

WEDDINGS IN A DIGITAL WORLD: WHAT HOTELS AND SPECIAL EVENT VENUES NEED TO KNOW

Presented by

Skift. + **cvent** | **WEDDING SPOT**



EXECUTIVE LETTER

Over the past 20 years, Cvent has watched firsthand as the meetings, events, and hospitality industries have become more important, more advanced, and more profitable. Now, as we look to the exciting future ahead of us, we're working to apply that experience to another related industry that continues to see unprecedented growth: weddings.

The wedding industry accounts for \$76 billion in revenue, according to IBISWorld, but it's a competitive landscape that is becoming more technologically advanced every day. Millennials and Generation Z make up the majority of marrying couples, and they're bringing their tech-first mindset to the wedding planning process.



Reggie Aggarwal
CEO & Founder, Cvent

What does all that mean for the hospitality space?

Simply put, there is endless opportunity to use technology to grow wedding business, fill rooms on weekends, and, ultimately, increase profit.

Cvent Wedding Spot will make the most of that opportunity by focusing on our hotel and venue partners, the couples they work with, and the weddings they host. From your efforts to attract wedding business to your need to measure your performance against your competition, Cvent Wedding Spot is here to help, with a platform that delivers quality leads, easy-to-use tools, and insightful analytics.

We have also partnered with Skift to develop this report, which explores how hotels and special event venues can use technology to differentiate themselves and capitalize on the wedding opportunity.

These insights and a strong collaboration with Cvent Wedding Spot will help you take your business to new heights while bringing couples' dream weddings to life.

Reggie Aggarwal, CEO & Founder, Cvent



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ABOUT SKIFT

Skift is the largest industry intelligence platform providing media, insights, and marketing to key sectors of travel. Skift deciphers and defines trends for global leaders and executives across travel and wellness sectors through a combination of news, research, conferences, and marketing services.

ABOUT SKIFTX

SkiftX is Skift's in-house content studio. SkiftX produced this report in partnership with Cvent Wedding Spot.

ABOUT CVENT

Cvent is the global meeting and event management technology leader, with tens of thousands of customers worldwide. Cvent's Hospitality Cloud platform attracts tens of thousands of event planners and travel managers. Our digital marketing tools help hotels and venues win new customers and grow their business, and our software solutions help hotels own their business by servicing their customers directly, efficiently, and profitably.

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INTRODUCTION



The \$80 billion U.S. wedding market is poised for a great transformation. In a consumer landscape increasingly defined by customization, those getting married today want to create unique events that express their individuality. Many of these couples are digital natives who approach searching for and booking wedding providers in new ways. And as couples get married later in life, they're looking for greater options for their special day – often with a price tag to match.

This shifting consumer behavior presents a promising opportunity for hotels and special event venues. But are they ready to capitalize on it? The typical methods for researching, pricing, and booking wedding venues and vendors do not align with how couples today make other big-ticket purchases on items such as travel, cars, and housing.

These creative, ready-to-spend couples want to search using digital tools. They want to gain easy access to complete information, including photos,

videos, and online reviews, and expect constant, clear, and transparent communication. Hotels and venues can easily get ahead of competitors by embracing wedding venue sourcing websites and capitalizing on all the tools and data resources they provide.

In this report, we explore the value of the U.S. wedding market for hotels and special event venues and examine the changing preferences and planning habits of millennial and Gen Z couples when sourcing a wedding venue.

We also provide eight actionable takeaways to help hotels and special event venues make the most of the opportunities provided by weddings. Additionally, SkiftX has conducted an online survey of several hundred U.S. couples currently planning a wedding, as well as hotels and special event venues that book weddings. The goal of the survey was to further deepen our insights about weddings today and our understanding of the specific wants and needs of these respective groups.

THE U.S. WEDDING INDUSTRY: AN OPPORTUNITY TOO BIG TO BE OVERLOOKED



U.S. marriage rates are declining, according to Pew Research Center. ¹Yet the U.S. wedding industry continues to thrive. More than 2 million weddings take place in the country every year, as reported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Health Statistics. ²And wedding spending has been growing 5 percent annually over the last few years,³ as stated in the 2019 Paper Source Wedding Report. In 2018, IBISWorld reported that the U.S. wedding industry was valued at \$80 billion.⁴

Soon-to-be newlyweds consider a number of different factors when planning their weddings. For starters, they increasingly look to venues offering personalized experiences. The key to capitalizing on their increased spending is having a product that can be expertly curated based on customers' individual preferences and interests. The opportunity to drive revenue through customizable wedding venues is too big to be overlooked.

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Hotels and special venues that want to go after the wedding market need to really understand the impact of technology and have a very diversified and textured online presence.

-Christine Lawson,
Vice President, Hospitality Cloud Sales,
Cvent Wedding Spot

Americans find it normal to spend between \$20,000 and \$45,000 on a wedding, according to Brides' 2018 American Wedding Study.⁵ Wedding budgets vary significantly by geography. IBISWorld finds that New York, Illinois, and California typically see the biggest-ticket events.⁶ This booming market is fertile territory, especially for hotels and special event venues that can take advantage of a growing interest in outdoor weddings and other unique spaces. Those who are



savvy about the use of online lead generation to attract wedding-related business will also be able to capitalize on this dynamic market. Competition in the industry is increasing as barriers to entry fall due to the popularity and sophistication of online search tools for wedding resources.

Hotels and special event venues of all sizes can find opportunities to engage in the wedding market, with its growing emphasis on associated events such as engagement parties, bridal showers, bachelor and bachelorette parties, rehearsal dinners, and

post-wedding brunches. These lesser events can be excellent revenue generators. Brides found that the average couple pays more than \$1,300 for their rehearsal dinner, for example.⁷

Operators in the wedding industry can benefit from the specificity of these wedding-related traditions. Little guesswork is required to discern what offerings will attract buyers, especially as wedding resource sites increasingly leverage data to provide an in-depth analysis of the market.

