

THE PHOTOGRAPHERS GUIDE TO THE BRIDES WEDDING GUIDE

A Work Of Opinion By Michael Novo



Contents

Introduction	3
Budget	4
First Look = Smooth Day	5
Wedding Secrets You Might Not Know	6
Value Of Photography, Wedding Albums And Questions To Ask	7
Wedding First, Extras Second	8
Wedding Secrets You Might Not Know Part Deux!	9



Introduction

My name is Michael Novo and I'm a wedding photographer who hates wedding photography. I know, I know...hate is a strong word but I mean it with a smile. Stick with me here. *Why, all of a sudden on a wedding day are so many couples images stripped of their personalities with cheesy template overdone poses? What's with that kissing her forehead shot?* But it's not just photography that's the issue, you've got questions about our hyper saturated market known as "The Wedding Industry". This guide will help you cut some of the fluff and get right to the meat and potatoes. Having gone through the planning experience with my wife I can say that while I wasn't initially excited about planning the wedding, we kept calm and just made it about our friends and family. It's one of the few times in your life when you can go all out and throw a mega party or keep it small and intimate. What to do?

So what happens during the planning process? You begin reading blogs, social media and wedding magazines noting down the many ideas and suggestions they have and this eventually leads some to be utter the words "I just want to get this over with." or even more blasphemous "what if we elope?"

So here's one photographers words of wisdom (or at the very least opinion) and also a view from the groom's perspective since I've gone through it. Some of the things I tell you will not win me friends in the industry and that's ok. Today more and more couples are planning their wedding without the help of parents who might know a thing or two and that's why I decided to write this.



Why is the humble photographers opinion of any significance to you? Because the photog is often spending the most amount of time with the bride and seeing all aspects of the day. Go ahead and lean in a little bit closer and I'll whisper some magic in your ears.

What Budget?



Let's just start off with one of the biggest factors for many couples getting married. The money. Is it me or are weddings crazy expensive? Well let's take a closer look at photography specifically but this concept applies to almost any other vendor.

You can spend \$500 or \$20,000 on just your photography alone. Where to begin? First let's give you a quick insight into what goes into a professional wedding studios considerations. *An average wedding requires about 50-80 hours of studio time.* What??? No it doesn't, you just shoot for 10 hours and that's it. This is true, but most of the work a studio does is like an iceberg where you can't see the bulk of the behind the scenes. Meetings, planning, shooting, editing, proofing, backing up files, album build/design, answering emails/phone all takes time. We logged our hours last year just to see the metrics and our average was 60-72 hours depending on the collection the couple selected.

When that price is sent over it can certainly give you sticker shock but that's what it takes to run a business and provide an excellent product. If you're getting a photographer who let's say is charging \$1800 then you're going to take a hit either on the time, quality, or, more than likely, both. But \$1800 is a lot! Well let's not forget to pay taxes, equipment and other costs which may easily slice that in half. Factor in the hours and now you have a photog working for right about minimum wage.

Weddings are events with many moving parts. You're hiring professionals to manage a long, stressful, day and put their skill to work for you, all while getting perfect images from start to finish. And indeed if you hire a pro they will do everything they can to make it a most excellent day for you.

Budget Studio - \$1500-\$2500 // Expect basic digital files. They'll be culled and color balanced but don't expect much in "wow" editing. When I worked here it's all about churn'n burn in the **quantity** of weddings. Yes, you're just a number but if you're not looking for anything special in your photos then that's totally ok! Beware that portfolios of these studios show the photographers work that they do with their own personal clients but since I don't have my lighting assistant and don't edit the images myself, what you see ain't what you'll get. Photographers at these studios are independent contractors and you see photographer X and say "wow, amazing images and gorgeous edits" only to learn that you get none of that in the final product.

Mid Studio - \$2500-\$6000 // Here your expectations should go up. Images from studios in this range should have a distinct look and appeal. You're getting more than just wedding day digitals. Engagement sessions, custom handmade albums and prints are in many collections in this range. What you see in the portfolio is what you should get. Hold your photographer to a higher standard and expect more personal service than the Budget Studio.

