

Memo: Protecting the Wedding from Prestige Competition

The goal is not to spend less; it is to ensure that each significant expense serves the experience you want rather than the ranking you fear.

To: Brides, grooms, parents, and families planning a wedding From: Your wedding planner Subject: Distinguishing genuine preference from status signaling

Bottom line

Luxury is not the problem. Unexamined comparison is.

When every wedding choice is measured against peers, family expectations, images seen elsewhere, or the fear of appearing insufficient, the event can become a contest in reputability. Thorstein Veblen's useful insight is that wealth is often accumulated and displayed not only for comfort, but for the honor and distinction it confers. In that environment, a choice may feel beautiful partly because it is costly, recognizable, or difficult for others to match.

The practical task is therefore not to eliminate expensive choices. It is to identify which expenditures genuinely improve the experience, which communicate something you deliberately want to communicate, and which are simply answers to an invisible ranking system.

The mechanism to watch

Veblen describes conspicuous consumption as the use of valuable goods as visible evidence of pecuniary strength and social reputability. He also argues that each social class tends to look upward, treating the next higher class as its model of decency. That makes escalation unusually difficult to see from inside the process: yesterday's indulgence becomes today's expected standard, and an accustomed level of expenditure becomes difficult to lower because it has become tied to self-respect and social decency.

This is why "We have already done so much; we cannot now do less" can feel like a practical argument even when the original purpose of an expense has disappeared. A display adopted for distinction can become a felt necessity through habit and convention.

The same mechanism can affect taste. Veblen argues that costliness can masquerade as beauty: an expensive object may be experienced as more beautiful because its price carries social meaning. The hand-wrought silver spoon is his concrete illustration of how honorific price can outweigh mechanical usefulness. The wedding equivalent is not any particular floral design, venue, garment, or service. It is the moment when price becomes evidence of quality before the choice has been considered on its own terms.

A decision test for major expenses

Before approving a costly or highly visible choice, ask four questions:

1. What experience does this create?

Does it improve comfort, participation, sociability, generosity, beauty, or another outcome you genuinely value?

2. What does it communicate?

Is the message intentional-welcome, family history, hospitality, restraint, delight-or is it mainly "we could afford this"?

3. Who is the audience?

Would you still choose it if no peer, relative, photograph, or imagined critic could compare it with another wedding?

4. What would happen if you removed it?

Would guests lose an important part of the experience, or would the family mainly feel exposed to the possibility of looking less accomplished?

The answers need not lead to a smaller choice. They lead to a more owned choice.

Where prestige pressure is strongest

Visible elements are especially vulnerable because, as Veblen notes, apparel is continuously in evidence and judged at first glance. The same logic applies to any wedding decision whose primary function is to be immediately legible as expensive, difficult, rare, or fashionable.

Fashion also changes under this pressure. When status requires continual distinction, styles become unstable and replacement becomes part of the system. A choice may therefore be attractive not because it expresses your taste, but because it is new enough to separate you from the previous standard.

Staffing and service deserve similar scrutiny. Veblen describes a point at which servants are retained less for useful service than to demonstrate the owner's ability to consume human time unproductively. The relevant question is not whether assistance is lavish. It is whether the assistance materially improves care and execution, or whether its visible presence is doing most of the reputational work.

The standard to preserve

A wedding can be luxurious without being governed by invidious comparison. Veblen defines that comparison as judging people according to relative worth, producing esteem for those who rank higher and dissatisfaction among those who rank lower. That is a poor foundation for an event intended to express affection, hospitality, and family meaning.

Counterweights already exist: charity, sociability, sympathy, and aesthetic communion are motives that resist personal rivalry. Let those motives guide the budget. Spend generously where generosity is experienced. Preserve beauty where beauty is truly yours. Decline the choices that exist mainly to prevent an imagined downgrade in rank.

The most successful wedding is not the one that wins every comparison. It is the one whose expense, beauty, and generosity remain recognizable to the people hosting it as their own.