

Wedding planning in china



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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

1. 1 Background

Wedding is once-a-life event in people's life. For most of families, they are willing to spend a considerable amount of money to ensure the wedding is organized as perfect as possible. According to Howard (2006), wedding today is a \$70 billion business in U. S., and the average cost of wedding is \$26, 000 per couples. As a spinoff the larger discipline of event management, the business of wedding planning will provide business to a broad array of supporting industries, such as hotels, retails, and catering service.

Comparing with the other personal events, such as birthday, anniversaries, wedding is more complicated, because it involves friends and families and a range of related service activities covering from catering to entertainments (Shone & Parry, 2004). In order to make sure everything goes smoothly in the wedding day, most of the prospective couples would like to plan the wedding in sometimes year in advance. Both brides and grooms put much effort into the wedding preparation including the venue selection, honeymoon booking and dress design etc. However, not all of them have enough time and energy and knowledge in wedding planning to arrange everything themselves. They need someone to assist them in wedding planning, budget preparation, planning detail checklists, venue arrangement as well as onsite supervision and coordination on the wedding day. Wedding planners, the professional dealing with all the details of wedding, provide a one-stop service to potential couples by charging some considerable consultant fee (Wikipedia org, 2009). The role of the wedding planners is to save time, look after details, make couples' dream come true, stay on the

budget and save money. Wedding planners have become one of the outsourced labours in modern society (Blakely, 2007).

With the rapid development of the society in the last decade, more and more couples prefer to go to college and start their own careers after graduation. Marriage is happening later in brides and grooms' life (Mayling, 2002). This means couples have more disposable income to afford the wedding expenses; and they are more likely to look for some special unique wedding styles, such as theme wedding, green wedding etc., which probably involves different elements, such as ethic, religious custom, family tradition, class identity, regional practice and individual tastes and preference (Howard, 2006). As a result, wedding planners, who are providing professional advices and assistance to the couples from the moment of distributing the invitations, arranging the style of cake ceremony, table setting, and setting for banquet, are necessarily needed and developed dramatically (Markby, 2006).

1. 2 Wedding in China

In traditional Chinese culture, marriage was creating alliances between families. Therefore, it was strictly arranged by parents or elder people in families. Wedding should be planned strictly according to the customs. For example, people should choose a good year, a good month, a good day as well as a good time for wedding ceremony; and use “ red” in the declaration for everything with the purpose of auspicious. Wedding is also one of the ways for Chinese families to present their social classes therefore the families are willing to spend a large mount of money on wedding, and much of which were supported by parents or relatives.

Because of the reform and opening-up policy in the late 1970s, nowadays, the living standards in China have been dramatically increased. According to the China Statistic Yearbook – 2008 (2009), the GDP per capita in Mainland China is increasing steadily and has reached 18, 934 RMB in 2007. At the mean time, the social culture is becoming diversified. More and more Chinese people, especially the younger generation who have better education, began to accept the western culture. Most of the prospective couples would like to experience different types of weddings that can make their special day more measurable. For example, some people choose “white” wedding instead of traditional Chinese “red” wedding; some may prefer destination wedding instead of having wedding at home, which may require more time and professional planning and organizing throughout the wedding preparation. Therefore, wedding planners, as a new business in China, has developed rapidly during the last decade. According to the ministry of commerce of the PRC (2008), wedding service today has become a big business in China covering about 76 industries, such as matchmaking business, wedding planning as well as banquets, tourism industries etc. where the photographer has the highest profit that is above 30% while the wedding planner is 15%. The average expenditure for more than 3. 7 million new Chinese couples in 2006 was about 126, 600 RMB. Based on the statistics of Ministry of Civil Affairs of the PRC (2009), about 11 million couples got married in 2008 with the growth of 10. 8% than 2007. All the statistics above show that wedding business in China has a huge market and potential.

This research will focus on Pearl River Delta, the most economically dynamic region in southern part of China. PRD covers nine prefectures of Guangdong province including Guangzhou, Shenzhe, Zhuhai, Dongguan, Zhongshan, Foshan, Huizhou, Jiangmen and Zhaoqing; and has become one of the leading economic regions and a major manufacturing center of China, which accounted for 10.2% of China's GDP. People in PRD have more purchasing power than the other region. The per capita GDP in PRD ranges from 35,700 to 79,600 RMB which is much higher than the national per capita GDP (HKTDC, 2008). Because of the advantages of its location and open-door policy, PRD became the first region in China which allowed the foreign investments. Thus, apart from the economic strength, people in PRD were influenced by the western cultures earlier than the other places of China.

