

THE WOW FACTOR



CREATING
YOUR EVENT
and DESIGNING
YOUR CAREER in
EVENT PLANNING



Rená
Puebla





My Story

Many years before I planned celebrity birthdays and million-dollar weddings, I was a little girl whose guilty pleasure was sitting at the top of the banister, watching beautiful guests saunter in and out of the parties that my mother used to host in our home. My memories of growing up in the 1950s and 1960s include many celebrations—the house bursting with flowers, the women laughing in exquisite outfits. It was a beautiful time.

My mother would let my sister and me come downstairs to greet the guests, but then we were immediately sent upstairs to go to bed in our lovely little robes. Children were seen but not heard. That's what my beloved grandmother would always say. If a party at the house was for adults who were not immediate relatives, my sister and I were not allowed to socialize.

My grandmother's protectiveness was a product of her strong, loving disposition. Her support for her children and grandchildren was unwavering. No matter what I wanted to pursue, my grandmother would say, "You can do this. If you work hard and do the right thing, you will be blessed."

"Doing the right thing" included everything from being positive to dressing properly. It was being true to myself, but also not using slang, not chewing gum and crossing my legs when I sat down. My grandmother took us to nice restaurants and trained us to observe proper etiquette. She'd say, "You can be poor, but you don't have to be ignorant. You don't have to be dirty." She always insisted that we didn't have to try to assert our differences from others by sporting the latest Afro or talking a certain way. "Everybody already knows you're black," she'd say. "Just be a lady."

I am a hardworking woman, and I believe that whether I work or give back to one individual or a large corporation, I should always give 150%. But even today, no

When I was forty years old, I received an uncanny phone call from a loved one and learned that my family had celebrated two religions while I was growing up. I have memories of celebrating Christmas and Easter in addition to Passover, and Hanukkah, but I was never told why. It never occurred to me that I was anything but Catholic, which I only assumed I was because I attended a Catholic school. Suddenly here I was at age forty, being told that I was Jewish.

I was born in the 1950s, when nobody said much about religion—especially Judaism. I obediently followed my grandmother to a black synagogue on Broad Street in Philadelphia. I admired the gorgeous Star of David in the window at the entrance, but I didn't know to call it the Star of David back then. All I knew was that the gentlemen used to wear little beanies, but I assumed that they were Catholic because I wore a beanie with my uniform when I attended St. Theresa's, the Catholic school right across the street from the synagogue. Later, I figured out that the "beanies" were actually yarmulkes.

Both the synagogue and the school have been torn down since then, and the relatives who would have known more than I did have all passed away now. It amazes me that for forty years, I didn't know that we were Jewish. But then again, the fifties and sixties were no time to be both African American *and* Jewish. As my grandmother said, that's like having two strikes against you. Martin Luther King, Jr. hadn't yet come to Philadelphia, and it was understood that you just did your own praying in the home; you didn't talk about it.

As a young girl, I attended mass every day through Catholic school, then accompanied my grandmother to the Temple on Friday nights, and then I wasn't allowed to do anything on Saturdays, which my grandmother called the Sabbath. And nothing was explained to us. When we had to abide by Jewish fasts, I would scream and cry because I couldn't have food, but even then, I was told nothing.

My unique background is important in the context of event planning because it gave me a high comfort level with all different backgrounds. I grew up in black America, but I also grew up in black Hebrew society and in Catholic society. I was trained from a young age to possess sensitivity toward all groups of people. I aim to learn as much as I can about others. Even though different people have different beliefs, we're all connected. We're all human beings, and we all have feelings.

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Growing up in so many different circles meant twice as many holidays to celebrate. It's no wonder that my life now revolves around helping diverse people celebrate all kinds of events!

Although I naturally loved celebrating, I didn't realize that helping others celebrate could be a passion and a skill until a while later. When I got married and became a mother, I was very involved with my daughter's schools and helped with fundraisers and events. Prior to this chapter in my life, I had never done fundraising or volunteer work; my grandmother did that. Then I worked for a telecommunication company called ROLM, where I became the go-to party planner who helped out with many of the events there.

Eventually, a lot of people complimented my work and my organizing skills. I think they were actually commenting on some of the personal skills I had developed when my grandmother sent me to finishing school. The concept of finishing school may not even exist today, but back in the day, it's where young ladies went in order to learn how to sit properly at the table, eat properly, not laugh out loud, and generally compose themselves with dignity. That's how we do things on the East Coast!

