

# Avoiding Some of the Wedding Reception Pitfalls and Regrets

A Bandleader's view of the reception process  
By Bob Cooper

One of the advantages of being the leader of a wedding band is that you have the opportunity to work within many varying venue situations with a stakeholder's level of interest. Often times the wedding couple spends months trying to find just the right venue, with just the right caterer, on just the right afternoon. Unfortunately, in most cases they have not been through the process of orchestrating a reception, therefore they are not familiar with the potential pitfalls that may exist. Since I have seen many mistakes occur over the years, here are a few tips that may help make your day closer to perfect. One thing to remember is there is no such thing as pure perfection, or the perfect wedding reception. The time will go extremely fast and many things will be out of your control. This is due to the having a fairly large number of people congregated in one place, under very emotional conditions, and within a situation that most people do not have an involvement with very often. The key is to be yourselves, don't try to control things, and just enjoy yourself. Let the professionals you have placed your confidence in take care of the details. Let the best man be your work slave, have him check on things that may concern you, take care of details such as payments, time adjustments, and guest issues.

Dinning Arrangements for your Professionals: Customarily the band, photographers, and other professionals working your wedding reception are invited to eat, or arrangements are made to feed them something. Typically these professionals are seated somewhere off to the side or in an adjacent room. The process of getting these people fed is important.

It is *KEY* to make sure the establishment has set up a prompt and efficient way to get your professionals fed and back working again. Often the head table finishes eating and certain formalities or announcements need to occur as dinner is finishing up. Certain candid photos need to be taken, and music needs to be supplied.

As bandleader, I will generally break the group shortly after I notice that the majority of guests are served... something. It may only be salad, but once they are served, I break the band and turn on some soft CD music. This allows your guest to speak easily with one another at the table and converse as they dine. This is often the time that I ensure that the band and other professionals get fed so there is no down time later when guests are done with dinner and they are ready to party.

One situation that often does not work out well is when your professionals are served off the bar menu. For whatever reason, in some establishments, the caterer has agreed with the newlyweds that wedding professionals will be served in the restaurant or bar area in a separate room from the wedding. Generally they order off the menu and are served similar to other patrons in the restaurant. The problem that occurs is when feeding the professionals in this manner takes longer than it should. It should take no more than 20 to 30 minutes for the professionals to eat. Otherwise, their services are taken away from your reception. Often the waiters, cooks, and bar staff do not realize the hardship that they are placing the wedding party in by not expediting the completion of the professionals' meals. One should avoid serving your professionals in this manor. No matter how well intended the establishment is, if they get busy in the restaurant/bar, your party suffers.

You might think that a 20 or 30-minute break is excessive. Don't worry; nothing is going on during dinner that warrants less of a break. Often, this may be the only break they receive during a four-hour reception.

Locating the band in the reception area: Often times the bandleader acts as a master of ceremony for your reception. If they do not act as announcer for introductions, toasts, and the like, the band's sound equipment is usually needed to do so. If the band is located in a different room from the head table or from your guests in general, it is better rely on having a second PA system for announcements, toasts, and the coordination of formalities. Most people are not professional speakers and talking in front of a crowd is difficult at best. If the speaker is not amplified, I will guarantee that most of your guests will miss his/her comments. The best situation is when the band is in line of sight and reasonably close to the head table. This allows speakers, toasters, etc. to utilize a microphone and sound equipment. Very seldom does a best man or maid of honor have the ability to clearly speak over the crowd without a microphone. A cordless microphone can be utilized, but if the speaker system is not properly located, it will fail to amplify the individuals who speak.

Another disadvantage of having the band in a separate room is that often people will not congregate in one location, this makes the party become split into different groups and the party falters. It becomes difficult to get everyone's involvement in the reception. Suddenly, you are spending a substantial amount of time trying to find people to get through the formalities.

The reception's scheduled time of Day: If you feel your group is likely to be real partiers, or possibly if they may be borderline as to how much they will party, there is a simple rule of thumb -- people party more at night than they do in the afternoon.

The length of the Cocktail Hour: A cocktail hour that is too long works to your disadvantage. Most receptions are scheduled to be about 4 hours long. In certain cases the reception is longer, but by American tradition, the reception is usually 4 to 5 hours. In any case, if your reception is about 4 hours long, which is typical, using more than an hour for cocktails will cut you short on time to get formalities in and still party adequately to quench everyone's desire to do so. In addition, it can be difficult for your older guest to hold out longer than that and still sit down and have dinner. The worst situation is when your cocktail hour is too long and in a separate space away from dinner where your guests cannot sit down at their tables prior to dinner being announced.

The Timing of Dinner Avoid too long of a period between the wedding ceremony and the time people get to eat. I've seen this many times, and it can be a real setback to a good day. Also, the amount of time it takes to serve dinner can create complications as well. The worst case is when dinner is served one course at a time. This can take forever, especially when the reception is off site from the Caterer's preparation facilities. This process can drastically cut into time for formalities and partying.