1.3 Research problem statements

Due to the low entry cost in the wedding planning business, the number of wedding planners has increased rapidly in China in the last decade.

Generally, two to three persons having relevant planning experience can establish a wedding planning company with around 100,000 RMB investments in China. They just need an office for meeting with clients and an official blog or website for promotion. Despite of the rapid development of the wedding business, the service/product offered by the wedding planners is similar. Comparing with the wedding photo service business, there is a lack of leading brand in the wedding planning business. With the growth of income level and education level, the couples in China are becoming more and more demanding towards the wedding service/products and face a problem that how to choose a suitable wedding planners who can provide

excellent service/product. Thus, from the supply side, identifying and satisfying the important and unfulfilled needs of prospective couples is one of the ways for wedding planners to differentiate their products from the competitors, and make success in the competition.

However, there is few studies indentifying prospective couples' needs or attitudes toward products or service of wedding planner in Pearl River Delta even though in Chinese mainland, nor research about how well the wedding planners in China is meeting the needs of prospective couples.

Therefore, this study will focus on the following questions to find out the needs of prospective couples (demand side) towards the wedding planners in PRD

1. What's the reason for couples hiring wedding planners?
2. What's the factors affecting the selection of wedding planners?
Reputation? Price? Or other?
3. Do the needs of prospective couples toward wedding planners in Pearl River Delta vary according to the different demographical characteristics?

1. 4 Research objectives:

- To find out the needs of prospective couples' when hiring the wedding planners in the Pearl River Delta;
- To investigate the relationship between the needs for prospective couples and the choice of product/service offered by wedding planners in Pearl River Delta Region;

- To investigate how the needs of potential couples are influenced by their demographic profiles;
- To make recommendations to the wedding planners in Pearl River Delta.

• **CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW**

In this chapter, the previous studies related to wedding, wedding planners as well as the consumer purchase behavior will be reviewed.

2. 1 Nature of wedding

From the view of sociology, Edward (1987) defined that weddings are rites of passage, which belong to the class of rituals that everywhere mark the transition of a person or persons from one status to another. Wedding therefore becomes a private and highly-personalized event in people's life. Event is held for a purpose that brings people together to share an experience and produce a measurable outcome no matter public or private, commercial or charitable, celebratory or commemorative (Silvers, 2003). Shone and Parry (2004) defined the wedding, together with the other personal events (e. g. birthday or anniversaries), as a type of special events. Their phenomenon arise from leisure, cultural, personal or organizational objectives which are set apart from the normal activity of daily life and their purpose is to enlighten, celebrate, entertain or challenge the experience of a group of people. The characteristics of special events include personal interactions, ritual or ceremony, intangible, fixed timescale, labor intensive, ambience and service, perishability as well as uniqueness. Getz (2007) also defined wedding as a form of planned events because it is held in venues that cater to individual and small-group clients

which may require professionals or be entirely arranged by the participants. From this point of view, Getz (2007) believed that the wedding is a multi-meaning experience in both personal and social aspects, and it can be considered as celebrations in which a theme and emotional stimulation are essential.

Although, wedding is usually defined as a type of small or personal events, it is still an area lack of study and research compared with meeting, exhibition, incentives or other events. There is quite a few academic book or journal devoted to the planning and design of weddings, parties or other private functions.

2. 2 Wedding planners

2. 21 The nature of wedding planner

Arranging an event is complicated as it involves different elements such as the specialist sets, props, customers for participants or guests, and all the range of support requirements from special effects and lighting to music and entertainment. Event management companies are increasingly common in the events business in the last decades, which have specialized in providing of the complete event by careful planning and management. People can enjoy a number of benefits of having an EMC including the expertise, ideas and experience they can draw on (Shone & Parry, 2004). Shone and Parry (2004) found that although there are some major companies in the event business, there are a wide range of smaller organizations and individuals that are willing to provide events-related service particular for the personal event market, which include the organization of parties, celebrations, weddings, anniversaries and many of similar events. Professional party

planners or event organizers are those professional who deal with the nitty-gritty details of planning, organizing, operating and managing an event to ensure everything goes smoothly.

