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Wedding etiquette: To keep or to toss?

By **Kat Kinsman**, CNN
updated 9:04 AM EDT, Fri November 1, 2013

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STORY HIGHLIGHTS

Traditional wedding rules can offer comfort -- or chafe at new ideas

Some rules are ready to be broken, though it's important to choose wisely

Some creative solutions might fit your style and suit your wallet

Rethink wedding attendants, seating, invitations and registries

(CNN) -- One of the most astonishing things about weddings is their power of transformation. Not just from girlfriend to wife and boyfriend to husband, but the metamorphosis of your college roommate from a shot-slammng girl gone wild on spring break in Cabo to a white-gloved, china-polishing etiquette stickler. The dude who was the beer pong and belching champion who never washed his sheets in your crappy post-college apartment is suddenly lecturing his groomsmen on proper tie knotting and receiving line stance. You're left wondering if some sort of matrimonial alien has come down and taken over the body of your beloved -- but messy -- best friends.

In the whirl of wedding planning, rules of etiquette can provide comfort and structure for a panicked couple suddenly confronted by words like "vellum" and "chiavari" for the first time in their lives. These customs are a great safety net for a gathering of family, friends, loved ones, acquaintances and your cousin's parole officer (once removed). Everyone knows what's going to happen, what their

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role is, who pays for what and when the cake will be served. They're often a fantastic link to the cultures and community from which the couples come and provide a tie to all the weddings of all the ancestors who brought the two of them to the altar where they now stand.

And sometimes they're an expensive, antiquated, glittery, stress-inducing set of handcuffs that just don't make sense in context of the marriage about to take place.

Good manners are always in style, but some of these points of wedding etiquette can be safely wrapped up and tucked away in the attic without the world crumbling to dust and guests rending their garments and wailing. I know this, because my husband and I bucked many, many points of traditional etiquette for our wedding seven years ago. We're still married, all of our friends and family still speak to us, and we are -- to this very day -- told how fun and freeing it was not to have to go through some of the pomp, fuss and cost associated with some of these rituals.

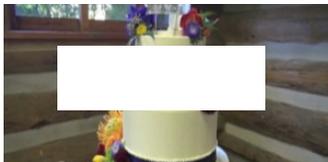
And we were hardly alone in this. In the past several years, I've attended weddings with Evite invitations, animal ring bearers, utensil- and napkin-less steak eating (guests were issued aprons), free-for-all seating and a million other tweaks. No one seemed slighted and every last one of them was a ball.

Thinking of taking the plunge into uncharted wedding waters? Here's how it worked out for a few lawfully-wedded couples:

No wedding attendants



Dying father gives wedding blessing



Firefighters help save wedding



19-country trek ... in a wedding dress?

Television host [Hilary Kennedy](#) and her husband agreed to buck custom and skip assembling a bridal party or groomsmen. "We had the traditional ceremony and reception of about 250, but after a lot of consideration, we thought having wedding attendants would be financially draining on our friends, create too much responsibility for them to be able to enjoy themselves on our day and would save time/money for us as a couple. Plus, we didn't have to worry about anyone getting their feelings hurt if they weren't included or asked to be best man or maid of honor," Kennedy said.

"This decision raised a few eyebrows," she admitted, but she, her husband and their guests were pleased with the decision. "Our friends still talk about how our wedding was one of the most fun and relaxing (and least financially draining) they've ever been to, and everyone still felt special by being able to celebrate with us."

My husband and I made the same decision and I joked on my blog at the time, "No bridesmaids. Because I don't actively hate any of my closest friends." That's in no way dismissing the fun I've had as a member of a wedding party, but those experiences also made me acutely aware of the financial costs associated with being a bridesmaid. I also dreaded setting up any hierarchy amongst my dearest friends. Instead, I just invited the female guests to hang around for moral support (and Prosecco) while I got ready, and ended up with some of my most favorite memories of the whole event, with roughly one-tenth of the stress.



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No bride's side and groom's side

[Kristen Ley](#) works in the wedding industry and has seen her fair share of ceremonies. She says these days, "Today two families become one, so pick a seat not a side." This quote is often used on some sort of signage during the ceremony to inform guests that they can sit where they please."