People started to ask me, "Why don't you think about doing this as a business?" At the time, I said no because my daughter, who was eleven years old, was still in school. But as she got older, I started looking into the event planning business, took classes, and read books that taught me about how to fold napkins, how to set proper tables, how to serve people, and how to manage intricate details that matter in this industry. I grew up in a family that valued education, so I grabbed every opportunity I could find to learn more about the business. Even now, I seek out new menus and fabrics, and can't sleep at night because I'm constantly thinking about which client would love which new sauce I recently tried.

Before the event planning side of my business emerged, I was more of a concierge who performed one-on-one services for executives. For example, if my clients were traveling, I would go to their home, pick up items for them, mail letters, purchase food, feed the turtle, and replenish their refrigerator, handle their dry cleaning, find

the best tickets in town for a show or set up their dinner parties for them.

I started my concierge business in 1986. But when the economy dipped and entered the downturn in the early nineties, I had to reevaluate and reinvent my business. Executives were spending less money on services such as hiring someone to pick up their dry cleaning and get their car washed on-site. So I had to move beyond one-on-one work and go corporate. And with corporations, event planning was the new revenue source.

~ Around the same time, the wedding business was becoming a large industry, although weddings weren't exactly what I wanted to do on a regular basis. With weddings, event planners sometimes have to deal with a fleet of people. They all have emotions and sometimes they have conflicting emotions. It can make you crazy! In the corporate setting, by contrast, you typically deal with maybe one or two people who will ask you to put on an event for the company without micromanaging you.

Handling events is a completely different affair from handling someone's dry cleaning. It's also not as glamorous or as easy as an hour-long television segment on event planning might have you believe. This is a multibillion dollar industry, but the premium is so high because events need to be planned *flawlessly*.

Corporate or social events can afford a tiny hiccup here and there, but they still have to give off the illusion of being flawless where it counts. For corporate and social events, as long as the client is happy, the food is served on time, the program is on time, and the guests are enjoying themselves, you've pulled off a successful event.

Weddings, on the other hand, happen only once for your client (you hope!!!), and they must be perfect. The tiniest detail gone awry can compromise the entire event. If a cake is cut wrong or not cut exactly the way the bride wants, then the entire wedding can be a disaster, for the bride and groom. Then if the bride is upset, the husband can become quite nasty, too. In a corporate setting, the client doesn't fixate on minute details. In events that aren't weddings, it doesn't matter whether everything actually is flawless as long as your client and the guests *tell* you that

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everything is perfect. But every detail of a wedding is being scrutinized—from the dress to the flowers to the music to the ceremony attendant, the invitations, the cake toppings, and so much more. And everything is magnified.

As a personal rule, I only put on two to four weddings each year. The rest of my events are corporate and social. I thrive and my work thrives when I have more freedom to create and execute my vision perfectly without too many chiefs telling me what to do. I didn't enter the event planning business to take the money and run while hating every moment of it. Event planning isn't a job to me—it's a passion. I've made sure that my business continues to be something I love to do.

The events I've planned in the last twenty-five years have ranged from incredibly intimate affairs to extravagant citywide projects. The fee ranges depending on the details of the event and the client's preferences. I've put on million-dollar events for clients with only 100 guests. And I've also planned larger events that were spectacular for 500 people that cost a lot less. The cost of the event will depend on the needs and wants of the clients, and what you can get for them in accordance with those needs and wants.

A client who wants custom linens and napkins with the company logo, gold-plated flatware, and beluga caviar will obviously pay more than a client who's willing to forego very expensive endangered fish roe. Some weddings are large and local. Others may be intimate, but take place on an island where the client wants to fly in every guest. Some wedding cakes and birthday cakes cost as much as \$6,000, sometimes more. On the other hand, some women spend as little as \$100 on their wedding dress. Each client's dreams and priorities are unique. And the size and fee for an event depends completely on the client's expectations.

One of the most intimate events I planned was a wedding for about thirty people. But, because of the certain type of champagne and locations that the bride requested, the wedding cost somewhere between \$75,000 and \$100,000.