According to Wikipedia (2009), wedding planners are the professionals who deal with all the details of the wedding, which includes planning, organizing, operating and management, to ensure everything goes smoothly and correctly. Ellis-Christensen (2008) defined that wedding planner as an event professional whose responsibility is not only to plan a memorable wedding, but also to give some professional advices to the couples including the venue selection, equipments preparation etc. They usually act as a wedding advisor, coordinator, supervisor, financial planner and mediator during the wedding (Brush Creek Weddings, 2008). Peters (2007) also stated that the range of service offered by wedding planner is widely. Some may prefer to offer consulting service only while some may prefer to provide comprehensive wedding package. At the meantime, Peters (2007) also pointed out that the global trend of the wedding business has been toward offering total coordination of the entire blessed event from the beginning to the end, which includes identifying the needs of new couples, budget preparation, planning detailed checklist, venue arrangement, identifying the professionals (e. g. florists, photographers etc.) as well as on-site supervision and coordination on the wedding day. The consultant fee varies widely depending on different locations or different packages. The consultant fee may be higher in larger cities where disposable income of couples is higher than the other places.

2. 22 The requirements of a wedding planner

Having a strong organizational skills as well as an eye for details are necessary and basic requirements for a successful professional meeting planner because meeting process is both comprehensive and meticulous. Moreover, meeting planners must have the ability to work successful under pressure, to react calmly to constant change, and to make quick decisions (O'Brien & Shaw, 2002).

Howard (2006) stressed that wedding planning is highly customer oriented as most of the couples are looking for special, unique and memorable wedding. Ethic and religious custom, family tradition, class identity, regional practice, and individual tastes and preferences certainly all played a role in shaping wedding consumption. Peters (2007) suggested that good communication skills, good organizational skills as well as good interpersonal skills are very essential for being a successful wedding planner, because wedding planners act as a middle person who deals with both clients and suppliers.

The appearance of the professional wedding organization was an important benchmark in the rise of wedding planner business, indicating that wedding planning service today are more and more professional. These professional organizations help wedding planners naturalize particular customs and practices on a potentially national scale by sharing etiquette and customs. They provide some training course for wedding planners. Getting a certificate from professional organization has become one of the evidences for professional and made the customer confident with the service quality. Additionally, the

organization also centralized and rationalized a consultants' business, providing important resources and information regarding the markets as well as the trend (Howard, 2006).

2. 23 Demand of wedding planners

Wedding is an important event in people's life that many people are willing to organize by themselves on the small and more intimate scale. However, not all of them have the time and wish to expend the effort on doing so and happier to pay a professional to come along and deal with all the details of planning, organizing, operating and managing to ensure everything goes smoothly (Shone & Parry, 2006).

According to Blakely (2007), the supply of commercial service increases dramatically along with the growth of demands for family jobs. Wedding planners are a form of outsourced labor in the modern society. These jobs which are transported from home to the public marketplace are responding to the time crunch produced by work-family conflict. From this point of view, Blakely defined wedding planners as commercial substitutes.

Besides, Edwards (1987) conducted a research to examine the relationship between the wedding's commercial development and its nature as a rite of passage. He found that the reason of the success of the wedding business was the convenience offered by the wedding planners and the demand from consumers for larger and more sumptuous celebrations. Consumers were looking for a wide range of wedding-related service (one-stop service) through a single organization.

2. 4 The trend

Firstly, the wedding today tends to be more customized than before. According to Hensdill (1996), because of the cultural exchange among the global village, traditional wedding customs are giving way to the trends of Western societies. Some new styles of wedding exist, such as theme wedding, destination wedding and green wedding, because more and more couples are looking for unique wedding.

Destination wedding is a new wedding style that a couple decides to hold their wedding in a location where neither one of them resides (Daniels & Loveless, 2007). There are several top destinations for wedding in the world, such as Caribbean, Las Vegas, Hawaii as well as Maldives. Generally, some special theme may be adopted into the destination wedding. For example, hotel in Las Vegas has organized Italian-style wedding for wedding couples (Stratton, 2001). Moreover, the destination wedding often merges into the honeymoon (Daniels & Loveless, 2007).

Secondly, the internet and e-commerce has shaped the modern wedding consumption and gave it a new immediacy and flexibility. As a result, the wedding planners can target different segments of the bridal markets through developing website that advertised their goods and services and allowed consumers to make agreement or shop directly through their online site (Howard, 2006).

2. 2 Consumer purchase behaviors toward wedding

“ Consumer behavior is defined as the behavior that consumers display in searching form, purchasing, using, evaluating, and disposing

of products and services that they expect will satisfy their needs. It focuses on how individuals make decisions to spend their available resources ” (Schiffman & Kanuk , 2007).

