



The Magic of Chris Wheel

WEDDING ENTERTAINMENT · UPSTATE NEW YORK & BEYOND

50 Things You Need to Know About *Your Wedding*

The Stuff Nobody Else Will Tell You

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A Note From Chris

I am a professional magician, and when couples book me for their wedding, they naturally ask about the magic. But as the big day gets closer, a funny thing happens: they start asking me about everything else. "What should we do during cocktail hour?" "How do we keep people from getting bored?" "What do you see work at other events?" These questions are a little outside my wheelhouse, but I am a service-oriented person by nature, so I do what I always do: I research, I ask around, and I try to help.

Over the years, between performing at weddings, attending them as a guest, being married myself, talking to planners and venue coordinators, and spending way too many late nights browsing wedding websites and vendor blogs, I have picked up a lot of knowledge that most couples do not hear until it is too late. The hidden costs nobody mentions. The tiny decisions that make a huge difference. The things that seem important but are not, and the things that seem small but absolutely are.

This is not a traditional wedding planning guide. You can find a thousand of those online. These are 50 of my best thoughts, tips, and considerations, collected from real experience, real conversations, and a genuine desire to help you throw the best celebration of your life. Some will save you money. Some will save you stress. Some will make your guests talk about your wedding for years. And a few will just make you laugh, which is honestly the most underrated part of wedding planning.

"I read this entire book hoping for magic tricks. There were none. But somehow I still feel like I got fooled into learning something useful."

-- A very confused groomsman

Congratulations on your engagement. Now let us make sure the wedding is just as good as the proposal.

Chris Wheel

Part 1: Before You Start Planning

1 Pick a Feeling Before You Pick a Venue

Before you tour a single venue or open Pinterest, sit down together and answer one question: "How do we want people to feel when they leave?" Not what color the napkins should be. Not whether you want a barn or a ballroom. How do you want the night to feel? Intimate and cozy? Loud and celebratory? Elegant and refined? That answer becomes your compass for every decision that follows. When you are torn between two options, the one that matches your feeling wins.

2 Set Up a Separate Wedding Email Immediately

The moment you start contacting vendors, your inbox will explode. Set up a dedicated email address (something like "SmithJonesWedding@gmail.com") and use it for every single wedding-related communication. This keeps your personal and work email clean, makes it easy to search for contracts and confirmations later, and gives both of you equal access to all the information.

3 Pick Your Venue Before Your Date

Most couples pick a date first and then scramble to find a venue that is available. Flip it. Find the venue you love, then choose from their available dates. You will end up with a space you are genuinely excited about instead of settling for "the only place that had our Saturday open."

4 Off-Peak Dates Save Real Money

Friday evenings and Sundays can save you 20 to 40 percent on venue costs compared to a Saturday. January, February, and November are typically the cheapest months. Even shifting one week in either direction around a holiday weekend can change pricing significantly. If budget matters (and it always does), ask every venue about their off-peak pricing before committing to a date.

5 Create a "Not-To-Do" List

Everyone will tell you what to add. Favors. A photo booth. Sparklers. A choreographed first dance. But some of the best weddings I have been to were great because the couple was brave enough to cut things that did not matter to them. You do not need favors if they are just going to get left on the table. You do not need a garter toss if it makes you cringe. Give yourself permission to skip anything that does not match the feeling you chose in Tip 1.

6

Schedule Wedding-Free Date Nights

Planning a wedding can consume your relationship if you let it. Designate one night a week where wedding talk is completely off limits. No seating charts, no vendor calls, no "what do you think about this centerpiece" texts. Just the two of you being the two of you. The couples who protect their relationship during planning are the ones who actually enjoy the engagement.

7

Make an A-List and a B-List

Instead of agonizing over a single guest list, create two. Your A-list is the people you cannot imagine the day without. The B-list is people you would love to include if space allows. Send A-list invitations first. As declines come in, you send B-list invitations. Nobody ever knows they were on the B-list, and you get to fill the room with people who actually matter to you.

8

Pick a Scent Together for Your Wedding Day

This is one of my favorite tips and almost nobody talks about it. Before the wedding, go together and pick out a new cologne and perfume for each other to wear on the big day. Make sure you try them on skin, not just on the paper strip, because fragrance smells different on everyone. Here is why this matters: smell is the sense most powerfully connected to memory. When you wear that scent again on your honeymoon, on date nights, at anniversaries, even at other people's weddings years later, it will instantly take you both back to exactly how you felt on that day. Keep the bottle. Save it for special occasions. It becomes a private time machine that only the two of you share.