I also recently put on a centennial for a city, which was a lovely experience. I was contacted two weeks before the event. When they brought me in, the location for the event was literally a pile of dirt!! This overwhelmed all the other event planners

before me, but I didn't let myself stop to feel rushed, or stressed. I took it for what it was, and it only took me two weeks to plan it out. The people I dealt with at City Hall embraced our expertise and allowed us to wow them with the event while they took care of their city. The end result was perfect for everyone involved, and the city officials said that we basically put them on the map. They said that the centennial was the most elegant thing they had ever experienced in their city. They told us that they now understood the value of hiring a professional with years of experience in a certain field and getting what they pay for.

Over the years, I have planned events for companies such as Xerox, Coca-Cola, and Pepsi. When IBM purchased ROLM—the telecommunications company I first worked with—I helped them with their Christmas parties, small birthdays, and other private events. Clients have made requests for food to be flown in from Europe, and Taco Bell Corporate once made a request for Tina Turner. When Tina wasn't available, they managed to get Huey Lewis. The strangest request I ever received was from a new university that asked for a lion. It wouldn't have been difficult to acquire the lion, but because of the many children milling around, I decided against the animal and turned down the potentially dangerous requests.

Nearly all of my events—whether high profile or not—have been flawless. This is because my standards are off the charts, my work is meticulous, and I choose the clients for whom I will be a right match. When you let your passion guide you, the possibilities are limitless.

When I was a young mother organizing school fundraisers for my daughter, I didn't imagine planning red carpet movie premieres. Then when I finally started my business and expanded my dreams, I didn't have a blueprint to guide my next steps. This is why I've written this book.

I've divided my book into two parts—one for the event planner, or the person considering entering this amazing field, and the other for the client. Both sections are relevant to both audiences and include information that will be valuable to everyone who wants to put on the perfect event...or simply select the right person to make his or her event perfect.

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- **Part One, “The Business of Event Planning,”** is for the dreamer—the budding event planner who wants both inspiration and information as the new business begins. If you want to be a successful event planner and make this a viable career, read this section! I will guide you through the logistics of putting together an event—from choosing the perfect client to acquiring insurance to pricing, location scouting, building relationships with vendors, and more.
- **Part Two, “Planning Your Event,”** is for the event host. Whether you are a bride, or a company executive, or an event planner who wants to understand the client better, this section will help you understand the importance of hiring a professional event planner. The cheapest way isn’t always the least expensive way, but neither is a pricey event. I will show you how to spot a well-seasoned event planner, how to ask the right questions, and how to get the best bang for your buck.

Even when I got married, I hired someone to help me piece my wedding together to relieve some of the stress I would have felt on the wedding day. It also allowed me to interact with my guests without distractions; I didn’t have to worry so much because I knew somebody else was doing some of the worrying for me to make sure everything went smoothly. No one can put on a flawless event without extra help. Even when I accept an engagement to plan extravagant events, I seek out a team of service professionals to fine-tune the countless details.

I love this business. Anything can happen at an event, which is why it’s important to be prepared and well educated as you begin planning your event. If you are a company that wants to host guests from all over the world, you have to bring in the right person who can execute an event and who will understand the etiquette regarding how to handle specific international guests. Some people have eating restrictions. Others have unique customs that oftentimes are overlooked because in the United States, we tend to throw events and expect that our guests will be like-minded. A perfect event is one that keeps the guest in mind, and that’s where the perfect event planner enters the picture.

I love people and I love exploring different cultures and different places. Event planning is a fascinating industry because every event provides you with the opportunity to learn something new. But the industry is only fascinating if you approach it the right way. If you plan events strictly for the money without having a passion for the work, the details in your event will give you away. By the end of this book, you will know how to tell that difference.

So let's begin with you, the event planner. In the next chapter, we will start thinking about the most crucial aspect of your business: your client. You can't have a business without a client, but without the right client, you will have a bad business. So who are the perfect clients? And how do you find them? Follow me to the next chapter and I'll tell you my secrets about how to get started on your dream career!

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Choosing Your Perfect Client

In the event planning business, your success and the success of your events depend largely on your clients. So before you build your business, let's spend some time talking about the people whose fabulous events you want to plan. Who are they? How do you find them? How do you keep them?

