

Fall Bridal Showcase

Expert tips on new wedding etiquette

By Priscilla Lister
Copley News Service

You want your wedding to be as perfect as possible, but your parents are divorced, haven't spoken to each other in years, have both remarried and you don't know how to handle this sticky situation.

Or your groom's parents have much more money than your own, yet tradition dictates that the bride's parents pay for the wedding.

Do you have a choice?

Or you're thinking of faxing form letters to ease the burden of all those thank-you notes. It's the latest technology, but is it proper protocol?

Letitia Baldrige, author of the newspaper column on etiquette, "RSVP," syndicated by Copley News Service, whose latest book is "Letitia Baldrige's New Complete Guide to Executive Manners (Rawson & Associates), is the first to acknowledge that times have changed since she first started observing behavior 25 years ago.

"Life adapts, etiquette and manners adapt to the realities of life," she says. "Rather than trying to stop or fight it, we have to adjust to it."

But in adjusting to changing times, etiquette still has its place, especially at weddings. And Baldrige has some valuable advice for those seeking that memorable occasion where sticky situations are handled appropriately.

"It all boils down to one thing: Everyone should subjugate his or her hurt feelings, desires for revenge or criticisms for the good and happiness of the bride and groom," Baldrige says. "It's a time for burying family feuds."

If both the bride's parents are divorced, for example, "invite them both.

Natural parents are natural parents in spite of what happens to their marriage. Invite both of them and their present spouses no matter how much you might loathe those present spouses," says Baldrige.

She advises that the nicest way to handle divorced parents and their new spouses at the wedding itself is to seat the natural parents in the front row of the church with the new spouses sitting behind.

"A lot of people can't do that, however, in which case it's all right for the father of the bride to sit with his new spouse in the second row. But you cannot have the new wife of the father of the bride sitting in the first row with the mother of the bride; the new spouse has to sit in the row behind."

Or what about the situation where the groom has children by a former marriage and you both want them to be there.

"The bride-to-be should write a letter to the ex-wife and say she knows it's not a time of great joy for her, 'But I love your children, I will be good to them, I promise, all my life, and it will mean a lot to me to have them come to our wedding. I hope you will be kind enough to let them come.' Very few ex-wives can resist a letter like that," says Baldrige.

In those receiving lines at the reception, natural parents of both the bride and groom should stand in them, with stepfathers and stepmothers roaming around being helpful.

"If the wedding reception is held in the home of the father of the bride and his new wife, she may stand in the receiving line as the first person because it's her home, and she's welcoming guests there," adds Baldrige.

The worst behavior she's ever seen, she said, "was the stepmother of the bride, the new wife of the father of the bride, openly proclaiming loudly after too many drinks that her husband and she had paid for the whole wedding reception and why wasn't she given more prominence on the invitation and by standing in the receiving line?"

But Baldrige prefers to focus on the positive side.

"I've seen people misbehaving, but I've also seen people act with brilliance and kindness — even dead-set enemies smiling through it for the bride and groom. Boy, is that a joy to see."

As for those issues of money, "Work out every cent long before plans are made," Baldrige advises. "Draw up a budget. If the groom's family has lots of money but the bride's family doesn't, outline the options. Point out that you can have a tiny wedding that the bride's parents can pay for, or a great big wedding that will make the groom's parents look really good in their community. Sit down and talk dollars and sense, and let them pay for it if it matters."

The tradition of the bride and groom dancing the first dance at the reception still has its place, Baldrige says, "although that's not followed much anymore; usually everyone starts dancing right away. But the whole tradition of the bride and groom having the first dance, followed by the father of the bride cutting in on them as the groom takes his mother on the floor, is a whole tradition of parents exchanging and it's still very nice."

And if the couple has been living together for several years before their wedding, which is more and more common, guests don't have to throw rice and petals at them when they leave the reception these days.

"But it's nice to see them off and wish them luck and happiness," she adds.

"Those who write about manners change, too. But we have to keep priorities in mind. There's

nothing more important than thank-you notes," she says.

The hurt feelings are real of people who spent money and time on a big wedding present who never get a note for it.

"Or if they get a form letter, which some young people are doing today, in which their name is written in and the note doesn't even mention the present, is worse than not thanking at all in my book," she says.

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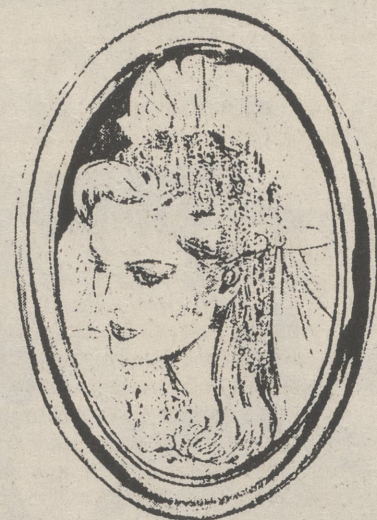
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