Part 2: Budget and Money

9 Build a 15% Emergency Buffer

No matter how carefully you budget, unexpected costs will appear. Overtime charges when the dance floor is still packed. A last-minute rental you forgot. A vendor meal you did not plan for. Build a 15 percent buffer into your total budget from the start. If your budget is \$30,000, set aside \$4,500 that you do not allocate to anything. You will use it.

10 Vendor Meals Are a Hidden Cost

Your photographer, DJ, videographer, planner, and entertainment will all be there for hours. Many contracts require you to provide a vendor meal. Even if they do not, feeding your vendors is the right thing to do, and it is far cheaper than you think. Ask your caterer about reduced-cost vendor plates. Well-fed vendors perform better. I have seen this firsthand, from both sides of the table.

11 Postage Adds Up Fast

Between save-the-dates, invitations, RSVP envelopes, and thank-you cards, postage alone can cost \$300 to \$500 for a 150-person wedding. Heavier or oversized invitations require extra postage. Take a completed invitation to the post office and have them weigh it before you buy stamps for the whole batch.

12 Alterations Are Not Included in the Dress Price

Almost every wedding dress needs alterations, and those can run \$200 to \$800 depending on the complexity. This is on top of the dress price. Budget for it from the beginning so you are not caught off guard.

13 Tips and Gratuities: Plan for Them

Tipping your vendors is customary, and it adds up. Catering staff typically get 15 to 20 percent of the food and beverage total. Bartenders, hair and makeup artists, transportation drivers, and musicians all appreciate gratuity. Check your contracts first; some include gratuity in the price, and you do not want to double-tip. Put cash tips in labeled envelopes ahead of time and designate someone in your wedding party to distribute them on the day so you do not have to think about it.

14

The Display Cake Trick

Here is one of the best-kept secrets in the wedding industry: you do not need a giant cake. Order a beautiful two-tier display cake for the cutting ceremony and photos, then have sheet cakes in the kitchen for actual serving. Your guests get the same delicious cake. You save hundreds of dollars. Nobody knows the difference.

15

Read Every Contract Line by Line

Venue overtime fees, corkage charges, setup and teardown costs, cancellation policies, force majeure clauses, required insurance, cleanup fees, noise curfews, and restrictions on outside vendors are all things that live in the fine print. Do not skim. If something is unclear, ask. If a vendor will not put a promise in writing, it is not a promise.

16

If Someone Offers to Pay, Let Them Choose What

When parents or family members contribute financially, ask them to put their money toward a specific element: flowers, music, the rehearsal dinner. This gives them ownership of something meaningful while keeping you in control of the overall vision. It also prevents the awkward "we paid for this, so we get a say in everything" dynamic.

Part 3: Vendors and Contracts

17 Book Entertainment and Photography First

After your venue, these are the two vendor categories that book out the fastest and have the biggest impact on your guest experience. A great photographer captures the day forever. Great entertainment makes the day worth capturing. Everything else can be figured out later, but these two need to be locked in early.

18 Ask for Real Event Video, Not Just a Promo Reel

Every vendor has a polished promo reel. What you really want to see is footage from an actual event. How does the DJ handle a dead dance floor? What does the photographer capture when things get chaotic? How does the entertainer interact with real guests, not staged reactions? Even smartphone footage from a real event tells you more than a cinematic reel.

19 Confirm What "All-Inclusive" Actually Means

When a venue says "all-inclusive," ask for the full list of what is included. Tables? Chairs? Linens? Sound equipment? Setup and breakdown? Parking? Many "all-inclusive" packages still exclude things you would assume are covered. Get the list in writing.

20 Your Venue's "Preferred Vendor" List Is Not Mandatory

Some venues require you to use their approved vendors. Many do not; they just have a "preferred" list. Ask whether you can bring in outside vendors. If you can, you may find better quality or better pricing on your own. If you cannot, ask why, because the answer usually tells you whether the venue is prioritizing your experience or their commissions.

21 Hair and Makeup Trials Cost Extra

Most hair and makeup artists charge separately for trial sessions. This is normal and worth it. A trial run three to four weeks before the wedding lets you test the look, make adjustments, and feel confident on the day. Do not skip it to save money. Feeling uncertain about your look on your wedding morning is the wrong kind of surprise.