After celebrating my twenty-fifth anniversary as an event planner, I realize that the reason we've been successful is because *we select the clients who work with us*. I don't take an event just because it has dollar signs on it. And neither should you. No matter how new you are to the business, you can define your idea of the perfect client. You don't have to work with just anyone.

The perfect client is someone who respects your expertise and listens to you. Although the event belongs to your client, you are the professional being hired for your event planning expertise. A client who makes endless demands and says, "This is exactly how I want my event done," is not the ideal client. If a client wants to micromanage an event, then that client doesn't even *need* an event planner! The perfect client, however, will sit down with you, listen to you, and respect your ideas while giving productive feedback according to what they want for their event. They won't be aggressive with you and they won't step on your toes. They should show you respect as a professional.

A client who listens to you will generally also be a kind and gracious person. It's important to work with a client who shares your similar values for kindness and professionalism. Your client should also resonate with your moral and ethical standards, and you should adhere to those of your client, as well. Once, a gorgeous woman who was referred to me by another client told me that she wanted to forego the traditional wedding gown on her special day. Instead, she wanted to walk down the aisle on the

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yacht in Newport Beach in her exquisite, one-piece wedding bathing suit, custom-made with a beautiful, long train. This woman had undergone plastic surgery and wanted to show off her body on her wedding day. The problem was that this bathing suit was also a thong. And her future in-laws were Mormon and very religious and conservative.

I turned down the woman...and her bathing suit! I had no desire to look at her exposed derrière during the event, and I thought that her decision would disrespect the groom's side of the family. I could have easily taken the money. I could have looked the other way and planned her lovely yacht wedding. But I didn't want to watch the appalled faces as the woman walked down the aisle in that bathing suit. She was gorgeous, but this was an inappropriate time to show off her body. I didn't want to participate in a wedding in which the bride was more concerned about celebrating her physique than about celebrating her love and celebrating the union of two families.

You don't have to sell yourself short and ignore your ethics to work with a client you won't be happy with. I want to give 150% to all of my clients, so if a potential client is rude or disrespectful, I don't want anything to do with them because I know that I will not be 150% invested in that client's event. The simplest gestures, such as not saying thank you after a meeting, can be red flags that indicate that this client will be difficult to work with. But if a client listens, is gracious, and possesses manners and integrity, then I take on that client because I want to make them and their event shine. They don't necessarily have to agree with all my ideas, but they do need to respect me and my time.

When I first launched my business, it was difficult for me to turn down bad clients. For many new business owners, the perfect client is anyone with a pulse and a credit card. But working with horrible clients results in a career that you don't enjoy and an event that can blow up in your face. Event planning is my passion, and I want it to continue being my passion. So in order to enjoy my work, I set standards on what kind of clients I would take, and my business has been fabulous ever since.

The Perfect Wedding Client

After my early years in business, I made it a rule to take on only two to four weddings per year. The reason for this is because planning a wedding is an extremely detailed and time consuming event; if you want to throw the perfect event for each client, you don't want to overbook your schedule (keep in mind you will have other events besides weddings to plan too!), or your vendors. I am, therefore, very selective about whom I choose as a wedding client. I generally prefer to work with a more mature couple whose parents, for many people, but not all, have hired me because they both have careers and they want a professional to design the perfect wedding for their daughter. These parents will give me a little bit of input, but they won't micro-manage me. On the other hand, if a bride's mother has dreamed about her daughter's wedding from the day that daughter was born, and this mother doesn't work and has no interests outside this one daughter, then the event planning becomes a mess.

The first or second meeting with a client is a good time to gauge whether the client is right for you. If a couple says, "We're not paying for the entire wedding. Our grandparents are paying for the flowers, our mom and dad are handling the band," and then they go into details about the various sets of families because the parents are divorced and about how they need to include the dad's new wife's opinion, then it might be time to back out. When a committee of people wants to manage a wedding, the planning becomes too complicated because all these different people with these different opinions are writing all these different checks; too many clients getting involved will cause major problems. Let me warn you now: back off from that event, but do it graciously. You could offer to take on the job for the actual day of the wedding to make sure that everything runs as smoothly as possible because that role is easier to handle and control, but if you decide to plan this type of wedding from the beginning to the end, it can become a disaster.

