

How to Choose a Wedding Videographer

Most brides spend months, if not years, dreaming about their wedding day – visualizing an event that will be as unique and sparkling as a snowflake, dazzlingly unlike any wedding before or yet to come, utterly fresh and magical. They may invest hours upon hours searching for the perfect wedding ring.

Yet when those brides look for a wedding videographer -- to capture a living record of that remarkable day, which they will be looking at as long as they're looking at their wedding rings (even if not as often) – most brides follow a very predictable pattern:

- They lump their search for a videographer along with shopping for other vendors, such as caterers, florists, and limousine companies.
- They wait until after choosing a photographer before locating a videographer.
- They give little thought to what they want their wedding video to actually be like; they just want to know it will be done.
- They make their final choice by price.



There is an old axiom in entrepreneurial circles: “Observe the masses – then do the opposite.” That also is good advice for any bride who wants a quality video of her wedding day. Hiring a videographer isn't just a matter of ticking off a check box somewhere on the pre-nuptial To Do list. For that matter, settling on the lowest bidder is no formula for securing a video that enthralls generations of viewers.

I will admit to a bias here, as a partner in a videography company that competes on quality, not on price. But statistics support the belief that brides who treat videography as a commodity often regret that view later.

Lessons Learned

The Wedding and Event Videographers Association (WEVA), an international professional group founded in the 1980s, commissioned a 2005 nationwide study to look at brides' attitudes about videography both before and after their weddings. The brides were asked to rank videography on a personal “Top 10” list of wedding priorities.

Prior to their weddings, barely 50% of the brides listed videography as a Top 10 item. However, after the weddings the emphasis changed dramatically. A whopping 79% of the brides placed videography among their Top 10 items for wedding planning.

I would bet that a follow-up survey, checking with brides a year or more after their weddings, would show the percentages climbing even higher. Here's why: Your video (and your photographs), unlike the contributions of other vendors, are the “to have and to hold” parts of your wedding celebration. They endure -- long after the bouquets have withered, the top of the cake has been taken out of the freezer and shared at an anniversary dinner, and you have forgotten whether the Mikasa platter was a gift from Aunt Sally or Cousin George.

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A Visual Heirloom

Only the video brings back the voices, the laughter, and the music – capturing not just how everyone looked, but how they were. It preserves moments to be relived and to be shared with people who weren't present (or weren't even born).

As time goes by, brides realize that their video was an investment. When they were looking for a caterer or a florist, they were shopping for an occasion. When they were choosing a videographer, they were indeed arranging to buy something that would last as long as their wedding rings.

So, move “Choose videographer” (along with “Choose photographer”) into a separate category on your wedding-planning list. You will live a long time with the consequences of those choices. Choose thoughtfully and choose well.

Be an Informed Buyer

Start by doing your homework. Look at the work of as many videographers as you can. Form an idea of what you want your own video to be like. Finally, make a selection based on the craftsmanship, experience, and personality of the videographer.

Why is “personality” part of the equation? Your videographer will be working closely

with you on one of the most important (and potentially one of the most stressful) days of your life. His or her people skills will be just as important as camera techniques and production skills.



If you're not comfortable with a videographer during your interview process, you certainly won't be comfortable with them training a lens on you an hour before the ceremony – when you're still waiting for your flowers, because the florist's van took a wrong turn, and your maid of honor has just discovered she may have left her shoes at home. Look for someone with a supportive attitude who can be part of the solution -- not part of the problem -if things don't go quite as planned. (Tip: They rarely do.)

How do you judge a videographer's craftsmanship? As with any other major purchase, it's wise to become a knowledgeable consumer. If you've only seen one or two wedding videos, then you have little to go by. Look at a lot of wedding videos – as many as possible.

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Where to Start

Bridal fairs are a fine place to start your survey. Most bridal fairs will have exhibits by at least three or four videographers. As you notice how various professionals approach their craft, you will get a sense of how they handle visual composition, timing, transitions, titling, and the use of special effects. More important, you'll form a clearer idea of what you like.

You can do a lot of evaluating online. Most professional videographers have web sites that feature sample clips. Do a web search for videographers in your area, then browse their sites. (Tip: While you're there, you also may see quotes from satisfied clients. Once you narrow down your choices to a handful of videographers, ask if you can talk to some of those clients about their experiences.)



