

A Guide to Choosing A Wedding Photographer

By Richard Santini Owner of RHS Photo Inc.

Article appeared in the Coronado Eagle Wedding Guide

Choosing a wedding photographer can be a difficult decision but with some guidance you can actually enjoy the process and feel confident in your choice. This article will cover some of the obvious and not so obvious aspects of wedding photography and some questions to ask as well as what to notice from a website and from a meeting.

This first section is purely an educational look behind the scenes in the wedding industry. Thanks to its availability, the internet is a first stop for most people in searching for a wedding vendor. The websites that pop up on the first page of a search engine result when you search a term like "wedding planning", or "wedding photographer" are there for a reason but that reason may not be what you think. The planning and directory websites get ranked high with search engines because the search engines see them as providing a valuable service with relevant information to your search phrase. The vendors that get listed in these websites are there because they pay to be there, and the ones on the first page and on top pay more. You should consider following up with a vendor you like if there is a forum or review section where brides have actually used their services and can talk openly about them. The vendors that show up on a search results page outside of a directory are there because their website has been optimized to rank higher, and they may also pay to have a third party company increase their page rank so that you will see them on the first page. The more successful the vendor, the more money they will have to compete for those precious first page spots, and the more business they get. They also tend to cost more since you're helping to pay for all of that marketing. The bottom line here is that the internet is a great place to start to see what's out there but the vendors on the first page may not be the best ones and it pays to go a few pages deep into your search.

Once you have an idea of what you like, at least with regards to photography, it's time to really look at the information provided on a website. Photography websites function as passive marketing and the nicer the website the better the chance a wedding couple will make contact with the photographer. A really nice website can cost a photographer ten thousand dollars or more, but don't get too caught up with a fancy site; it's the quality of the photos that count. When it comes to the photo galleries, keep in mind that your wedding photos may look like the examples you are seeing. This is extremely important since long after you have forgotten

what you have paid, you will still have the photos on your wall and you better love them. Look at the couples in the photos and see if they are having fun, in good lighting, with good color, and in a style of photography that you like. Be wary of a photographer that mostly shows black and whites since you can hide bad color reproduction by simply desaturating the image. Another thing to notice is a lot of off center cropping, or photos that look like they are on their side at a 45 degree angle. This will make a poor or boring image that's out of focus or moved into an artsy image. After a while you may want to just tilt your computer monitor to see what the photo looks like straight. After looking at a number of websites you will gravitate towards a style that best matches your vision of your photos. Now it's time to dig deeper.

Check out the other information on the website. You can get a feel of the personality of the photographer as they open their work to you. Some like to share their wedding photo packages and prices, some just their packages, and some just want you to contact them for any additional information. You may find reviews, clever stories, advice, and even some background information allowing you to get a feel of the person behind the camera. The photographers that share the packages and the prices do tend to be more up front with their couples. Photography packages are made up of a combination of the labor, skill, and tangibles you receive. The labor and skill is represented in a photographer's portfolio. The tangibles can be a wide variety of items you may or may not want, look to see if they can be flexible. Some photographers will give print packages, while others give you a printing credit you can put towards a variety of sizes. You may get a proof book or a custom album with a set number of pages. You may get online proofing of your wedding photos for a month or year with or without the ability to order prints online. You can also get your photos printed on canvas, or other specialty medium that may match your home better than just a framed picture. Ultimately, you may have a wish list as to what you want to walk away with but be sure to get your photos with the copyright since all of these other items can be purchased through your photographer or someone else, as long as you have the images and you love them. For the labor portion of the package, some photographers give you a block of time for a price and then charge by the hour thereafter, while others give unlimited time. The hourly packages tend to be cheaper in the beginning but you

may end up spending much more than you bargained for since a typical full day wedding can keep a photographer busy for 10 to 12 hours, especially if they are with the bride as she is getting ready with her hair and makeup. Another thing to consider is if you get your images, in full resolution and ready to print, without a water mark or studio logo, and the copyright. If you don't then you will have to ask how much extra it will cost since you will want to own your images and keep them indefinitely. Some photographers will give you the images right away while others will make you wait a year so you will have to use their printing services to get something on your wall. Don't forget to ask.

So now you have spent weeks visiting websites you found online, through referrals, and preferred vendor lists with the venue and coordinator. It's now time for the phone calls and emails. The first thing to notice is how easy it is to get in touch with the photographer, and how long does it take for them to get back to you. You should ask if you are contacting the photographer, or a studio manager. Check to see if they are polite and answer all your questions and listen to what you have to say or do they go right into their sales pitch. This right here will let you know what they will be like leading up to your wedding and getting your photos afterward. This will also narrow your search for the face to face interviews. Here are some very important questions that you can use to further refine your list. Do they shoot digital in camera RAW or Jpeg? The difference here is huge since a RAW image is the equivalent of a film negative thus allowing a knowledgeable photographer the ability to adjust and optimize almost every factor of the photo while a Jpeg does not with the same resolution. Will you be meeting with the photographer that will shoot your wedding or someone else? This is important since you must have a rapport with the photographer especially if you are going to be with them on an engagement session and maybe 10 hours on your wedding day. Do they have a business license and insurance? Can you contact any past brides? Can you see a full wedding done at your selected venue? How long does the post production take in order to see the finished images? How does the couple handle payment for the deposit and the final? Is this their full time job and how long have they been doing it? When does the couple get the images and copyright? Does the photographer also process the images or does it get outsourced? This is really important for consistency since you have already told your photographer how you want your images to look like but the editor has a lot of control as to the final look and photo selection.

Congratulations, the hard part is now over, well sort of. All that is left is to get that last feel of the

photographer with the face to face meeting. This will give you a sense of the overall person that you will have beside you for hours sharing a very important milestone of your life. You will get to look at their work in a relaxed setting, and you should insist on seeing at least one complete wedding from beginning to end and not just a selected set of best shots like their website. Perhaps you may get lucky and get to see their work at the same venue as your ceremony and reception. When it comes to the face to face meeting, don't be shy and forget to ask some questions, try just one to get a discussion started. A good opening question is to ask how they got started in wedding photography and why do they like it. You can also ask what a typical wedding day is like for them. You can certainly ask some professional advice as how to structure your wedding day with regards to the photos, they know what works and what doesn't. Lastly, be carefully not to laundry list the photographer with a page taken from a bridal magazine, especially if they have the information on their website or have previously answered the questions in an email or phone call. Remember, they are interviewing you the same way as you are interviewing them. A popular photographer will have the ability to decline your wedding if they don't want to work with you since they will eventually book the date with someone else.

Now that all of the screening is done, the technical questions were asked, and the legitimacy of their business has been verified, choosing a photographer will come down to four simple factors. It sounds so easy right? In no order of importance except for the last one, here we go. Is the photographer still available on your wedding date? Do they listen to you and are they compatible with both of your personalities and the type of wedding you want to have? Do they provide a photo package that will fit within your budget and give you most if not all of the tangibles you are looking for? And the most important factor, do you really love the quality of the work and the style of the photos? Like it was mentioned before, you will enjoy your wedding photos long after you have forgotten how much you paid for the service, the photographer's name, and if you even liked them.

I hope this article will help someone, and I wish that I knew all of this when I was picking our wedding photographer. As it turns out, we didn't get a single photo out of the camera of our paid professional so I know what it's like to get burned and I don't wish that upon anyone...

Richard Santini
Owner and Photographer RHS Photo Inc.
San Diego CA.