Once, I did a wedding where everybody, and I mean *everybody*, (moms, dads, grandparents, bride, groom, sisters) was giving me their input on how they wanted the wedding to be put on. And all of their ideas were so different from the

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other—realistically, there was no way to incorporate them all! Eventually, the situation became so messy that the bride wouldn't even speak to me, the mother of the bride wouldn't speak to me, and there was no respect from the groom, the father, or the grandparents. People were talking behind my back, and it was very uncomfortable. No matter what I did, nobody was happy because in their eyes, I became the problem. Unfortunately, I didn't have a manual to tell me which situations I needed to back out of when I took on that disastrous wedding. That was part of my impetus for writing this book—so that you *will* have a manual and will be able to minimize those horrible situations.

Most events are supposed to be joyful occasions. One of your main jobs is to keep that exciting energy around you. When a client is upset, that energy will drop. So it's important to choose the right client who will work well with you. I don't need to work with someone who will get in your face, talk down to you, or point fingers and curse. In a situation like that, simply thank the person for coming in, say you'll give it some thought and that you'll get back with them.

Choosing a client is similar to dating. When you go on the first date, you may not know whether the person is Mister or Ms. Right, but you surely know whether they're Mister or Ms. Wrong. But if you're not used to going out on dates, the temptation is to be so thrilled to be on that one date that you overlook the person's warning signs and think, "Well, I can get something out of this," instead of looking at the big picture and visualizing what could go wrong down the line.

One year ago, I was about to do a wedding that was being planned entirely by the groom. The bride wasn't allowed to say anything and I sensed several red flags. I decided to turn down the job and I'm glad I did! After the wedding, the hotel that the groom had booked told me that the wedding was horrible. The hotel staff said that I was the only vendor who considered the entire situation and backed out in time. Everyone else took the job and many of them were taken advantage of. Some of the vendors were not even given full pay for the services they provided; the groom agreed upon a certain wage then reduced the amount arbitrarily.

I know that I've found the perfect client when someone approaches me and says, "We want to give you our input, but we want this to be a special event for us and we trust you to make it a great experience." When I hear those words, I say, "I'm here. You hired the right person. I'm the right planner for this job."

The Perfect Corporate/Social Client

It's important to be selective when you take on corporate or social clients, as well. If a client approaches me with a chip on their shoulder, then I know immediately that I won't be able to work with that client. For example, if a client starts to ramble and say, "I've traveled all over the world so I know good wine and I know this and that" or "My husband is a CEO and all of our friends are extremely wealthy so I deal with the best of the best," then it's time for me to back off. I let them finish rattling off their brag list and if I sense that their need to assert their wealth or knowledge will hinder the event planning, then I step away from the job.

The ideal corporate client is someone who respects you and respects your job in the event planning industry. You'll normally interact with someone who has a lot of respect for event planners because they've put on events for their large corporation. The perfect client is someone who listens to your ideas and then decides what they want. They're inside the office or dealing with the company's matters and they've hired you as a professional to be the one to select new menus, venues, props, lighting, fabrics, electric power, staffing, ambience, stationery, and entertainment.

Just as you choose wedding clients, remember to consider your morals and values when you take corporate or social clients. One gentleman told me that all he wanted for his event were women and booze. But when you bring girls to an event with lots of liquor and little food, there's going to be a problem. Or a lot of problems! I like to have balance in my events. And if someone at an event gets hurt or is treated inappropriately, then I can lose everything because the situation falls back on me as the event planner. I refuse to sacrifice my hard-earned business because of one mistake. The icing on the cake was that this particular gentleman's wife had just had a baby, so I already felt uncomfortable planning an event for him that was all about liquor and "the girls." Was he looking for an event planner?

Generally, when clients ask us to bring in women, we bring them in as greeters who might also take pictures of people, pass out favors, or perform other (legal!)

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tasks. But our greeters don't just "hang out" with guests. If there is liquor, we also make sure to have lots of food at our events so that we can monitor the guests and make sure that no one's behavior gets out of hand. So far, we've never had a problem with being able to cut off liquor from someone who is drunk or disorderly. These days, it's easy to wind up in a sticky situation, because of one mistake. I would rather turn away the business than take a chance that something might happen to a guest.

During my first five years in the business, when I was taking events indiscriminately because of the need to grow my name and success, I wanted to quit and run away because I stopped enjoying my work. But when I did some soul searching, regrouped and refocused, I figured out that in order to stay in this industry and thrive, I needed to interview clients before taking them on. If you don't enjoy what you do, then you're not going to be the best of the best. Then you ultimately cheat yourself and cheat your client because you don't invest your entire heart and talent into your work.