Use Eyes and Ears

Pay attention to audio quality. Experienced videographers use wireless microphones during the ceremony and the reception to be certain they fully capture your vows, and the speeches of friends and family. Audio is a critical element. If you find a ceremony video where the only microphone used was the one on the camcorder – and the audio has so much room reverberation in it that it sounds like it was recorded in an airplane hangar – look elsewhere.

Some videographers will give you sample DVDs or video CDs. Those allow you further opportunities to study and compare styles. They also help you get an idea of how different videographers design DVD menus and organize DVD content. (Practically no one delivers videos on VHS cassettes now, unless asked to do so. DVDs offer far superior image quality and navigation.)

Does all this sound like a lot of homework? Well, yes. But remember the point: You will live with the consequences of your choice for the rest of your life (and your children and grandchildren will live with the consequences, too). You will be glad you made the extra effort.

Learning the Landscape

Another benefit of surveying many video companies is that you'll learn what's available in the way of additional services. Wedding videographers can do more than just point cameras and roll tape on your wedding day.

For example, many companies offer "Love Story" videos (sometimes called "vignettes" or "couple stories") as well – either as part of a wedding package, or as an a la carte selection. For a Love Story, usually the videographer will arrange a separate shooting date well

in advance of your wedding day. You and your fiancé will be taped, perhaps individually or perhaps together, talking about how you met and what drew you to one another. Often you will do this in a setting that has special meaning to you, such as at a favorite park or at a beach. Footage of the two of you walking hand in hand will be edited into the finished video – which becomes part of your final package, and which may also be shown for your guests at the wedding reception.

Another popular enhancement is a photo montage. You provide your videographer with photos of yourself and your fiancé, from your baby pictures all the way through your engagement pictures, and those are scanned and edited into a custom video presentation, set to music. This too can be shown at your wedding reception.

(Some couples prefer to have photo montages projected as a feature attraction during the reception meal. Others prefer to have them playing continuously on a video monitor somewhere in the reception area, such as at a special table with the guest book and family mementos.)

Counting the Cost

As you survey videography companies, you will find yourself collecting package brochures and price lists. Probably you will notice wide variations in prices and descriptions. There are no well-defined "standard services" in wedding videography. Videographers have different ways of bundling their services, calculating fees, and setting payment terms.

The basic cost components in a typical video package (a group of services and "deliverables" -- such as DVDs -- at a single price) tend to be:

- How many camera operators cover your event.
- How many hours of coverage they provide.
- How many add-ons (such as a photo montage) are included.
- How extensive the editing of the footage will be.
- How many final copies of your video you receive.

Certainly there can be other factors, but those are the most common. What price range should you expect? Sorry, there is no pat answer to that one. The market for videography in your area will have a lot to do with the numbers you find. All things being equal, you can expect to pay more in, say, New York City than you would for a comparable package in Twin Falls, Idaho. And in some places you might see companies discounting packages for weddings during the off-season (roughly from November to March), when business is slower.

Some videographers don't charge by the hour, but provide all-day coverage at one package price; others offer a graduated scale, providing more time for more money. Some companies have packages that mix and match the number of camera operators, offering two cameras for preparation and ceremony and a single camera for the reception; some limit their packages to strictly single-camera or strictly multi-camera options.



Minimums and Maximums

A bare-bones, low-end package, possibly costing in the hundreds of dollars, might provide single-camera, ceremony-only coverage

– with the videographer just handing over the tape cassette afterward. At the other extreme, the sky is the limit.

It's not unheard of for top-tier videographers with established metropolitan studios to charge \$10,000 or more for a deluxe package that includes multi-camera coverage of your rehearsal, wedding-day preparations, ceremony, and reception, along with a scripted, multi-camera Love Story, a photo montage, and perhaps Same-day Highlights as well. Highly sought-after videographers can command top-dollar fees. The national average probably is closer to \$2,500 - \$3,500, but your mileage may vary. (Same-day Highlights, which are increasingly popular, involve having a video editor go along with the camera operators. As taping ends for each part of your wedding day, the tapes are rushed to the editor, who pulls some of the best clips and fashions them into a special presentation. By the time your reception guests are ready for dessert, the highlights are ready for screening. Obviously this requires well-coordinated efforts by skilled professionals, and the prices usually reflect that.)