¹ "8 facts about love and marriage in America," Pew Research Center, <https://www.wcpo.com/lifestyle/research-says-cohabitation-in-the-u-s-is-rising-while-marriage-is-declining> ² "Marriage and Divorce," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention National Center for Health Statistics, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/marriage-divorce.htm> ³ "2019 Paper Source Wedding Report," <https://weddingmarketnews.com/2019-paper-source-wedding-report/> ⁴ "Wedding Services in the US - Industry Market Research Report," IBISWorld <https://www.marketresearch.com/IBISWorld-v2487/Wedding-Services-Research-12402785/> ⁵ "This Is What American Weddings Look Like Today, Brides," <https://www.brides.com/gallery/american-wedding-study> ⁶ IBISWorld report ⁷ "What a Rehearsal Dinner Really Costs—and How to Pick the Theme," Brides, <https://www.brides.com/story/rehearsal-dinner-costs-theme-decor>

MILLENNIALS AND GEN Z TRANSFORM THE WEDDING SPACE

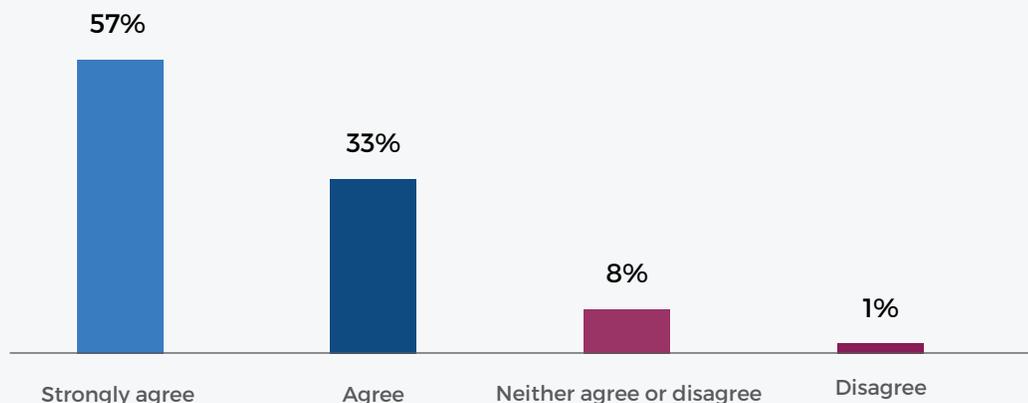
Today's couples are getting married in different ways and for different reasons than their parents. Brides and grooms are now slightly older, with an average age of 28 and 29, respectively. Interestingly, trends show that although millennials are in no rush to marry, they remain focused on buying houses. This trend is in stark contrast to generations past, when homeownership and marriage went hand in hand and signaled the start of adult life. However, it's not just home buying that makes millennials distinct from other generations. A number of other socio-economic factors contribute to them marrying later in life, such as college debt and changing family structures around financial independence — particularly for women.

A report by the National Center for Family & Marriage Research stated that in 1980, 68 percent of baby

boomers between the ages of 25 and 34 were married. This proportion has dropped by 41 percent over the past few decades, with only two-fifths of millennials married as of 2015.⁸ It is clear that while marriage was once seen as the definitive marker of a successful life, there have been substantial shifts in family behaviors. Not only have attitudes towards marriage changed, but the exercise of planning a wedding also differs from the wedding planning of the past.

For example, men and women more frequently share wedding planning duties compared to previous generations. According to the Brides' study, 97 percent of brides-to-be said that their fiancé was "involved" in wedding planning. Another 36 percent said they were "very involved."⁹

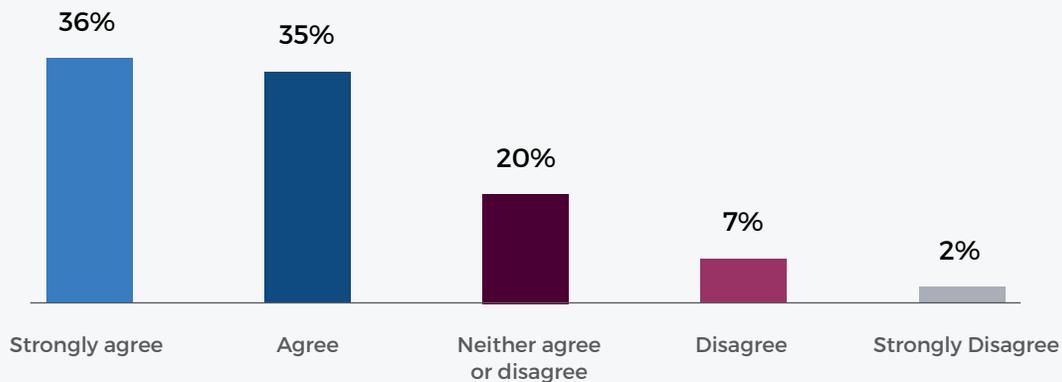
U.S. Couples Who Agree vs. Disagree That It's Important Their Wedding Venue Represents Their Unique Identity



Source: SkiftX + Cvent Wedding Spot 2019, *Weddings in a Digital World: What Hotels and Special Event Venues Need to Know*

⁸ "Generational Differences During Young Adulthood: Families and Households of Baby Boomers and Millennials," National Center for Family & Marriage Research, <https://www.bgsu.edu/ncfmr/resources/data/family-profiles/anderson-families-households-boomers-millennials-fp-17-07.html> ⁹ This Is What American Weddings Look Like Today, Brides, <https://www.brides.com/gallery/american-wedding-study>

U.S. Couples Who Agree vs. Disagree That They Were Interested in Picking a Non-Traditional Venue



Source: SkiftX + Cvent Wedding Spot 2019, *Weddings in a Digital World: What Hotels and Special Event Venues Need to Know*

Couples marrying today also prioritize meaningful personalization and alignment with individual values. Weddings, including the venues they take place at, are seen as outlets for self-expression. Ninety percent of respondents to SkiftX's survey said they "strongly agree" (57 percent) or "agree" (33 percent) that it's important to pick a venue that represents their "unique identity and personality as a couple."

