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Wearing white, staying in the black

Brides' big day gets downsized

By JENALIA MORENO Copyright 2009 Houston Chronicle

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Chelsea Blechman recently got engaged and is nervous.

But it's not just a case of pre-wedding jitters. It's the recession.

She's sliced her guest list in half to 100 people and decided to host her big day in the fall instead of the summer to give her time to save.

"Every girl dreams of their wedding. You want it to be over the top," said Blechman, a college student whose fiance's home was damaged by Hurricane Ike. "You have to be realistic now."

A growing number of couples are cutting back on guest lists, ordering less elaborate floral arrangements, and downsizing on wedding cakes.

Cost-cutting is showing up in surveys and being noticed by those in the wedding industry.

According to a December survey by retailer David's Bridal, 75 percent of respondents said the economy forced them to adjust their budget or reconsider their wedding plans.

"People are just scared they're going to walk into their jobs on Monday and they're not going to have their jobs," said Cristina Garza, owner of Fresh Blooms of Houston.

"They're not splurging as much as they used to."

In the past, brides would order an array of arrangements, even some to place in restrooms, Garza said.

Now, they ask, "Can I buy the flowers from you and do it ourselves?" Garza said.

Hunting for deals

Like Blechman, many brides-to-be will be turning out at the George R. Brown Convention Center this weekend hunting for deals among the calla lily bouquets, butter cream cakes and tulle gowns showcased at the Bridal Extravaganza Show.

"In hard economic times, a show like ours become even more important," said Laurette Veres, producer of the bridal show that's expected to attract 5,000 brides.

The January event comes on the heels of the holiday season, when 25 percent of brides get engaged, said Cindi Freeburn, spokeswoman for Philadelphia-based David's Bridal.

"We call it bridal Christmas," said Freeburn, whose company has seen an uptick in sales of its more expensive dresses.

The downtown bridal shows can generate up to half of Edible Designs by Jessie's sales.

"Honestly, I'm a little worried," said owner Jessie Lopez. "I think the economy is hurting everybody."

The pastry chef is planning to bring simpler cakes to the two-day show to cater to a bride's smaller budget.

"I'm seeing that brides are not spending as much as they used to," said Lopez, who will hand out 3,000 samples of bride's and groom's cake this weekend. "They want the cheapest designs. They want to do fake cakes. They want to do sheet cakes and things like that."

About four months ago, Lopez began noticing tightening bridal budgets.

Until the summer, Garza would limit herself to working on no more than two weddings a weekend. But now that most brides are ordering less expensive flowers and arrangements, she works longer hours so she can deliver flowers to up to four nuptials per weekend.

Feeling the pinch

Wedding planners especially are feeling the pinch.

"We've had more brides coming in asking for reduced prices on our packages," said wedding planner Alia Rdissi, of Belle of the Ball. "The one advantage we do have being in this business is that people are always going to get married. They may not have the biggest wedding that they were going to because of the economy."

The event planning company may have to reduce its package prices, which start at \$3,000 for tying up the details for the month before a wedding and helping on the big day.

Even wealthy families are looking to save money by holding weddings in other countries to help keep the tab down.

"The trend we are seeing nationwide is people are doing more destination weddings," said Alex Martinez, of Flair Productions. "They don't want to cut down on the event as a fabulous party but they want to cut down on the guest list."

He said that some brides can spend \$80,000 on a wedding in Playa del Carmen, Mexico for what would have cost \$200,000 in Houston.

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