

BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES

Wedding bells ring up big business

Entrepreneurs thrive in bridal industry

For many of us, weddings represent the promise of enduring love and commitment, but to others they represent a chance to say "I do" to a business opportunity. U.S. weddings amass \$38 billion to \$42 billion in sales annually.

According to Linnyette Richardson-Hall, founder of the Association of Minority Wedding Professionals and columnist and contributing editor for *Signature Bride Magazine*, the average U.S. couple spend \$17,000-\$19,000 on their wedding. Although much of that is spent on big-ticket items—the catering hall, a wedding gown—specialists such as favor-makers and wedding consultants can earn as much as 10% of the total wedding cost, enough, she says, to fuel a business.

Mayai Chatman of Jamaica, New York, became a wedding consultant five years ago after friends and relatives convinced her that the work she'd been doing for free was of the caliber of highly paid professionals.

Chatman diligently researched market trends. She attended bridal shows and read industry magazines before launching Wedding Day Inc. She made an initial \$5,000 investment for a computer, office supplies, sales and marketing, and to create a custom-designed wedding planner software application.

The business took about three years to show a profit. She started with a handful of customers and kept fees very conservative, charging only \$600 for top-shelf service—design and coordination of a full-day wedding.

As a result of steady client referrals and Yellow Pages ads, Chatman now turns down accounts, limiting herself to 16 weddings annually. Her top-to-show a profit. She started with a handful of customers and kept fees very conservative, charging only \$600 for top-shelf service—design and coordination of a full-day wedding.

As a result of steady client referrals

Chatman is also Royal Caribbean Cruise Line's on-board wedding coordinator, teaches classes on starting a wedding consulting business at Queens College in New York and has written a book on the same topic.



Chatman designs and coordinates elegant weddings

Rhonda McLean, president of Rhonda's Greetings in Cleveland, is laying the foundation for a business she hopes will replace her current full-time job. McLean spends off-hours and weekends, or about 10 hours per week, filling orders for personalized wedding accessories, such as invitations and guest books.

McLean started in 1997 by purchasing two professional wedding-invitation books for about \$110 and began taking orders. She also participated in a local bridal show and advertised, bringing her first year's expenses to \$1,500. The business broke even that year, but through continued advertising and a strategic partnership with a cake maker, sales chasing two professional wedding-invitation books for about \$110 and began taking orders. She also participated in a local bridal show and advertised, bringing her first year's expenses to \$1,500. The business

Like McLean and Chatman, many wedding professionals run their businesses from home offices, keeping overhead low. Phone bills are typically the biggest expense, along with industry trade shows, which can cost \$650-\$1,000 to attend but provide good contacts and sales leads.

Although most weddings take place from June through October, planning for warm-weather events takes place months in advance, and winter weddings are becoming more popular.

To turn her wedding-related skills into additional revenue, McLean began making novelty Christmas cards and bookmarks this year, while Richardson-Hall has diversified her company, Premier Event Management, to include corporate and non-wedding-related events.

"Just about anyone with creative talent or service can get involved in the wedding industry," says Lois Pearce, director of ethnic diversity for the Association of Bridal Consultants in New Milford, Connecticut. "But make sure you have the business sense to complement the creative side—otherwise, like any other business, it will fail." —Deidra-Ann Parrish

Wedding Industry Sources

Association of Bridal Consultants:

Publishes a newsletter and offers seminars and workshops. 860-355-0464 or e-mail: bridalassn@aol.com

Association of Minority Wedding Professionals:

Publishes a member Services

Consultants:

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