Aligning with this desire for personalization is the fact that weddings are no longer limited to traditional banquet halls or country clubs. Couples are increasingly looking to hold their weddings on farms, in gallery spaces, or at wineries or restaurants. According to SkiftX's survey, more than 70 percent of respondents said they were interested in choosing "a venue that could be considered a 'non-traditional' event space," such as a barn, a loft, or an outdoor space.

Online reviews and photos play a valuable role in how millennial and Gen Z customers seek out wedding venues and vendors. A survey from BrightLocal found that nearly three out of four 18- to 34-year-olds "regularly" or "always" read reviews of local businesses. A similar percentage said that they trust online reviews as much as personal recommendations

"always," "as long as there are multiple reviews," or "if the reviews seem authentic."¹⁰

Perhaps unsurprisingly, price is one of the most important elements for millennial and Gen Z couples when planning their wedding. However, they often find their budgets insufficient to cover the weddings they plan. Brides' study found that while 80 percent of couples report setting a budget for their wedding, nearly half of couples end up going over budget.¹¹ Overspending tends to result from estimating that items and services cost less than they do and from "falling in love" with items that they hadn't originally included in the budget.

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Weddings are no longer limited to traditional banquet halls or country clubs.

Couples responding to SkiftX's survey indicated that their wedding budgets were most likely to be in the \$10,000 to \$20,000 range, with plenty of people also looking to spend as little as \$5,000 or as much as \$30,000. Widely published numbers of average wedding expenses in the U.S. market indicate that



these initial budgets are likely to be just that: a starting point from which the costs are likely to rise.

Parents of younger-generation couples often play a role in paying for their children's weddings. SkiftX's survey found that while 53 percent of couples said they paid for their entire wedding themselves, 34 percent said their parents or other family members helped with the cost. Another 13 percent said that their parents paid for the entirety of their wedding.

SkiftX's survey also revealed that parents are often involved with planning even if they don't pay for all or even part of the wedding. Despite less than half of respondents reporting that their parents helped with costs, 72 percent said their parents were "somewhat involved" or "very involved" in the decision about which venue to use.

Engaged couples today value transparency when it comes to pricing and communication in wedding

planning, as well as other aspects of the process. It makes sense, given that millennials have come to expect transparency from brands and companies in general. A 2016 survey from Label Insight found that 94 percent of millennials surveyed were likely to remain loyal to brands that were completely transparent, with 56 percent saying that they would be likely to remain a fan of such a brand for life.¹²

To reach these generations in the wedding market today, hotels and special event venues would be wise to engage both members of a couple in planning (and parents or relatives, if applicable), provide do-it-yourself planning options, communicate values, provide options for personalization, offer packages within a range of budgets (but allow for opportunities for upselling), and be as transparent about pricing and communications as possible.

¹⁰ "Local Consumer Review Survey 2019," BrightLocal, <https://www.brightlocal.com/research/local-consumer-review-survey/> ¹¹ "This Is What American Weddings Look Like Today," Brides, <https://www.brides.com/gallery/american-wedding-study> ¹² "Driving Long-term Trust and Loyalty Through Transparency," Label Insight, https://www.labelinsight.com/hubfs/2016_Transparency_ROI_Study_Label_Insight.pdf

WEDDING PLANNING IN A DIGITALLY NATIVE WORLD



Millennials and Gen Z couples are turning to digital platforms such as mobile apps, social networks, search engines, and vendor listing sites to plan their weddings. Respondents to SkiftX's survey listed Google, social media, and wedding venue sourcing websites as their top three go-to resources for selecting a wedding event space.

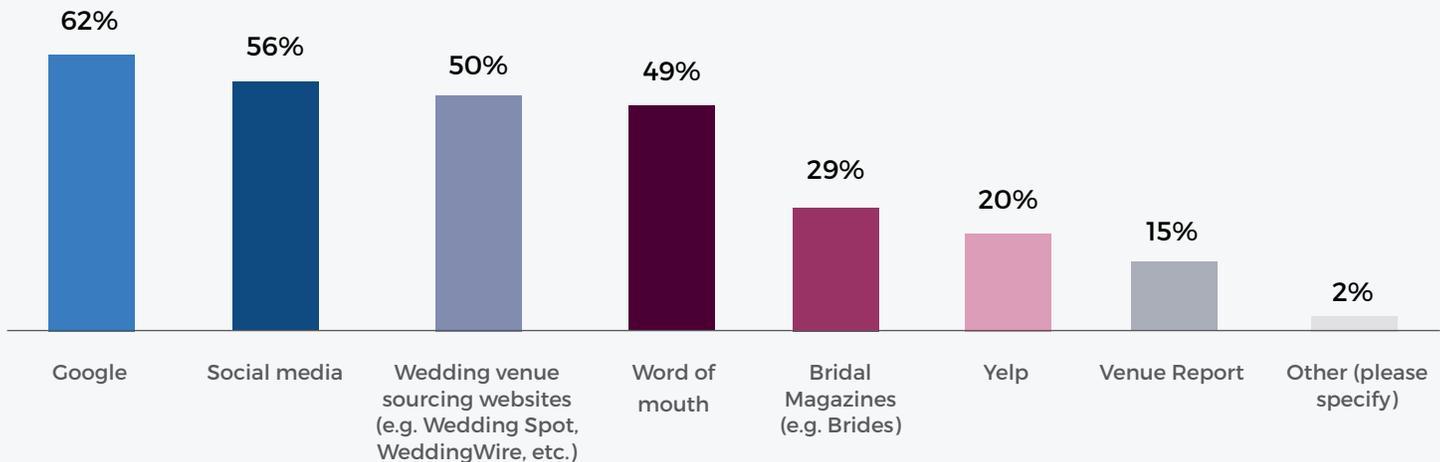
Search engine results play a particularly strong role. SkiftX's survey found that 62 percent of respondents use Google to search for wedding venues. However, individual hotels or venues are unlikely to rise to the top of a generic search for properties in a given location due to the high budgets and digital expertise needed to craft an effective search engine optimization strategy. Hotels and venues can gain exposure on Google much more efficiently by

partnering with a third-party listing source that has a core focus on search engine optimization rather than attempting to rank high on search engines on their own.