Top Studio - \$6000-\$20,000 // Customer service should be top notch, often you're getting a photographer with an established name and a solid / consistent look. This end of the market is sort of like high end shoes. Are they better than Mid Studio? A bit of a loaded question but maybe yes, maybe no. You should have the highest demands and expectations from your photographer with total personal attention.

Low Market - \$1500 or under // In general my suggestion is to stay far away from this range if possible. This is the (insert 99c burger joint) range and is mostly some guy / gal that bought a camera and said "I'm a photographer now" with little skill / education. If this is your for real-sies range then you consider buying a nice camera for \$1000, and have a friend or relative who's a hobbyist shoot your wedding. You'll get the about the same results but will be left with a camera that you can now bring with you on your honeymoon and beyond!

First Look = Smooth Day

What a random point to have in this guide? But it's not. If you're thinking about waiting to see each other until she walks down the aisle...don't. Let's just get it out of the way that it's not bad luck to see the bride and this has never been a thing in America.

My theory is that this comes from movies such as *Coming To America* where Eddy Murphy at the end thinks he's marrying the girl that was chosen for him but after he lifts the veil it turns out to be Lisa...the girl he wanted all along. How sweet! It's not nearly as dramatic if they did a first look for movie purposes.

“But I think it will be more special if he sees me walking down the aisle the first time...”

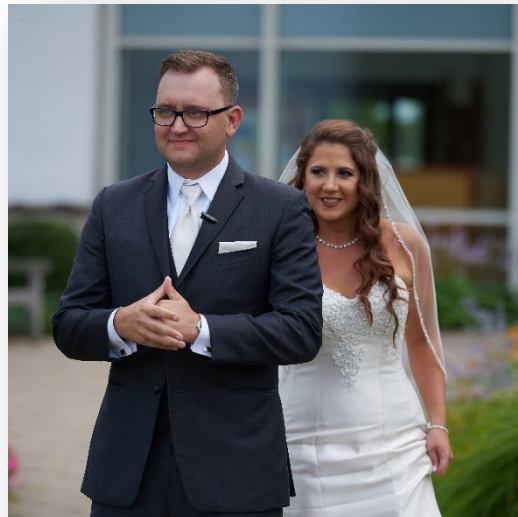
Well here's me speaking both as a photographer and a groom. He (or she) won't. When I'm standing up at the alter, what I'm staring at are the hundred or more faces gazing at me, I'm pondering my vows, trying to feel ever so lightly without it being obvious if my fly is still zipped. So many thoughts are going through my head that yes, I am watching you walk down the aisle, but not really.

But wait, there's more! When you do a first look, that's the moment where you can truly take each other in. It can be private and quiet with just the two of you or with your close friends and family there. There is ALWAYS much more emotion from the couple during a first look than first seeing each other walking down the aisle. Not to mention, after the ceremony you more or less become property of your guests. The time for you to spend with your significant and bridal party is all early on in the day. Go hang out with them and enjoy your time alone! Once that reception kicks off your attention will be pulled in many different directions. In the hundreds of weddings I've shot I have never had a couple regret doing a first look, ever.

Seeing Bride Before Ceremony Cultures

During the time when arranged marriages were custom, the betrothed couple wasn't allowed to see each other before the wedding at all. The wedding symbolized a business deal between two families (romantic, huh?), and a father would have been pleased for his daughter to marry a man from a rich, land-owning family. But he also feared that if the groom met the bride before the wedding and thought she wasn't attractive, he'd call off the wedding, casting shame onto the bride and her family. Therefore, it became tradition that the bride and groom were only allowed to meet at the wedding ceremony so that the groom did not have the opportunity to change his mind. And that veil the bride wears? Its original purpose was also to keep the groom from finding out what the bride looked like until the last possible minute, when it was too late to back out of the transaction.