Even as you first start out in this business, interview your clients—even your first few clients—and learn to say no. And as you turn away job opportunities and step away from events, be extremely gracious. Let everyone down gently and don't place blame on the people that you're turning down because they can still be a referral source.

Ways to Find Perfect Clients

Referrals are the number one way you will find the perfect client. Ninety percent of our business is acquired through referrals. We've gone out and knocked on a few doors, listed ourselves in the yellow pages, but because most events are so personal, people prefer to hear from others they trust before hiring an event planner. In order to get many referrals, be consistent. My clients will say to their friends, "Rená is professional, dedicated, and loyal. She's respected and has integrity. If she says she's going to do something, she follows through. If she says she'll be there at twelve, she's there at 11:45." Through this positive word of mouth, I get my business. But if you're inconsistent, unreliable, untrustworthy, and you're all over the place, then you will gain a bad reputation and your credibility will take a big hit. In the same way that you interview clients before taking them on, they're also interviewing you. A good client will gather from your suggestions and from your references, whether or not you're a reliable planner.

When your wedding clients get married, there may also be relatives, friends, and guests who will also get married in the near future. It might happen that one day you will help with a corporate event, and at some point, someone might leave that one company and go to another that will also need an event planner. Most of the time, people don't want to spend all of their time looking for an event planner. Some people don't even have the time to look for one. They don't like interviewing strangers to take on such important events, so they prefer hearing someone they know say, "This planner gives 150%," and vouch for what the planner can bring to the table.

New business owners severely underestimate the importance of referrals. Referrals can also come from a variety of sources. Put yourself out there in your community, go out and network, or volunteer your time. Even when you volunteer, always put 150% in your efforts. Any event that you plan or help organize is an opportunity for new people to come into contact with your work. Join committees that will give you an opportunity to donate your time. Then others will see the effort and care you put into your flawless work even when you don't get paid, and members of the committees will likely become huge sources of referrals.

If you know someone whose daughter is getting married, volunteer to help out in a small way. People will notice the qualitative difference in your work with the caliber of vendors you bring in. Just the other week, I volunteered to help a client with the catering at her wedding. She was able to acquire an amazing catering company for the same price that she was going to pay this other lower tier catering company that she wasn't even happy with. She was so grateful, and by volunteering my services to help out with that small task, I ended up getting two more paid events from her.

Nothing will speak for your business the way your actual work will. Every event for which you play the tiniest role is a marketing tool. Go out there and show people that you're a professional person. Don't only take jobs and opportunities that provide instant gratification and money on the spot. People can sense whether you're someone who is in this business because you're after the money or because you care about event planning.

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How To Be the Perfect Planner for Your Perfect Clients

The best event planners hold their clients' hands. Event planning is not as easy as people think it is. Every event consists of countless components, and people unfamiliar with the business tend to become overwhelmed by the tiny details. A bride thinks about her dress, but she may not be thinking about table settings. As the perfect planner, you need to make sure that your client feels relaxed and doesn't have to worry about checking and rechecking to make sure that you're taking care of the details during their event. It's a good idea to have a list to review with your client prior to the event to make sure that you're on the same page. Good planners don't disturb their clients for anything minor during the actual event.

Another way to be on the client's side is to make sure that they get their bang for their buck. Many people in this industry want to upsell their clients. They know that they're working with a cake budget of \$1,000, but they try to convince the client to add edible gold or edible pearls on the cake so that it costs \$2,500 instead.

A good planner will find higher quality items and bring the cost down. I often find bargains for my clients and say, "Why would you want to spend \$1,000 on a cake? We can go with this company and save you \$600." But good clients will oftentimes upsell themselves and say that they prefer the more expensive cake, anyway.

If you try to upsell your clients with unnecessary additions, they will sense that you're in this business for the wrong reason and you'll lose credibility. Put yourself in the client's place—if you were getting married, would you want your planner to look out for your best interests? Of course. You need to have respect for the client and the job you've taken, and make sure that your client gets the best quality of service and products for their budget. Alternatively, when an upgrade is needed, share this information with your client but then let them decide in the end.