Social media plays an increasingly significant role in venue discovery as well. Fifty-six percent of couples who responded to SkiftX's survey said social media platforms were most useful in their wedding venue search.

Additionally, Brides' 2018 study found that 82 percent of brides turn to social media — particularly Pinterest and Instagram — instead of wedding magazines for inspiration. This was a significant increase from 2017, when 69 percent of brides reported doing so.¹⁵ The emphasis on these

Online Resources That U.S. Couples Found Most Useful for Researching and Selecting a Wedding Venue



Source: SkiftX + Cvent Wedding Spot 2019, *Weddings in a Digital World: What Hotels and Special Event Venues Need to Know*

platforms illustrates the importance of aesthetically pleasing visuals that are on trend, aspirational, and highly shareable.

Today's wedding-planning couples also rely heavily on online reviews and photos when seeking out venues. Ninety-one percent of those surveyed by SkiftX agreed that it is important to be able to view information about venues, such as pricing, available dates, photos, and reviews, online.

They also want venues to be readily discoverable. They find it important to be able to compare venues easily and contact the venue owner digitally. Ninety percent of SkiftX survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that it's important to be able to easily compare different prices and amenities when researching a venue. Knowing this – as well as the importance they place on reviews and photos – it makes sense that 50 percent of survey respondents said they used wedding venue sourcing websites for their venue research.

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50 percent of survey respondents said they used wedding venue sourcing websites for their venue research.

They are looking for a human touch in their communication as well. SkiftX's survey found that once they have reached out to a hotel or venue through a digital channel, 44 percent of couples would prefer to be followed up with by phone, 29 percent by email, and 17 percent by text. While hotels and venues must master their digital communication tools, an effective sales team and stellar client management are irreplaceable when it comes to closing the deal.

Couples researching wedding venues also value easy-to-understand, transparent pricing that clarifies what is and is not included in the price. Couples

¹³ "This Is What American Weddings Look Like Today," Brides, <https://www.brides.com/gallery/american-wedding-study>



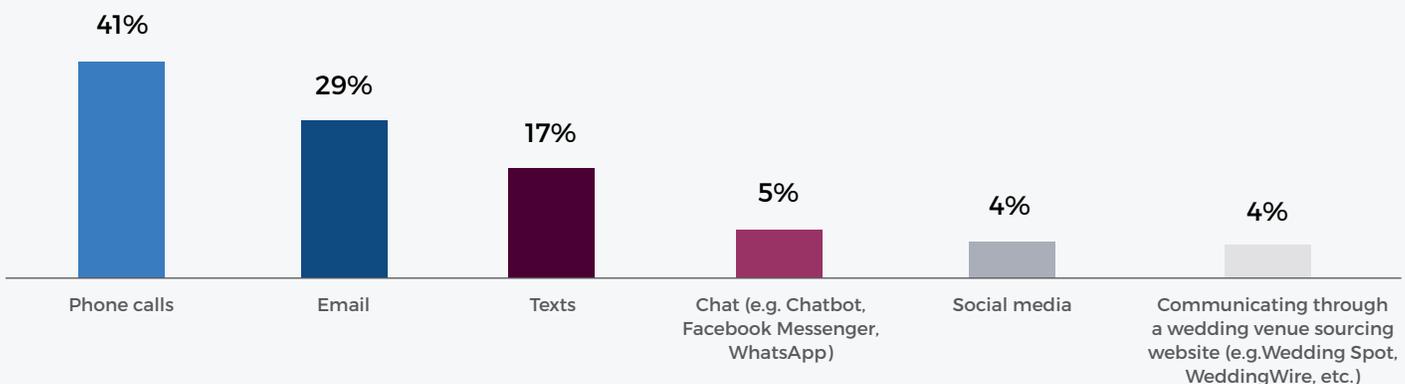
pricing wedding venues and amenities have traditionally had to rely on shoe leather methods of collecting information – for example, making a variety of phone calls or visiting vendors in person, then collating all the data in a manually created spreadsheet to compare and contrast. But this is no longer the way people make spending decisions on big-ticket items (such as cars and housing), making researching, budgeting, and comparing wedding venues and other vendors particularly cumbersome.

Couples who are planning weddings benefit from being able to easily price options before going further in their research process. Pricing tools such as Wedding Spot's Spot Estimate tool provide this type of transparency, allowing customers to obtain pricing estimates to match their particular needs and compare various venues without a lot of legwork.

Customers can self-select various venues based on budget or other considerations using a degree of customization that many appreciate as they look to make their event their own.

The Spot Estimate tool is a good example of how the wedding market is incorporating easy-to-use, transparency-promoting digital tools to make finding and booking venues easier. However, the majority of the planning process is not so easy. Researching and communicating with venues and vendors can be slow, labor-intensive, and unwieldy. Making streamlined efforts to meet the digital natives who are planning today's weddings where they are – online – is the best policy for hotels and venues looking to get an edge in a competitive industry.

How U.S. Couples Want to Be Contacted by Wedding Venue Employees



Source: SkiftX + Cvent. Wedding Spot 2019, *Weddings in a Digital World: What Hotels and Special Event Venues Need to Know*

INTERVIEWS: WHAT TWO SOON-TO-BE BRIDES WANT WHEN SOURCING A WEDDING VENUE

Ana Murray, who is planning a July 2020 wedding, spoke with SkiftX about the process of seeking out her venue. She found wedding venue sourcing sites helpful in her search for an outdoor venue, such as a barn, garden, or vineyard, but felt the overall process could be improved.

SkiftX: What role did digital tools play in your venue search?

Ana Murray: I used a few websites and created a spreadsheet. The websites, in particular, helped with searching by the venue type — such as a barn, field, or outdoor space — that I wanted. It was also great to be able to “like” and save my favorite venues so I could easily reference them later.

SkiftX: What were some of the biggest challenges of your wedding venue search?

Murray: There were a few venues that I found online and then toured in person that did not match up to how they were advertised. And not all websites displayed the same type of information on their listings. I often had to visit three different venue sourcing websites to collect everything I needed to know about a single venue. Searching and comparing venues would be easier if each venue reported the same necessary information.

SkiftX: What types of information did you value most in the search process?