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A Few Secrets You Might Not Know

All-In-One Studios. Avoid If Possible

The more important quality is to you, the more I suggest you get away from the all-in-one studios that have dj, video, photo booth, etc... The reason is quite simple, the more moving parts in the machine the more chances for something to go wrong. Most big box studios have just one owner managing all of those parts. Quality is more likely to slip and not be as good as individual specialist studios. If your car transmission goes out, do you go to an auto specialist or someone who fixes cars and computers and plumbing? My wedding DJ / MC does only that and he was so good at what he did that he was worth flying out for our wedding in LA.

You might be thinking "well they're all from one studio so they will communicate better". But this is not correct. Remember that at the big box places it's all about the number of weddings and it's likely that they have multiple teams covering multiple weddings that night. This is all about churn and burn...get in, get out and get paid. Often times we barely know the name of the other crew.

Kickbacks Are A Thing

Sometimes they're called "commissions" but in the end it's all the same thing. Why is this relevant to you? Because sometimes a vendor is suggested to you because there's an exchange of money going on, not necessarily because the vendor matches your quality or style. The most common people to receive kickbacks are either the venue or wedding planners. Do note that not all venues and planners do this. Folks I personally work with did not ask for any money for my studio to be added to their list, we simply enjoy working together. It's totally ok and in your interest to talk about it. Simply ask, "Do you ask for or receive any commission of any kind by suggesting vendor X?"

Just because they are getting a kickback doesn't make it bad and it doesn't mean that the vendor they suggest isn't a match. If you love the vendor suggestion then what difference does it make? If you don't think it's a match just say so and keep on searching or have your planner keep looking for someone outside of their list.

Wedding Magazines / Top 10 Lists Are Pretty Much Just Ads

Did you pick up a bridal fashion magazine or see some sort of top 10 list online? Chances are you're just looking at a glorified advertisement. Most wedding industry publications both print and digital feature only their paid advertisers. How does it work?

Let's take 'Bridal Magazine X' and look through it. In there you might see a full page ad from a photo studio, florist or any other venue. Now dig a bit deeper and you'll discover that the cover and several of the featured articles in the magazine were shot by that same photographer. That other floral article on centerpieces is featuring a florist who took out a full page ad. There's a reason that all of those magazines and wedding websites are free. Almost all of the information published are ads created by the writers and advertisers to make it appear like one cohesive publication rather than 200 pages of ads.

Awards Are Meaningless...Almost

Does someone have some sort of digital wedding award on their website? Most of those are make believe. How many Top 10 Wedding Photographers can there be? And to be honest, I'm not one of them. Not all but almost every award you see listed on a vendors website (most often photographers) are either made up by a company they advertise with or it was purchased. There are so many obscure orgs handing out awards that most can be ignored.

But I did say "almost". Some awards are from reputable photography print competitions. These are real physical awards that you see at the photographers studio. Orgs such as PPA, WPPI, Fearless and some others have thousands of photographers competing against each other with their best images. Trained judges sit and score each image individually and then award the top scorers without knowing who the photographers are. Placing in the top 3 spots in any of these organizations is a massive accomplishment and the other fakey awards piggy back off of this idea.

Value Of Photography, Wedding Albums And Questions To Ask

Wedding photography is one of the most saturated markets out there. In fact it's so saturated that turnover in our industry is massive. It's safe to say that there's at least a 70% chance your wedding photographer won't be around in just a couple years. This is because the barrier to entry has dropped significantly due to camera gear getting cheaper but better camera does not mean better photographer and there's still a business to run at the end of the day. It used to require skill and knowledge to operate a film camera. Today with digital that's all out the window. Folks get a camera and believe that they "have an eye" for photography. But they kinda sorta don't most of the time. This includes yours truly. It took me years to learn how to be a good photographer. Anyone who claims that they just started and they have an eye for it naturally is not correct. No one ever took a math class and then said "ok I'm an accountant now!" Same goes for taking pictures ☐

First decide how important photography is to you...