Suggestions for your formalities: It truly is not my place to say what formalities you should undertake and those that you should not, however, here are my minimum suggested reception traditions that you should consider and when they should occur.

*General Rule of Thumb* – You have your guest's attention the very most just after they have been seated for dinner, not during the cocktail hour, and not after dinner.

1. Introducing the wedding party to your guests – this is still almost always done and is a courtesy to both your wedding party and to your guests. The best time to do this is directly after everyone has been seated for dinner. Unless you know you can schedule the arrival of the wedding party immediately before the time you want to introduce them, let your wedding party participate in the cocktail hour, then gather them up just prior to dinner and have them introduced at that time. Very seldom does your party arrive at the reception when you think they are going to. It is too difficult to estimate the time necessary for the receiving line to complete and orchestrate all the photos you will want on a perfected time schedule. There are too many people to deal with. A great way to cut down on your variables is to have the formal photos taken before the wedding.
  - a. Lining up your wedding party for introductions – this may vary depending on the size of the party and the number of family members to participate. Generally, a gentleman escorts a lady. This normally means the bridesmaids are escorted by the groomsmen. Also consider introducing family members such as grand parents. If their spouse is deceased or they are alone, consider having a grandchild or another family member escort them in. If the grand parents are too fragile to be comfortable with the process, why not honor them by introducing them from where they sit at the their table.
  - b. Here is a good format for introducing the wedding party:

- ☞☞Grand Parents of the Groom
- ☞☞Grand Parents of the Bride
- ☞☞Parents of the Groom
- ☞☞Parents of the Bride ...(optional) and our hosts for this evening
- ☞☞Bridesmaid (name) being escorted by Groomsman (name)
- ☞☞Announce all bridesmaids and groomsmen
- ☞☞Maid of Honor being escorted by Best Man
- ☞☞Flower Child – Ring Bearers
- ☞☞Newlyweds

This procedure goes best if the Master of Ceremonies has a complete and accurate list of the wedding party ahead of time, in the proper order, using the appropriate names for each person. If the individual is a doctor and should be introduced as such, fine. Make sure participants are comfortable with the names being used. Consider which is better, for example, Patricia or Pat and so on for all members of the party. You have become accustomed to calling her Patty, however, she may feel more comfortable being introduced as Patricia. Ask members of your wedding party if this rule is in question.

2. The First Dance – Still a must in today's society. Not only does it focus attention on the couple alone on the dance floor in front of all their guests, an equally important reason for the first dance is that many people who are up on ceremonial etiquette will avoid dancing until the newlyweds do so. Not only is the first dance their first dance as a

married couple, it should also be the first dance of the reception. This is another good reason to get this formality out of the way soon. A great time to do the first dance, again because you have everyone's attention, is just prior to dinner. Ideally, this can occur directly after your wedding party has been introduced. They are still standing around the dance floor as a group while you dance. Sometime, they are invited to join you partially through the dance.

3. Generational Dance – This dance that honors those couples that have been married for an extended period of time by requesting that all *married* couples gather on the dance floor. It often breaks the ice with your more reserved guests and gets them up and dancing. The dance continues with the periodic removal of couples with the least number of years of marriage. As the couples dwindle in number on the floor, more and more attention is brought to bear on those couples recognized for being married for an extended period of years. Finally, only one couple is left on the floor with decades of blissful marriage. This is a great formality for guest participation. It often gets older family members involved and recognized. A small token such as a bouquet of flowers given to the couple is a nice gesture.
4. Father/Bride & Mother/Groom Dance – Still often performed as part of the wedding reception, the family always enjoys seeing this formality occur. This is great time to acknowledge the effort these parents have put into the bride and groom, and it is an opportunity for the children to thank their parents in public without having to place their emotions in words.
5. Toasting the Newlyweds – This tradition still always occurs today, and often it is not just the Best Man's place to do so. Very often the Maid of Honor also speaks, and periodically a God Parent or family member will also speak on behalf of the couple. It is not uncommon for the father of the bride to also thank the guests for coming, and he also toasts the newlyweds and/or the guests. The best time to do this is just after the newlyweds have seated for dinner. Why, because you still can get the attention of your guests thoroughly. The toaster must remember that you can't give a toast very well unless they have a drink available.

A good master of ceremony will introduce each speaker, their involvement with the wedding or relation to the couple, and once the toast or comments are complete, the speaker's name is once again announced such that the guests know when to clap for the speaker's efforts.

### Conclusion

Many of these ideas seem simple and obvious, but I can't tell you how many times I have worked with couples that, until we've discussed the reception shortly prior to the date, have not taken many of these items into consideration. Most importantly, as a wedding professional, my belief in the process is simple, I will interject my observations as to certain details that appear to run astray, however, when it come down to your special day, you are hiring me to help ensure that your interests are pursued. It is my obligation, and the obligation of all the wedding professionals to yield our judgment to achieve your requested desires. Every family situation is different, we have all been through different experiences, and you should have the wedding reception that best suits your situation. These observations are only for consideration, and if your situation varies such that these recommendations would not be appropriate, so be it, you are the boss.