Murray: There's the basic information, like a venue's capacity and whether you can use outside vendors or your own wedding planner. But I'd really like to see as much information available as possible.



SkiftX: What was most helpful about Wedding Spot versus other platforms you tried?

Murray: I really liked the Spot Estimate. It was a lot more accurate than other websites. I also liked being able to save my favorite venues, so I had a list I could return to. It was also helpful to search for businesses by what they offer, such as being able to bring your own alcohol.

SkiftX: What types of wedding venues were you searching for?

Murray: I wasn't sure at first, so it was helpful to browse the different venue categories. But I was leaning toward a barn, garden, or vineyard — an outdoor option. So, it was nice to have those selections available on venue websites.

Chiara Geremia, who is planning a November 2020 wedding, spoke with SkiftX about the process of her venue search, which included a tent at a venue in New York City. She found it challenging to locate information about pricing and guest capacity for this option.

SkiftX: Do you think wedding venues make the search process easy?

Chiara Geremia: No. For example, my fiancée and I had to physically go to a hotel in Brooklyn to actually figure out a price, which was inconvenient. We saw the venue – and the price – listed on Wedding Spot after our in-person visit, and we wished we had known about it beforehand. I would say that pricing feels like it's a bit hidden unless you're actually willing to go out and see the place yourself – especially in New York. Pretty much everything about the wedding process seems outdated.

SkiftX: Well, that being said, how did digital technology play a role in how you found your venue?

Geremia: Being able to see photos online definitely helped. I really liked going through the pictures to find the right vibe. It was really helpful to see all the different spaces and nooks that were in a venue that I hadn't really considered before.

SkiftX: How did you communicate with the venues during your search?

Geremia: At first, I just tried to call and email them. Eventually, we created a separate email for communicating with them so their emails wouldn't get lost in the shuffle. The process was not very streamlined, and it was different for each vendor.

SkiftX: What were some other challenges you came across during the venue search?

Geremia: It was frustrating to hear that not all of the "optional" pricing options that go into the full price were actually optional. There were also a lot of



hidden fees. At first, it seemed like we could opt out of them, but in reality, we couldn't. We also wanted a tent. So many venues we found online made it seem like a tent was a very standard offering. But when we got deeper, we learned it was definitely not a typical part of most venue packages.

SkiftX: What types of information did you value most in the search process?

Geremia: Definitely capacity. How many people a venue could hold was one of our biggest concerns. And since our wedding will be in New York, we wanted the ceremony and reception to be held at the same place so our guests could avoid traffic. It would also be great to know about restrictions or time constraints during certain times of the year. Knowing about any additional fees up front would improve the process as well.

SkiftX: Did you find that seeing the pricing estimates up front made that search easier?

Geremia: It definitely helped with cutting some venues out that are totally out of our reach.

8 THINGS HOTELS AND SPECIAL EVENT VENUES CAN DO TO SUCCEED IN TODAY'S WEDDING MARKET

Today's couples expect to be able to gather information digitally and want price transparency and open communication during their wedding planning. This means that venues should focus on online marketing efforts via wedding sourcing websites and social media channels, prioritize immediate, open communication, and provide personalized service to potential customers.

Here are eight strategies that hotels and special event venues can use to gain a competitive edge in today's wedding industry.

1. Move toward dynamic pricing to adapt to market conditions and competitors.

Gaining insight into competitive pricing is key to capturing relevant leads for hotels and venues in the wedding business. However, this is often easier said than done. In SkiftX's survey, 30 percent of hotel or venue representatives reported that figuring out appropriate pricing relative to competitors was difficult, and another 22 percent said that identifying the right price relative to demand was challenging. An additional 20 percent reported that figuring out pricing for their local market was a frustrating aspect of the business. Knowing this, it makes sense that nearly 60 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they would be interested in a service that advises on how to price their venue more competitively based on market conditions.

A hotel or special event venue's pricing strategy must adapt to changing market conditions and competitive realities. It's a good idea to track the market's ebbs and flows throughout the year to increase rates during busier seasons or make prices more competitive during slower times. Consumers

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Northeast Pennsylvania isn't as busy as San Francisco, New York, or Philadelphia, so our prices are more accessible to people who come to the Poconos area from pricier regions. They're so thrilled with our pricing because it's cheaper here than what they're used to.

- Cathy Kutchi, Manager and Co-Owner,
Carmen's Country Inn and Gardens in Drums, Pennsylvania

have become used to this precision pricing model when buying plane tickets and renting hotel rooms from large chains that already use this method of capturing top-line revenue.

To ensure you're pricing accurately for your market, you should know exactly who you're competing against — it may not be only venues in your immediate vicinity but also more expensive venues in nearby cities. Dynamic pricing that takes those markets into account can help you price more competitively to attract more business.

2. Be transparent and consistent about pricing information and amenities included.

Consistency and transparency are paramount values to wedding couples. They prize the ability to quickly and easily find information about venues online and receive customized estimates that work with their budgets.



But the difficulty in doing so is often a pain point for couples. According to SkiftX's survey, wedding couples seeking out venues online were often confused about the process for finding clear pricing options (26 percent), identifying venues within their budgets (27 percent), and viewing consistent information provided by each venue (24 percent). They also frequently found it difficult to compare features of different venues (21 percent) and reported wasting time looking at options outside of their price ranges (31 percent).

Venues can win more business by employing tools that can give couples an estimate early in their search process. Doing so can improve conversion rates, establish a clear understanding and alignment for both the couple and venue, and help ensure that the most qualified leads are coming in the door.

3. Provide a range of communication methods, and make sure responses are timely.

Seamless and swift communication is crucial to landing wedding bookings but is often an

afterthought for hotels and special event venues. SkiftX's survey found that nearly half of couples planning a wedding agreed that unresponsiveness and confusing communication were challenging aspects of selecting a wedding venue. Clearly, couples in the planning process expect more timely responses from potential venues after their initial outreach.

In addition to getting the timing right, hotels and special event venues should focus on reaching out to

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We get a lot of inquiries and calls. Providing the base pricing upfront is important so that couples who visit us in person already know that we're within their budget. It's important to be upfront to save everyone time.