And you know what? It's not a top priority to some and doesn't have to be for you which is totally fine. If you're not looking for artistic images to document your day and just want some snaps as memories, there's nothing wrong with considering a budget studio.

Find Vendors That Adapt To Your Wants

Do you want to have a 30-45 minute dance set in between one of your dinner courses to mix it up a bit and work up your guests appetite? Your caterer might tell you that's not possible. Remember that they want to operate as efficiently as possible to not keep their team longer than necessary. You might need to continue your search but I believe most vendors should adjust and be flexible around what couples want.

A Last Word on Wedding Albums

Most real wedding album companies that are making quality books will not work with wedding couples. They are B2B only and verify that they are dealing with a real studio. This is much easier for the album companies of course to deal only with designers and photogs but leaves brides who want to make their own album with very few choices. So while you might think you're saving a lot by making your own album through some online company, the reality is you're more likely to end up with a book that's falling apart or fading in just a few years. Either get the album from your photographer or if it's not in the budget, save up and get one for an anniversary down the road.

Questions to ask your wedding photographer //

- What do you do in case of emergency if you end up in the hospital?
**There should be a solid backup plan laid out for you.
- Do I get the high resolution retouched digitals?
**Varies from studio to studio but these will be your archive to keep as you start your new family!
- Is your second photographer also a professional?
**It's important that the second photographer be just as skilled as the lead so that your album has a cohesive unified look and lighting. Ask the second photographer if they are a professional!
- How long until the wedding images are ready for proofing?
** For most studios it should be less than a month but ideally 2 weeks while the memories are fresh! Slight exemption for fine art wedding photogs who hand retouch every image.
- Are you a natural light photographer?
**It's possible that some are great using natural light but weddings almost always require use of some sort of off-camera light due to being dark.
- How many images do you shoot?
**If a studio is capturing more than a thousand images, it might feel less like a wedding and more of a photo shoot.
- Can I see a full wedding from start to finish?
**Studios should be proud to show you their work!
- How many images do you deliver?
**This really isn't important but I know you want to know! In fact the fewer the better because it means they're spending more quality time on fewer pieces. Remember...less is more.

Wedding First, Extras Second

It's easy to get swept away in the hundreds of options out there. Should we get those custom shot glasses? What about flip flops to hand out at the end of the night? Don't forget about that photo booth! Whoa whoa, slow down. Let's go back to what a wedding is. It's a celebration of the union of two people their families at the core. That gift you want to have on every guests seat? At least half of the guests will forget it and it will be swept away when the cleaning crew comes in.

Throwing money at a wedding will not always make it better. In fact some of the most engaging weddings I've seen are done on a shoe string budget in the basement of a church right after the ceremony on foldout tables. Shut up, really? Yes. It really is about the love and bringing-ness of friends and family together for a celebration. So what is the core of a great wedding? Great food and drink, a comfortable schedule for guests and music that caters to keeping the dance floor relatively full.

Midwest vs East Coast Style Wedding

Contrary to popular belief you don't just have to have a dinner hour followed by dancing all night. That style is called "Midwest". There's another wedding format called "East Coast".

East Coast style weddings are usually family style food service where the tables are preset with cold appetizers which guest sit and enjoy before introductions. Once the couple is introduced and does their first dance there's a dance set for all guests for approximately 30 minutes. Then the next course is served. 30 minutes later you dance again and the process repeats all through the night. Main course is often served after 9pm with cake cutting even later.

Why East Coast? When you give guests a break from a solid 90 minute dinner and then non-stop dancing, they actually lose track of time. On average I see East Coast style wedding parties have a lot more people interacting through the course of the night. Because your guests perception of time is skewed they end up actually staying later and dancing longer!

With Midwest style what happens is dinner ends and the dance floor fills up. But as folks get tired or need a break they sit off to the side. The East Coast format both allows folks to build up their appetite and take a break with this food-dance-food-dance format. If you can't go full on East Coast, then it's great to add in a dance set somewhere in between courses. It will make a huge difference.