To one couple with whom Ley worked, "The whole point of their marriage was focused on the bride and groom becoming one flesh, thus the two families joining together. Instead of separating the guests based on affiliation, they opted to join them together to reflect this purpose."

In 2013, it may be time for this custom to fall by the wayside. At a recent wedding I attended, the officiant told the guests to pick the bride or groom's side, and most nonfamily members stared at each other for a second. "But...but...we're friends with both of them; don't make us choose!"

Untraditional escort down the aisle

[Barbara Ann Michaels](#) is a wedding officiant in New York City, where same-sex marriages are increasingly common, and offer up some potential etiquette twists. "My gay and lesbian couples ask themselves these questions in some special ways," she said. "One great solution was a lesbian couple who had two aisles and walked down the aisle with their dads at the same time."

Advice columnist [April Masini](#) sees change afoot these days as well. "The father of the bride walks the bride down the aisle, old school, is no longer required," she said. "In fact with families being redefined by the millisecond, the bride can walk down the aisle herself, or accompanied by her children, or a family member or two."

I found myself striding down the aisle with a faithful companion by my side -- my Irish wolfhound, Mordred. It's not just that he was part of my family, or that I was trying to be all wacky. It served a practical purpose. My mother has a lot of health issues, and it would have been jarring to remove my father from her side, so I didn't. I handed the leash to a trusted friend when I reached the altar, and he fondly remembers his job as "Wolfhound Wrangler" to this very day

Free-for-all dinner seating

Events planner [Tracie Domino](#) says this option should be deployed with caution. "Brides tend to think it will be easier on them and less stuffy to avoid a seating chart. This turns into a fiasco more often than not," she counseled. "While the intentions are good, the bride and groom are making their guests work and that is not what they are there to do. Guests now make their own table arrangements, pull up seats to a table so more friends can sit together, and leave your three work friends at a table by themselves."

But it's not totally off the table, according to Domino. "Open seating is only recommended when you have a cocktail-style reception and there isn't seating for the entire guest count in the first place."

No paper invitations or RSVP cards

Masini, the advice columnist, says a couple may feel free to save the trees, but they have to be comfortable with the consequences.

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"Engraved invitations, like the ones sold by Crane, are no longer required. Wedding invitations are always nicer when mailed, and that's the bar I raise for wedding etiquette. However, e-mailed invitations have become the norm in many circles and if budget is factor and it's not a first wedding, they're OK."

But, she continued, "Don't expect people to buy you gifts off of your Tiffany's registry. You can't have it both ways. If you're sending e-mail invites, you've set the tone of the wedding, and your registry should be a charity as well as Pottery Barn and Target."

Or, the tone might be one of fun. Ekho Powell decked out 4x6 Christmas cards with peacock feathers, but didn't include an RSVP card. Instead, she and her betrothed set up a response website.

"The day I dropped off my wedding invitations at the post office, there was another couple there with a box of at least a hundred invitations (that obviously had the RSVP cards) who had already put postage on each of the cards, only to find out that they hadn't put enough postage on," Powell said. "I almost felt guilty dropping off my slim invites and slipping out the side exit."

"The online RSVP was wildly successful because we created an experience," Powell recalled.

Skipping the store, asking for cash

But speaking of that registry -- this may be the biggest potential pitfall of them all, so tread lightly.

House and petsitter Danielle Vasta is getting married next year, and she says her immediate family is upset that she is not registering at a store, but rather at Honeyfund, a website through which guests can give cash toward vacations, home down payments or however the couple decides to spend it.

"My fiancé and I are in our 30s. First-time marriage. Have two households that just came together in one house. We want experiences, not things," Vasta said. "My parents are not happy about that and all I keep hearing is that it is bad etiquette, even though it is exactly what all my friends are doing!"

It might take a while for sites like Honeyfund and gofundme to make it into the etiquette books, so in this case, it might be easier to engage with a store registry.

Did you buck tradition with your wedding? We'd love to hear about it in the comments below or on Twitter @CNNLiving.



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