Event planners are hired to be the client's advocate. I want my clients to get the best for their dollar. When the client seeks me for advice, I assess the event and look at where the money will be the most visible. You need to be sure to set priorities from the beginning on, and review them with the client to make sure you will both

be on the same page for the planning process. For example, spending \$150 per champagne bottle seems excessive when the champagne is only being used for the toast. Selecting a less expensive champagne and using the saved money elsewhere to create a bigger “bang” in another area, like food or décor, could be a better option. When I plan events, I try to allocate where the client’s money should go while still providing the best possible “wow factor.”

One thing we usually do, in order to keep the bride’s costs down, is transport all the flowers that are used for the ceremony to the reception area. A lot of people are more aware of that now, because there are so many different shows that tell people that they can use things for other purposes. Back in the day, thousands of dollars’ worth of flowers used for the outside ceremony would be torn down and thrown away. Then they would bring a whole new set of flowers inside for the reception area. We just did a wedding a couple of months ago, and we brought the flowers that were used for the arch in to decorate the cake table and the wedding cake itself. So this way, we were able to use the flowers twice versus just for the ceremony only. And if you are having a ceremony that’s outside and during the summertime, the wedding planner can help you coordinate with the florist on flowers that will not wilt in the heat, so that you can bring them in and use them for the reception.

Let’s say you plan a \$25,000 wedding. If you spend your efforts trying to upsell your client rather than putting efforts into finding the “wow” factor in vendors within a reasonable budget, most of that money will end up in the hands of the more expensive vendors, and you’ll walk away with little money for yourself. Essentially, for the extra amount, you’re sacrificing trust and your reputation as an event planner. You’re giving up relationships, referrals, and credibility. The successful business owner and event planner has a long-term vision, which can see past the short-term gain of an upsell and can value the long-term gain of a delighted client.

Most good clients have budgets. Putting money aside to plan an event is similar to buying a car or a house. You know what your budget is. You tell the salesperson

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that you need to stay within that budget, and when he or she tries to sell you a car beyond your means, you know that the person just wants to make more commission. I normally don't spend a penny over my client's budget. Generally, I make it a rule not to upsell unless they want to add something themselves. I give them options for possible "upgrades."

Also be wary of people who don't want to give you a budget. People who say, "Oh, just throw me a number," are wasting your time. If a client says, "I don't know how much I want to spend, but I want it to be fabulous," you'll give them the sky because the sky's the limit here. But when you come back with a proposal that you spent a lot of time working on, they're likely to say, "Oh, that's not what I wanted. My budget's only x amount."

Someone who doesn't give you a budget is unlikely to be a potential client. Chances are that the person is trying to get ideas from you. Then once they've received their share of free consulting, they say they'll speak to their spouse and then disappear. You can normally tell whether a person is being upfront with you. Of course, if they genuinely have no clue and are sincere about it, then you can throw out a dollar

range to help them assess what they're willing to spend. You especially have to be careful with the brides. It's surprising how many people will take advantage of your time and ideas.

People who hire you for corporate or social events tend to be more organized and experienced in these matters. Most of them have worked in their industry for a long time and say, "I know what I want. I know which chef I want to hire and I know what I want you to do." But sometimes, you'll meet with a tire kicker who contacts you because he or she might be collecting proposals from several event planners and has no intention of actually hiring you. Proposals are much too time consuming to create for everyone. A simpler alternative is to make an outline. In order to be the perfect planner for your clients, devote your energy and attention to your work for those clients and not to the superfluous work for people who will never hire you.

The Perfect Client/Planner Relationship

Maintaining an ideal relationship with your client also means setting important limits. I used to take calls from my clients twenty-four hours a day, but that was a nightmare. Six months prior to a wedding, there's no need to call me at two in the morning because the color of the flowers have changed. I've learned to put restrictions on phone calls so now my clients can call me during business hours from nine to five (unless there is an emergency), and I typically meet with them to talk for about half an hour to forty-five minutes each week.

During the week of the actual event, I am available twenty-four hours per day, every day of that week. There are always last minute changes during the week of the event, whether it's changing the table settings at a wedding or acquiring another guest speaker for a corporate event, so it's important to be available to the client during that time.