2. 32 Factors affecting consumer purchases

As people are willing to devote time and effort to the ritual occasions like Christmas and Thanksgiving, some researches regarding the types of purchases associated with ritual occasions have been conducted by researchers in consumer behavior (Lowery, 1994). According to some market analysis, consumer purchase behavior is strongly influenced by social, cultural and individual characteristics.

a)Social factors

According to Schiffman and Kanuk (2007), consumer behavior is influenced by two major groups, namely the reference group and families.

*“ A reference group that is perceived as credible, attractive, or powerful can induce consumer attitude and behavior change”
(Schiffman and Kanuk , 2007)*

Based on the traditional family life cycle, the prospective couples belong to the stage II, honeymooners, who have available a combined income that often permits a lifestyle that provides them with the opportunities of more indulgent purchasing of professions, which means that the honeymooners are happy to accept the professional products and service and willing to pay more money for them as they pursuit high quality of life. The reason hidden behind may be because they have more disposable income and more free time for themselves

before the born of young children. Additionally, for the newlyweds, the advice and experience of other married couples (e. g. parents or friends) are likely to be important when they start-up their expenses to establish a new home (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2007).

“ For many consumers their family is their primary reference group for many attitudes and behaviors. The members of a family assume specific roles in their everyday functioning; such roles or tasks extend to the realm of consumer purchase decisions. Key consumer-related roles of family members include influencers, gatekeepers, deciders, buyers, preparers, users, maintainers, and disposers. A family’s decision-making style is influenced by its lifestyle, roles, and cultural factors.” (Schiffman & Kanuk , 2007) .

Different social classes have different preferences in clothing, home decoration and leisure activities as well as saving, spending and credit habits. Based on the market study by Bride’s magazine, 20% of the buyers of the wedding products identified themselves as buyers of Bride’s magazine who were mainly middle class women employed in white-collar, professional and technical fields and had higher medium annual income, when combined with their future husband’s. This means that the bride had more control over future consumer decisions that the couple would make (Howard, 2006).

Another research about the division of wedding labor and its meaning for couples by Sniezek (2005) indicated that women complete the a disproportionate amount of wedding work just as women do more of kin-work, housework, childcare and managerial family work. He also

pointed out that couples were not likely to label the unequal division of labor as unfair which may potentially put the relationship in a state of conflict. From this point of view, his statement highly support Blakely's study (2007) which stated that the wedding planning business's targeted market is modern career women. Blakely also used the case study of wedding planning to confirm Hochschild's thesis (2003) that feminism plays an important ideological role in the expansion of the commodity frontier.

However, after comparison of the emphases that brides and grooms place on artifacts selected for use in their weddings and reception, Lowery (1994) found out that the brides participating in the focus group had no difficulty describing artifacts that were important to them; while grooms had greater difficulty. They also suggest that the emergence of traditional or modern gender roles in wedding planning is partially determined by the attitudes of the bride and groom toward these roles. This is also proved by Schiffman & Kanuk (2007) that wedding purchase is a joint-decision in the family where the couples may play different roles in the decision making procedure.

b) Cultural factors

" Culture is the sum total of learned beliefs, values, and customs that serve to regulate the consumer behavior of member of a particular society." (Schiffman & Kanuk , 200 7)

When explaining how culture affects the consumer behavior, Schiffman and Kanuk (2007) indicated that all phases of human problem solving are directed and guided by culture, which includes various ritualized

experiences and behaviors. For instance, in practice, rituals accompany with people throughout the human life cycle from birth to death, including a host of intermediate events such as confirmation, graduations and marriage. Besides the culture, subculture also plays an important in consumer's behavior which includes nationality, religion, geographic, location, race, age and sex. For example, when comparing the husband-wife decision making between United States and China, Schiffman and Kanuk (2007) found out that there were substantially fewer " joint" decisions and more " husband-dominated" decisions for many household purchases in China. Even in the same country, another research showed that in larger city like Beijing, couples were more likely than rural couples to share equally in purchase decisions.

c) Individual factors

Apart from the social and cultural factors which affecting the consumer behavior, individual factors play an important role when people make decision (Dholakia, 1979). Schiffman & Kanuk (2005) explained the influences of the individual factors through several categories: motivation, personality, perception, learning as well as attitudes. As a driving force within individuals that force them to take actions, motivation is produced by a state of uncomfortable tension – unsatisfied needs. Liking to our topic, hiring the wedding planner may be motivated by the needs of couples, such as lack of time for preparation, looking for professional service etc. Personality determines and reflects how a person responds to his or her

environment. Generally, people are looking for the balance between the perceived self-image and their behavior including the purchasing products or service. Some may prefer innovative wedding style (e. g. destination wedding, green wedding) while the other may choose traditional wedding. Moreover, each individual has its own process when he or she selects, organizes and interprets stimuli into a meaningful and coherent picture of the world. This process is highly subjective and is based on what the consumer expect to see. There are several factors that can influence the perception including physical appearance, stereotypes, halo effects, irrelevant cues, first impressions, and the tendency to jump to conclusions.