- Jamie Lagoyda, Senior Manager for Weddings and Events, Auberge du Soleil in Napa Valley, California



customers through their preferred communication methods. Millennials and Gen Z customers have a reputation for avoiding unnecessary phone calls from businesses, preferring digital communications like email and texting when possible. These tools should be integrated into a venue's customer communication strategy, though using the right communication tool for the right customer and the right message is key. Giving potential customers the option to use a range of communication methods — such as email, texts, and phone calls — is key to meeting them where they are.

4. Shorten the time between initial contact and booking.

Hotels and special event venues should focus on moving leads through their process quickly to get more couples signed on the dotted line. SkiftX's survey found that 32 percent of couples planning a wedding agreed that the length of time spent researching, selecting, and booking a venue was the most difficult aspect of their venue search. Another 28 percent reported that "slow-to-respond or

unresponsive wedding venue managers" were their biggest stumbling blocks in the process.

SkiftX's survey examined the typical lead time for hotels and special event venues to book weddings. About half of hotel and venue representatives reported an average lead time of three months or less to book couples into their venues, though 26 percent reported needing six months to one year to close a booking. Another 15 percent said it took more than a year to finalize a booking. With 47 percent of

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So many people tell us they found us because of the photos on our website. And then they get here and say, 'It's better than the photographs.'

- Jody Hafey, Founder, Nantahala Weddings



hotels and venues reporting an average lead time of four months or more in total, there's room to improve the booking experience.

5. Provide a range of amenities and services that can be customized for different needs and wants.

Brands and retailers popular with millennials and Gen Z increasingly offer products and services based on hyper-personalization. For example, online retailer Stitch Fix provides customers access to personal stylists who help them find clothing based on their personal tastes. Meanwhile, supplement brand Care/of sends customers a box of daily vitamin packs based on their lifestyles and goals. Both brands offer customers a variety of pricing levels.

Millennial and Gen Z customers are seeking out this level of customization in other areas of their lives as hyper-personalization becomes more common. When it comes to their own weddings, they want venues that can be tailored to fit their own wants and needs and express their individual values. SkiftX's survey found that 86 percent of couples agreed or strongly agreed that when selecting the

venue for their wedding, it was important to find a venue that offered event options with customizable pricing to suit their specific event needs.

Venues can take advantage of this trend by offering couples a variety of event options and being clear about how they work and what each will cost. Providing couples with a one-size-fits-all event is no longer an option.

6. Include additional events in wedding planning.

The majority of weddings in the U.S. start with a rehearsal dinner, and many now conclude with a brunch. Venues can benefit from expanding their offerings outside the strict confines of the wedding ceremony and reception. Creating packages that tie together a suite of events such as dinners, brunches, bridal showers, and engagement parties is one way to increase revenue. These packages can be taken even further for hotels, which can offer discounts on additional nights, spa services, and food and beverages outside the event, to entice attendees to spend more money and time on the property.

7. Make sure imagery is eye-catching and reflective of the experience.

Today, couples seeking out wedding venues are very visually focused. They may be imagining how their future wedding photos will look on social media as they browse venues' websites. It's essential for venues to showcase the strongest imagery (including video) possible to accurately portray the beauty of the space and its surroundings. Photographs and videos should reflect the four seasons, different types of events, and specific angles and features — such as the view from the reception hall, types of tables, and dancefloor — and be shared on Instagram and Pinterest, as well as on the venue website.

Many venues already take great care to keep their imagery and copy updated. SkiftX found that 77 percent of venue managers agreed or strongly agreed that they regularly review and update the content related to their venue on wedding websites used by prospective customers. Every venue that wants to attract new clients and increase bookings should make this a top priority.

8. Promote hotels and special event venues across a range of digital channels.

There are many ways to promote hotels and special event venues online, from Google SEO strategies to robust social media engagement strategies.

However, SkiftX's survey found that hotel and special event venue representatives identified wedding venue sourcing websites as the most useful option among digital tools: 62 percent felt that these sites are effective for promoting their venue.

"We get the best leads from Wedding Spot," said Meg Batizy, event manager and operating partner at The Lobby, a restaurant that hosts weddings in Denver, Colorado. "Of all of the different paid listings we've had, we've stuck with Wedding Spot because we get the best conversion rate."

The early information-sharing enabled by Wedding Spot's system helps Batizy approach potential customers with an attractive offer or a range of choices that fits their priorities. "When they do the Spot Estimate, I can see what they're looking for — it answers the first three or four questions I'd usually ask," she said.

To be competitive in an online age that is increasingly focused on digital, including mobile, venues need to use all available online tools. According to SkiftX's survey, 54 percent of hotel and special event representatives said they find social media effective, while 31 percent reported that Google is very helpful. Hotels and special event venues looking to attract wedding business should have a multi-pronged approach but be attuned to the data that will indicate which platform they are likely to find most valuable.



INTERVIEW: HILTON GARDEN INN VIRGINIA BEACH OCEANFRONT ON ITS WEDDING BUSINESS STRATEGY



SkiftX spoke with Lynell Helms, director of catering for Hilton Garden Inn Virginia Beach Oceanfront in Virginia Beach, Virginia, about what couples are looking for in a hotel wedding venue today. The oceanfront hotel, which opened in 2014, is a popular wedding venue in the area and is especially attractive to couples seeking an ocean view.

SkiftX: What kind of seasonal usage trends do you see?

Lynell Helms: Business usually spikes around the summertime, when everybody wants to be outside. However, this can be challenging for some couples. Hotel room rates are high at that time of year, since we're located in a destination area. I've found that the shoulder months are becoming increasingly in demand in response. October is very popular, as are April and May.

SkiftX: Many wedding venues do not advertise their prices up front. Why did you decide to make your pricing estimates transparent?

Helms: I think it's important. It's very challenging for a couple who's never done this before to know what to expect. They can fall in love with the really expensive stuff and then realize they can't afford it. I don't want to waste anybody's time.

SkiftX: What do you do to reach those couples who have shown interest and visited the space but haven't yet committed?