DJ vs Band vs MC

It's easy to just think about good music which is absolutely important but there's one more thing to take note of. The MC (Master of Ceremonies) can add a whole new level to your wedding. What on earth do you mean Mr. Photographer? Let me explain. DJ's are often masters of their craft in terms of selecting music that will keep the dance floor full and smiles on folks faces. But an MC will go and interact with your wedding guests and truly be a guide through the course of the evening. For example a wedding DJ will announce "now it's time for the first dance". And some guests will look over to the dance floor and watch. But an MC will go the extra step and do things such as have folks gather around the dance floor, explain traditions, introduce folks giving a toast or speech. Partnering with a DJ or band, an MC can and will elevate any wedding.

A Few Secrets You Might Not Know Part Deux!

Digital Files

It's my personal belief that in today's day and age, digital files be a part of any wedding package. Not every other photographer agrees with me so there are many options. You can have web / low resolution files included which means that they will display on social media just fine but will not print. There are high resolution digital files which can be printed BUT you should ask if you get the retouched images. Sometimes the studio will edit your digitals and use those for your wedding album and other prints. But the files they deliver to you will be reset back to what they were before editing. Ask to see examples if you're not sure.

Copyright, RAW Files and Printing...Oh My!

The person that actually snaps the photo (at least in the US) owns the copyright by default. You shouldn't really need the photographer to release a copyright to you and if you ask for it, it's likely they'll ask you for quite a bit more money because it will be as if they never captured that photo in the eyes of the law. What you really want are "print rights". This will let you print all your images without worry.

RAW files vs JPG, should you care? Not really. For example most phones shoot JPG which you're likely familiar with. RAW files allow a lot more editing and adjustment of the images which is why almost every pro photog uses it. Should you ask for RAW files? We don't go into restaurants asking to see all the raw ingredients that make up our meal. Trust that your photographer is an artist and focus on the final product.

Not all printing is equal. Studios are usually editing based on calibrating their monitors to the final print products from whatever print lab they are using. Just as with album companies, many pro print labs will not work with couples and are B2B. Keep in mind that when you run off to print 200 copies of a photo as your holiday card at your local drug store, the colors may come out different from what's on your screen. Do a small test print first and make sure all is well before making any large prints. You don't want to get your 60x40 canvas only to notice that it has a massive green hue covering the whole thing.

To Feed Or Not To Feed?

There are photo or video studios out there which have it in their contract that you must feed them or other list other demands. First off I'll state that we're all big boys and girls and if you choose to not have a meal for your photo or video team that's ok. You're spending enough that we can all bring our own sandwich.

Now I will say that it is nice when a meal, even a boxed vendor lunch is provided. It's the simple fact that you thought of the folks who are with you the entire day that we're thankful for. But for me to demand it in my contract is bananas. Some studios go even further and require you to seat their team where all the guests are and get the same meal! This is of course because the don't want to miss an important moment during the reception but this can all be dealt with by them simply communicating with your wedding MC or coordinator. We're fine with even a boxed vendor meal which will be appreciated greatly.

Haggling Is Ok But Be Careful... We All Know Each Other

At a bridal show not long ago a bride walked up to our booth and had some questions about pricing. After a bit she said "I like your work but the photographer in the other booth offered to beat your price." The thing is I knew that photog and just about every other studio at the show. In fact we all had drinks that night after the show. So I looked over to the other booth and said "Hey Terry, did you discount your prices?" Terry responded "Nope, absolutely not." The bride seemed mildly embarrassed but I told her not to worry and just go with who she liked.

Photo, video, catering, etc.. most wedding vendors know each other. In fact each year I host a party during our down time for the various photogs in Chicago and contrary to what some might think most of us are friends. We know if you went with another vendor and there's nothing to be ashamed of. Asking for a discount or extras is ok, just ask! But I suggest to not start a bidding war. Good chance we'll call each other to verify.