solo. If you invite a few "live wires" who like to dance and help get the party going, others will follow without the fear of being the lone couple on the dance floor.

16. PARENT DANCES - Once I had a daughter of my own, I dreaded the day I would have to walk her down the aisle and dance the Father – Daughter dance with her. I watched many fathers completely lose their composure. I personally had to tune out songs like "Daddy's Little Girl" or "Butterfly Kisses." I didn't want guests to be wondering why the DJ was getting misty-eyed. Fortunately, my daughter chose "Unforgettable," which saved the day for me. My advice: keep this song short and positive. Your dad or uncle will thank you for it.

I am a composer, professional musician, DJ and teacher. I truly want your wedding to be as wonderful and joyous as it can possibly be.

I hope that these ideas give you some insight. (Remember that these tips are just my opinion!)

Now, just RELAX AND HAVE A GREAT TIME!

R.J.

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