Helms: I typically reach out through email or phone. I think phone calls are definitely the most personal. Not everybody likes phone calls, because we're all just so busy in this industry, but these personal touches make a difference.

SkiftX: What do you find most helpful about Wedding Spot?

Helms: I like that it gives potential customers some idea about the pricing and what is and isn't included, because sometimes it can be very confusing. Everybody works differently when it comes to what they do and don't include. I think Wedding Spot spells it out a little more clearly than most.

INTERVIEW: NANTAHALA WEDDINGS ON ITS TRANSPARENT PRICING STRATEGY



SkiftX spoke with Jody Hafey, founder of Nantahala Weddings, an outdoor venue on Nantahala Lake in Topton, North Carolina, that hosts weddings from April through October. The natural beauty of the Nantahala area is a major selling point for the venue. Most of their customers host destination weddings for families that are scattered up and down the East Coast.

SkiftX: Can you give us an idea of what your wedding venue offers?

Jody Hafey: We offer a really unusual package. Basically, we do one wedding a week that starts Thursday at 3:00 p.m. and ends Sunday at 11:00 a.m. You get access to the full venue on Thursday. You can stock up your fridge with your beverages and get organized at the venue that day. Then you have Friday to start decorating, and if you want, have your rehearsal dinner. We have a rehearsal dinner room, a get-ready salon, and a man cave.

SkiftX: What are some of the ways hotels or special event venues like yours can differentiate themselves from more generic venues?

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We want people to enjoy their time and be able to relax with their family and friends. They've got people coming from all over the place. We want people to be able to unwind with them.

- Jody Hafey, Founder, Nantahala Weddings

Hafey: Our goal is to slow it down and make it a stress-free wedding for our guests. We don't want to rush them. We want them to be able to relax and enjoy their time at Nantahala. I think that's at the heart of it. My goal is really to show people our beautiful home rather than make the maximum amount of money. We're probably bringing a hundred people into the area every weekend who would never have come here if it weren't for our venue.

SkiftX: Many wedding venues do not advertise their prices up front. Why did you decide to make your pricing transparent?

Hafey: I've found that millennials want to know up front. They don't want to have to ask, and my prices are good. So why not offer transparency?

SkiftX: What do you find most helpful about Wedding Spot?

Hafey: It has helped us get more people to look at what we have to offer and inquire about. I went from 13 weddings a year to about 32 weddings a year after signing on with Wedding Spot. We only do one wedding per weekend, so we're not shooting for 300 a year.

EXECUTIVE Q&A: CHRISTINE LAWSON, VICE PRESIDENT HOSPITALITY SALES, CVENT WEDDING SPOT



Christine Lawson

Vice President Hospitality Sales, Cvent Wedding Spot

SkiftX spoke with Christine Lawson, who discussed how hotels and other venues can most effectively take advantage of the wedding market, including the importance of using technology and qualifying leads.

SkiftX: Why should hotels and special event venues take advantage of the wedding market?

Christine Lawson: The obvious reason is that it's a big business. It's an \$80 billion industry, and it really helps hotels and special event venues balance their market segmentation and niche.

Weddings no longer take place only in June. It is a relevant year-round business and a potent means of addressing softer days of the week and broader need periods where demand is a challenge.

For example, a city-based hotel busy throughout the week with business travel and groups but

challenged on the weekends has an opportunity to capture occupancy and ancillary spend from weddings in the way of rehearsal dinners, brunches, and spa treatments, which help boost topline and overall revenue per available room (RevPAR). Hotels and special event venues can also leverage package and pricing offerings for those couples who are flexible on the time of year and/or day of week to host their wedding.

There is also the ability to capture future customers. Hosting a wedding means you have a captive audience of individuals to dazzle. This often results in return customers for business or leisure needs, in addition to positive word-of-mouth for your venue.

SkiftX: How can a hotel approach the wedding market through sales and marketing?

Lawson: It's critically important to understand the impact of technology and the need to have a diversified and textured online presence so that hotels can grab the attention of couples through inspirational content on their site. Clearly, being part of wedding directories such as Wedding Spot is strategically important.

Additionally, couples getting married now — especially millennials — are looking for a unique experience that speaks to their value system. The ability for hotels to partner, take the time to understand the couple's vision from a vibe, décor, music, and culinary perspective, and deliver the dream will be a win-win. Communicating this

commitment and nimbleness is important from both a marketing and cultural perspective. It comes down to how teams interact with couples throughout the sales process and on-site.

SkiftX: Why is getting highly qualified leads so important in the wedding business?

Lawson: The short answer is that time is money. Weddings are an emotional purchase. Couples, and often parents, are weighing options and, most importantly, seeking a budget fit. This has a significant impact on a hotel or special event venue's sales cycle.

That said, a couple who uses the Spot Estimate tool on Wedding Spot can source a desired location and design aesthetic and immediately submit their details to instantly receive a price estimate, quickly eliminating unqualified requests from couples. The couples and the sales and catering teams are aligned from a budget perspective at the outset, allowing them to focus on what's important: the elegant execution of their wedding.



EXECUTIVE Q&A: YOTAM SOEN, GENERAL MANAGER & HEAD OF PRODUCT, CVENT WEDDING SPOT



Yotam Soen
General Manager & Head of
Product, Cvent Wedding Spot

SkiftX spoke with Yotam Soen, general manager and head of product for Wedding Spot, about how the digital tool can help venues capture search traffic and see trend data that can help them adjust their marketing and pricing, as well as provide venue shoppers with the information they're looking for.

SkiftX: Why should hotels and special event venues take advantage of the wedding market?

Yotam Soen: It's all about the weekend business for hotels. Many hotels with meeting and event spaces sell those throughout the week, but they don't have that business on the weekend — so it's a great way to fill up those spaces during that time.

Depending on the couple and how big the wedding is, weddings usually come with hotel rooms for a few nights. You have your destination weddings where a couple will bring the entire family. Or perhaps one side of the couple's family is from the West Coast and the other is from the East Coast. They might have a wedding in one of their hometowns, but all the other people have to find somewhere to stay.

