

NEWS

## Wedding price tag

*Area brides budget more but still plan for their dream day*

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The economy may be tighter, but couples in love are still spending money to have their perfect wedding.

Theresa Konitz, who ties the knot with her 21-year-old fiance Justin Hardy on Aug. 23, said she didn't even look at the price tag on her \$1,100 wedding dress until she was at the cash register.

"I didn't want to be worrying about that in my head," said 22-year-old Konitz of Williston.

For Konitz, skimping on the dress was not an option, but for other factors the price tag mattered a little more.

She said she expected a buffet to be cheaper than a sit-down meal during her reception at Steinbrenners Ramada Inn and Conference Center in Ocala.

"Buffet was not cheaper, which we were very surprised at," Konitz said. "We switched to sit-down."

Nationally, about 2.5 million couples get married every year, spending from a conservative estimate of \$40 billion to a growing estimate of \$70 billion, according to wedding industry Web sites.

Although the total costs for a wedding will vary, depending on the bride's preferences, some owners and employees of bridal stores, florists and reception halls say that brides may be budgeting more, but are still planning for their dream day.

"They might tone it down," said John Stephen, who co-owns Solutions Bridal & Formalwear on SW Archer Road in Gainesville with Newell Fox and Jeff Adams. "The reception may not be as grand, and the gown may not be as expensive."

Stephen said he thinks all brides prioritize and budget everything to their means.

"Some brides want pictures or the gown as the priority, or even the DJ," said Stephen, who has eight years of experience in the industry and is about to celebrate the store's one-year anniversary.

Bridal gowns at Solutions Bridal cost between \$1,000 and \$6,500, he said. He added that the economy isn't hitting the business too hard, as they are getting ready to open a second shop in Orlando on Sept. 1.

"People are going to get married no matter what's going on with the economy," he said.

Paul Rhodenizer, owner of Jay's Bridal & Special Occasion at the Creekside Mall in Gainesville, said the wedding industry is "recession resistant."

The average cost of a wedding, including the wedding apparel, rings, reception, flowers and photographer, ranges from \$22,000 to \$23,000, Rhodenizer said.

Christen McGinnis, event planner at Crevasse's Regency Florist Inc. in Gainesville, estimated that weddings usually range from \$15,000 to \$25,000, with an average of \$20,000 to \$22,000. But she noted that every bride is different and it depends on what she wants.

Floral arrangements for the wedding can range in price from \$100 to \$6,500, depending on the bride's desires, McGinnis said.

Konitz said she's paying \$400 for her flowers, which is slightly higher than her budgeted price of \$350, because she ordered roses, a more expensive flower.

McGinnis said some brides just want a bridal bouquet, while others may want boutonnieres, altar arrangements and centerpieces for the tables at the reception. The majority of the bridal customers are on a budget, she said.

"We'd rather work with their budget than turn them away," McGinnis added.

Rhodenizer noted that the bride does not pay all the costs, rather the costs are split among the bride, groom, parents of both and the wedding party.

For example, the bride and groom may pay for the honeymoon and transportation, and the bride may pay for the DJ and reception, he said.

Konitz said she began planning her wedding in January and sent her father, who is paying the greatest share, a budget proposal of \$13,000, which includes the dress, flowers, photographer and reception hall.

"He accepted that bid," Konitz said. She said that she and the groom are paying for their honeymoon to Maui, Hawaii, while the groom's parents are paying for the rehearsal dinner. Also, the bridesmaids and groomsmen are paying for their wedding apparel, she said.

Even though Konitz's wedding cost is below Rhodenizer's and McGinnis' average, she's all right with that, she said.

"I think I have what I want," Konitz said. "I'm not missing anything."

Both Konitz and McGinnis agreed that the reception is the biggest expense.

"Your reception could easily be 50 percent of your budget, if not more," McGinnis said.

Factors include whether there is an open bar, no alcohol, buffet-style food or a sit-down dinner, she said.

McGinnis said some brides want the reception to be the first priority.

"A lot of people want the reception to be a fun party," McGinnis said. "That's where people are spending a majority of their time."

Cornelia Holbrook, owner of the Sweetwater Branch Inn on East University Avenue in Gainesville, which hosts weddings, receptions and rehearsal dinners, also agreed that receptions are the most expensive aspect of a wedding.

"We've definitely noticed that people are much more price-conscious," Holbrook said.

For example, receptions on a primetime Saturday evening in the spring and fall will cost about \$50 to \$55 per guest. That price includes rental of the facility, as well as food, tax and gratuity, she said.

But Holbrook said that she has been working to accommodate lower budgets on Friday evenings, Saturday mornings and Sundays.

Prices to rent McKenzie Hall (the reception hall at Sweetwater) on Friday are about \$49 per guest and on Sunday \$52 or \$53 per guest, said Claudia Hardy, event coordinator at Sweetwater.

Holbrook said there is also a smaller McKenzie House, which accommodates up to 80 guests for hors d'oeuvres.

It's typically 20 percent less expensive, depending on the day of the week it's rented, she said.

Holbrook added that the cost of maintaining a Victorian-style reception hall is increasing and it's been a difficult year.

"We can't afford to turn people away," Holbrook said. "So we're accommodating the market."

One aspect of this is for the bride to be flexible with dates of the reception, Hardy said.

Andrea Stivender, owner of Savannah Grande Reception Hall on North Main Street in Gainesville, said that business has been "pretty consistent," and that the facility hosts at least one wedding a weekend, if not more, she said.

Stivender said she thinks the slower economy has not hit the industry as hard as others.

"They may save a little longer or plan more carefully, but people are still getting married," she said.