Corporate clients don't contact you as often because they're occupied with the company's business, whereas brides tend to become consumed by their wedding, especially because it's such an emotional affair. But during the week of the event, whether the event is corporate or social or a wedding, the client may become emotional and all over the place. The situation is similar to hosting your own dinner party. You're in a frenzy because you forget this and you forget that and you have an increasing number of errands to run the closer it gets to the actual dinner party.

I let my clients know about my phone call policy upfront and reassure them that during the week of their event, I am available twenty-four hours a day to get whatever they need and take care of any situations that arise. I want my clients to enjoy their event. There's no need for them to hire someone if they're going to stress out. I am there to relieve that stress so that they can deal with their boss or enjoy their child's birthday or dance peacefully at their wedding.

I also make it a point to try and work every event personally. My friends tell me to bring in other qualified people to oversee some events, but although another planner

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might have the same amount of passion as I do, I don't think he or she could have the same love that I have for the business that I built. When you've labored to create your business, you don't hesitate to wake up at three in the morning to set up something special for your client who will be arriving at seven. But someone who doesn't take ownership of your business might not take ownership of those details.

Because of my desire to work every event, I set limits on my business, as well. I only plan as many events as I can give careful attention to and manage. My clients know that I try to show up to every event, and on the rare occasion that I have two overlapping events in one day, I will leave one event and then go to the other, but I still show up to both for a given amount of time.

In the beginning of your business, it will be tempting to take on more events than you can handle. But again, it's more important to put on a flawless event and be present to handle any spontaneous crises than it is to rack up the numbers. That flawless event will lead to a happy client who will refer you to more potential clients. If you have two couples who want to get married on the same weekend, it is better to interview both of them and see which one you bond better with. Having more offers means that you have a variety to choose from. It doesn't mean you have to take them all on. This business requires painstaking attention to detail and it's not wise to juggle too many events at once. In a corporate environment, if your event has a slight hiccup, you'll manage, but your brides are watching every move you make. A flawed wedding will come back to hurt your business. It's simply not worth the trouble of taking on more than one at a time, and overextending yourself.

In this business, your reputation is of great value. It's a small world and word about your consistently flawless events can travel far. But so can word about your mishaps. You have to dot your i's and cross your t's because you don't want somebody to come after you and even sue you for a wedding or event that didn't go as planned. Even tiny misunderstandings can result in a lot of trouble—especially in a business with this much detail. For example, if a bride picks out pure white napkins, the rental

company could bring in a white, but it might not be the white that the bride had envisioned because whites come in an assortment of shades ranging from your ivories to a stark white to an off-white to a white with a little butter in it.

Today's brides know what they want. Whether they're eighteen years old or one hundred years old, their reaction to wedding mishaps will be the same. No matter what age they are, they want their wedding to be flawless. The perfect client/planner relationship is one in which by the day of the event, the client is free of stress and the planner is making sure that everything happens on schedule *flawlessly*.

The perfect client is someone with whom you will have longevity.



The perfect client is someone with whom you will have an ongoing partnership and budding friendship. When you think about each job as a single event that will bring instant gratification with x amount of money, you limit the potential of your client. Clients are not money trees. They're human beings who work hard for their money, and they have human relationships with like-minded people who can also become your clients. It's your job not only to produce flawless events for them, but also to develop genuine relationships with your clients and hold on to them. Destroying a relationship with a client and letting them fall through the cracks will harm the potential of your business.

Your events are not moneymaking projects. They are relationships. Your clients are not only the people who pay you, but also the people who trust you. When you trust a doctor to perform heart surgery on you, you want him to be precise and follow through on all of your requests. Prior to the surgery, you want him to tell you what exactly he will do and how he will do it so that you can give him your consent. Event planning isn't exactly heart surgery, but your clients do entrust you with their lives, their money, and their personal issues. They're relinquishing control of something that is important to them and handing it over to you. Yes, sometimes things may change depending upon certain developments, but you need to be sure that you are there for all the changes and overseeing them.

People tend to think that event planning is glamorous. It's rewarding, but it's not glamorous. If you really want to enter this business, have an honest conversation with yourself. Are you a stickler for details? Are you willing to put in long hours? Do you have a passion for event planning? And most importantly, do you want a business in which relationships with clients are just as important as the actual events themselves? In this business, you get to dictate who gets to work with you. And when you run a business with perfect clients, you build a perfect business.