In the case of special event venues — the non-hotels — there's a lot of stuff that can be done on weekdays, and they can bring weddings in for weekends. Or often couples are first interested in weekend days, but change their minds when they see that a Saturday is going to be much more expensive than a Thursday.

SkiftX: What are some of the major ways that the wedding venue sourcing process has changed for couples over the last few years?

Soen: First of all, it's gone online, and it keeps going more and more online. And mobile is prominent. When we compare 2017 to 2019, more than 60 percent of the traffic that we see on Wedding Spot is mobile now, as opposed to 50 percent two years ago.

We also need to remember that this is a new generation that looks at things differently. They want a short list before they even call anybody. They want their information up front. And response times are critical because these couples expect an answer immediately, even if they're reaching out in the middle of the night. That poses challenges for hotels and venues.

SkiftX: How can couples who are planning weddings benefit most from Wedding Spot?

Soen: When couples get engaged, they're excited. They have no idea what they have to do, so they go to Google and search for wedding venues in Seattle, wedding venues in San Francisco, etcetera. That's



when they find Wedding Spot, which brings them ease-of-use. They can get their own price estimate without having to talk to anybody. They want to understand that this venue fits their style, that it's what they envisioned, and that it's in their budget.

Wedding Spot puts a very big emphasis on photos and on easily digestible, structured data. They can get the data points that are interesting to them and then get the price on top of it. This way, it's very easy for them to create that short list and then reach out to venues.

SkiftX: How can hotels and special event venues benefit from Wedding Spot?

Soen: It's going to be impossible for most individual hotels and venues to show up high on Google in a typical search. If a couple looks for wedding venues in San Francisco, the chances that a single hotel will rank at the top are very, very slim. The fact that Wedding Spot is more often than not the first

organic result in those searches means that you gain exposure to all those couples.

Second, with the Spot Estimate, couples' ability to actually get a price for their event at the venue means that the couples that reach out to you have seen the venue's price. There's no sticker shock. When they come in, they know it's more or less in their budget.

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It's going to be impossible for most individual hotels and venues to show up high on Google in a typical search.

When getting leads through the Spot Estimate, the venue representative also gets everything that the couple filled out on the site. Before ever talking with

them, the venue has a ton of data on that couple — for example, that they're looking for 120 people, they're talking about Friday, and they want three courses plated. The sales representative can start a back and forth with the couple from a much better position.

Wedding Spot also helps venues by giving them competitive information showing the couple's other activity on the site. For example, did a couple reach out to ten other venues or one other venue? That lead is much hotter if they reached out to just one other venue as opposed to another ten.

SkiftX: How can data and analytics help drive bookings?

Soen: Venues can use the data to see trends. For instance, I can see that my venue's profile was viewed 1,000 times by couples in the last month. Out of those, 10 couples reached out. The month before, I had 1,000 couples viewing my profile, but 30 reached out. That was a 67 percent lower count of leads and conversion of these couples. So, do I need to update my profile? Do I need to change photos? Is something wrong with my pricing? You can use this valuable information to check the pulse of your performance.

Venues can also see how they perform competitively against others. For example, a sales representative can see that a couple is pricing other venues between \$15,000 and \$30,000. This way, venues know what they're up against and can leverage that in their conversations with that couple.

SkiftX: What are the main differentiators between Wedding Spot and its competitors?

Soen: One is the Spot Estimate, for sure. It's our secret sauce. It's what makes us who we are. The second is that we're venue-only. When a couple gets engaged, they don't have experience. What they need to do now is find a venue, lock the date, and then there's a whole slew of other things that need to take place. But none of that matters before the venue. The fact that we're venue-only means that the couple is focused on what they should do now. The third is that the data that we give the venues really empowers them to make better decisions and better prioritize their time and how they reply to their couples.



CONCLUSION

The way that soon-to-be brides and grooms plan their weddings has undergone a digital transformation. The emergence of search and the online availability of information has shifted how they search for and communicate with hotels and venues. Venues must engage with new tools, such as wedding venue sourcing sites, to best express the essential part they can play in a couple's special day and maintain a competitive edge in this shifting industry.

Those planning weddings today are seeking transparent and customized information about venues, from unique options that match their values to precise pricing estimates. They want to communicate using a variety of preferred channels and go through a fast and easy booking process.

After all, choosing a wedding venue is important. It's that first exciting step toward a day of joy, in a place – and with an experience – that lasts a lifetime.



ABOUT SKIFT

Skift is the largest intelligence platform in travel, providing media, insights, marketing to key sectors of the industry. Through daily news, research, podcasts, and Skift Global Forum conferences, Skift deciphers and defines the trends that matter to the marketers, strategists, and technologists shaping the industry.

SkiftX is Skift's in-house content marketing studio, working collaboratively with partners like Adobe, Airbnb, Hyatt, Lyft, Mastercard, and many more on custom projects to engage the world's largest audience of travel influencers and decision makers.

Visit skiftx.com to learn more or email skiftx@skift.com.

The Skift logo is rendered in a large, bold, black sans-serif font.

ABOUT CVENT WEDDING SPOT

[Cvent Wedding Spot](#) simplifies the process of finding a wedding venue by providing more than just an online directory.

Working directly with venues, Wedding Spot gathers all the information allowing newly engaged couples to find venues based on budget, location, style, and guest count. Users can “build out” their ideal wedding day by selecting guest count, wedding date, and specific services and options to receive an instant online price estimate and book a venue viewing appointment with one click of a button. Wedding Spot offers wedding venues tools to manage the entire wedding booking process, including acquiring customers, organizing content, and marketing inventory.

Launched in August 2013 and currently partnering with over 12,000 venues in the U.S., Wedding Spot has helped millions of couples find their wedding venue. Wedding Spot is owned by [Cvent](#), a leading meetings, events, and hospitality technology provider with more than 4,300 employees, 27,000 customers, and 300,000 users worldwide.

The Cvent logo features the word "cvent" in a lowercase, blue, sans-serif font.The Wedding Spot logo consists of the word "WEDDING" in a small, black, uppercase font above the word "SPOT" in a larger, black, uppercase font. The letter "O" in "SPOT" is replaced by a purple diamond-shaped ring icon.