As video technology begins entering a new phase, more and more videographers are offering High Definition (HD) video as an option. If that is important to you, be sure to ask your videographer; but be prepared to pay extra for it. Someday HD will be the norm – but it isn't yet. Videographers have to pay a premium for HD cameras and HD editing technology now, and typically those costs get passed along to customers.

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Read the Fine Print

When will you have to get out your checkbook? Here, too, there are no real standards. One common arrangement is the 1/3 – 1/3 – 1/3 plan, where you pay one-third of the package price as a booking deposit, one-third

in advance (usually a month or so) of the actual wedding, and one-third when the final DVDs are delivered. Also common is the 1/2 – 1/2 plan, where you pay one-half of the package price as a booking deposit, and one-half a specified time before the wedding date.



Be aware that the deposits normally are non-refundable. If you make a last-minute change in your wedding date and your videographer isn't available on the new date, you may not get your money back. (That clause protects the video company from taking a complete loss if it can't fill the vacated date on short notice.)

All the variations make it doubly important for you to understand what you're getting when you finally sign a contract for wedding videography. Study the package description and ask questions about anything that isn't clear to you. If you find you have to make compromises on price because of a limited budget, then be clear about adjusting your expectations. That will avoid misunderstandings later. ("You mean we don't get...?" "No, I'm sorry, you didn't pay for...")

Don't Be in a Hurry

Contrary to what you might think, the better videographers won't necessarily deliver your finished video soon after your honeymoon. A videographer's work has only begun when the cameras shut down at the end of the reception.

There is a rule of thumb that a minute of finished video requires at least an hour of editing. I've found that the ratio actually can be higher when it comes to creating polished, tightly edited wedding videos. Besides, if your videographer is really in demand, he or she will have a backlog of wedding videos to work through before getting to yours. If you're the only customer, that might be cause for concern.

At our company, we advise brides to expect their videos within four to six months after the wedding. The videographer you choose may have a different timetable; but don't be surprised if the wait is measured in months, not weeks. Quality video production takes time.



Don't Delay

It is a good idea to book your videographer as far in advance as possible. The earlier you book, the more likely it is that the company you want will be available on the day you've chosen. It isn't unusual to book a year and a half ahead. (Another benefit of booking early is that when you lock in a date, you lock in a rate. Video companies often adjust their prices annually. When you book far enough in advance, you may end up paying less for the same package than someone who only books six months ahead.)

Don't leave the selection of your videographer until after you've chosen your venue, or your photographer. Consider different videographers and photographers at the same time. Ask video companies which photographers they recommend, and vice versa. When you have videographers and photographers who have worked well with one another before, the total on your wedding day can be greater than the sum of the parts. Good visual pros feed off one another's creativity. That teamwork can make a significant difference in the finished visual products. It's certainly better than having professionals who aren't acquainted worrying about just staying out of one another's way – or worse, getting territorial about who has rights to the best camera angles.

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Expert Options

Ideally, don't even choose your ceremony and reception venues until you've consulted with your videographer and your photographer. They can give you valuable insights on which places will make for the most attractive footage and pictures, or which places to avoid. ("Yes, it's a lovely spot for an outdoor wedding – but if the ceremony is after 2 p.m. in June, the wind off the water will have your veil blowing straight out as you go down the aisle.") This doesn't mean you give your visual professionals the last word, of course; but it does mean you can reach a more informed decision.

Finally, talk to other brides if at all possible. They can be your best sources about the levels of skill and customer service that a video company offers. If they were happy with what they got, it's likely you will be too. After you've thoroughly done your homework, and trimmed your list of candidates down to two or three companies, then you can come back to these key questions:

1. Will I like having these people around me constantly on my wedding day?
 2. Am I confident they will create a one-of-a-kind video that my husband and I will treasure for the rest of our lives?
- When the answer to both questions is "Yes," you've found your videographer.

Article courtesy TeamWedding.com -
Home of Top Wedding Video Sites

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