2. 3 Theoretical foundation- Consumer decision making process

This research is based on consumer decision making process, which is one of the theories of consumer behavior. Decisions are about the selection of an option from two or more alternative choices. According to Kotler, Bowen and Makens (2006), consumer decision process consists of five essential stages:

2. 31 Need recognition

From the moment that the consumer recognizes a problem or need, the consumer buying process starts. The consumers' needs can be stimulated by both internal and external factors. Advertisements, word-of-mouth, social cues from families, friends and anyone within the families can influence the customers' need recognition. In the case of wedding planner, potential couples, their internal stimuli probably is lacking of time for preparation, looking for some unique and special

wedding while the external stimuli may be the advertisement in the internet, the promotional events held by wedding planners, especially by the friends or families who have previous experience.

2. 32 Information search

Searching information about their needs or problems is the second step of buying process. How much information a consumer looks for will depend on the strength of the drive, and the amount of initial information, the value placed on additional information. Linking to the wedding planners, couples will take some time for information searching. This is a stage that couples can decide if they would like to hire a wedding planners or if the products/service offered by wedding planner can satisfy their needs.

2. 33 Evaluation of alternatives

After searching the relevant information, customers will use the information to arrive at a set of final brand choices. At this stage, potential couples may set up a personal comparison system through different attributes such as reputation, price, theme etc., in order to identify which would be the most ideal brand.

2. 34 Purchase decision

Subsequently, consumer will buy the most preferred brand based on their evaluation in the previous stage. This is the stage that potential couples choose which brand, what kind of services and check if the product/service is available. This is also the stage that potential couples decide if they would like to hire a wedding planner or not.

2. 35 Post-purchase behavior

Based on the performance of the service/products, the final stage determines whether the consumer satisfy the service/products or not.

2. 4 Summary

After reviewing the previous studies related to wedding and wedding planners, we can find out that most of the studies were conducted in the developed countries such as U. S or United Kingdom, while there is a blank area regarding this field in China. Moreover, there is little study regarding the consumer purchase behavior towards the wedding planners conducted before. This research will based on the theories of consumer behavior to conduct three in-depth interviews to find out the reasons for potential couples hiring wedding planners; and the factors affecting their decision. Then, a quantitative research will be conducted to express the findings in statistical terms.

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

This research will be designed as an exploratory, quantitative, cross-sectional investigation of prospective couples' needs towards the service/products offered by wedding planners in Pearl River Delta.

3. 1 Research Design

The advantage of semi-structure interviews is that it can allow issues to be explored deeply while questionnaire survey is that it can collect information from a large number of people and express the findings in statistical terms (Jennings, 2001). As limited study regarding the needs of potential couples towards the wedding service has been conducted in China so far, for this research, the important variables are not clear and still need to be defined. In order to develop a more reliable

questionnaire to conduct quantitative research at the second stage, the first stage is to explore the important variables through a qualitative research. In-depth interviews with three potential couples will be conducted, which will facilitate the identifying the different requirements made by potential couples when selecting the wedding planners. These in-depth interviews are critical for the whole research because the finding of these interviews will be used to develop the questionnaire.

3. 2 Questionnaire design

There will be four main parts in the questionnaire. The first part will be the screening questions with the purpose of screening the invalid sample through some questions. Then, the second part will include some questions regarding the prospective couple's attitudes towards the service/products offered by wedding planners in Pearl River Delta. Respondents' are required to indicate their personal opinions on each statement on a five-point Likert type scale: 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. In the third part, open-end questions will be included in order to examine the personal experience and intention of hiring a wedding planner. Finally, there will be a set of questions regarding the demographic characteristics of the respondents, which will include gender, age, income level, marriage status, and education level.

In order to explain the purpose of the research to the respondents, a covering letter will be attached to the questionnaire. The covering letter will include the information that how the sample was selected, the time will take to complete the survey, contact person for questions

and assuring the response would be kept confidential and only used for statistical purposes.

3.3 Samp