



## Wedding Industry Slims Down In 2009

By Angela C. Allen  
Senior Writer

The country's estimated \$61.4 billion wedding industry is expected to go on a diet this year as cost-conscious couples forsake the glitzy trappings of platinum weddings for more low-key and budget-friendly ceremonies that challenge businesses to creatively cut expenses while still turning a profit.

The average cost of a wedding has already declined by 24 percent – dropping from \$28,704 in 2007 to \$21,814 in 2008, according to the Wedding Report, a research firm that tracks wedding industry statistics.

Joseph Magaddino, chair of the department of economics at California State University, Long Beach, says the decline in wedding spending is a direct reflection of the national and regional economy.

"Consumers have significantly retrenched in terms of expenditures," he says. "These are tough times, and people are choosing to watch their expenditures carefully. In some cases, households might very well have used credit lines to finance a wedding, and given the tight credit terms we've observed, . . . it's a period for people to be a little bit more cautious."

Despite the restrictions imposed by the tightening economy, true love continues to bloom.

In Los Angeles County, 59,169 couples registered marriage licenses with the Los Angeles County Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk's office last year. That's a nearly five percent increase from the 56,493 who officially tied the knot in 2007.

As we enter 2009, commitment-minded couples are looking for ways to make their special day beautiful without breaking the bank, say wedding industry experts.

"Clients are telling me couples are coming in wanting a deal right away," says Jolene Rae Harrington, creative content director of HereComesTheGuide.com, a Berkeley-based Web site that caters to California brides. For those marrying in the Golden State, the Web site provides information on everything from finding the perfect dress or ring to arranging a ceremony at the Aquarium of the Pacific in Long Beach.

"It's a bride's market," she says. "Smart shopping is going to save you money in the long run. On our Web site, we have a series called Questions to Ask, focused on each particular aspect of your event, where we've broken down what you look for in a contract, ways to save yourself money and make sure you're getting what you pay for. And now more than ever in this economy, it pays to do your homework."

Harrington says an indirect benefit of the economic downturn is that upscale venues that normally cater to the business elite are now making a pitch for wedding dollars.

"We're seeing couples take advantage of some of the flexibility on the higher-end venues," she says. "Because the corporate-event business is seriously in decline and really hurting, a lot of people that had depended on the corporate business are relying on their wedding business to pick up the slack, and they're putting more energy into promoting their wedding business because it's a more reliable revenue stream."

Harrington says the newest creative budgeting technique is the increasing popularity of the "midweek wedding." This option is ideal for young couples or those with kids and a small budget. It's also practical if guests live locally – couples can have their ceremony after work, serve dinner and still have everyone home before 11 p.m., she says.

"Five years ago – never; now occasionally we're seeing it," says Harrington. "And you get your weddings for half because the venues aren't used to booking the bar room on a Wednesday or Thursday and they're giving you a great deal. It's a wonderful way to still have a nice event and save money."

Locally, weddings on the beach remain popular as couples take advantage of the idyllic background scenery provided for free by Mother Nature. Last year, the City of Long Beach's Office of Special Events and Filming gave out 35 permits for beach weddings.

At Claire's at the Museum in the historic Elizabeth Milbank Anderson House, the staff relies on a dramatic beachfront vista and expansive views of the harbor and Pacific Ocean to lure in couples looking for the quintessential California wedding.

The scenic restaurant hosted 24 wedding parties in 2008 and is already on track to exceed that number this year, says Marketing Coordinator Anne Dreyer. "With Catalina Island in the distance and Long Beach Harbor, when it lights up [at night], it's a nice backdrop," she says, adding that the spectacular sunset views are also a big draw. "If [couples] start when it's light out, after their ceremony they'll see the sunset and it'll get dark – they'll get the whole experience."

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**INCO Commercial Realty, Inc.**  
**dba INCO Company**  
**(562) 498-3395**  
**6621 E. Pacific Coast Hwy. #280**  
**Long Beach, CA 90803**  
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