22 Tastings Can Have Fees Too

Some caterers and bakers charge for private tastings, though many apply that cost to your final bill if you book with them. Ask before you schedule. And bring your partner or planner, not ten friends. Too many opinions at a tasting creates more confusion than clarity.

23 Coordinate Vendor Arrival Times in One Document

Create a single timeline document that lists every vendor's arrival time, setup needs, point of contact, and phone number. Share it with every vendor and your day-of coordinator at least two weeks before the wedding. Most day-of problems happen because one vendor did not know what another vendor needed. This one document prevents 90 percent of those conflicts.

24 A Day-Of Coordinator Is Worth Every Penny

You do not need a full wedding planner if your budget does not allow it. But a day-of coordinator, someone who manages the timeline, handles vendor questions, and solves problems on the day, is one of the best investments you can make. Their job is to make sure you never have to think about logistics once you put on your dress or suit.

Part 4: The Ceremony

25 Rehearse at the Same Time as Your Ceremony

If your ceremony is at 4 PM, rehearse at 4 PM. The sun will be in the same position, the shadows will fall the same way, and you will see exactly what your guests (and your photographer) will see. Spotted sunlight through trees, a blinding sunset behind the officiant, or a shady spot that turns cold: these are things you only catch by being there at the actual time.

26 Tell the Wedding Party to Leave Their Smartwatches Off

This is one of those tiny details that photographers will thank you for. A glowing Apple Watch on a groomsman's wrist or a notification lighting up during the vows shows up in every photo. Politely ask the wedding party to remove smartwatches for the ceremony and formal photos. Regular watches are fine.

27 An Unplugged Ceremony Changes Everything

Ask your officiant to announce that you have hired a professional photographer and kindly request guests put their phones away during the ceremony. This is not just about photos (though your photographer will love you for it). It is about presence. When guests are not holding up phones, they are actually watching you. The energy in the room is completely different.

28 Keep the Ceremony Under 30 Minutes

I know this might be controversial, but here it is: almost every guest I have talked to at a wedding says the same thing. The most memorable ceremonies are the shortest ones. Twenty to twenty-five minutes is the sweet spot. Long enough to be meaningful, short enough that no one starts shifting in their seat.

29 Write Personal Vows (Even Short Ones)

You do not have to write a five-minute speech. Even three or four sentences from the heart, in your own words, will mean more to your partner (and your guests) than the most beautiful pre-written vows. Keep them to about a minute each so you can get through them without completely falling apart.

30 Do Not Forget the Marriage License

It sounds obvious, but it happens more than you think. Research your local requirements early: some states have waiting periods, some require blood tests, some have specific witness requirements. Get the license at least two weeks before the wedding and assign someone trustworthy to bring it on the day.

Part 5: Cocktail Hour and Reception

31 Do Not Sleep on Cocktail Hour

A lot of couples treat cocktail hour as filler while they take photos. But your guests experience it as the first real social moment of the evening, and first impressions matter. If cocktail hour has good energy, the rest of the night builds on it. If it falls flat, your reception has to work harder to get things going. It is worth putting some thought into making this hour feel intentional.

Also, here is a practical tip that gets overlooked every single time: you will not get to enjoy cocktail hour. You will be taking photos, greeting family, and being pulled in five directions. Designate someone in your wedding party to grab you a plate or two of appetizers and set them aside. You paid for that food. You should eat it.

32 One Signature Cocktail Beats a Full Open Bar

A full open bar is expensive and most guests default to the same three drinks anyway. Instead, offer one custom signature cocktail, one mocktail version, plus beer and wine. Name them something personal. "The Meet-Cute Mule" or "Grandma Rose's Lemonade." It saves money, feels intentional, and gives every guest a story to tell.

33 Entertainment During Cocktail Hour Is a Game Changer

This is the single biggest upgrade I have seen at weddings. When you add live entertainment during cocktail hour, whether it is a strolling magician, a live painter, a musician, or interactive games, you solve the two biggest cocktail hour problems at once: awkward silence and phone-staring. Strolling magic in particular creates those small crowd clusters where strangers become friends, because they just experienced something amazing together. By the time guests sit down for dinner, the room is already buzzing.

34 Close the Reception Space During Cocktail Hour

If your reception space is near the cocktail area, keep it closed until it is time. Guests will try to drop coats, purses, and gifts on tables, which means your beautifully styled reception room gets cluttered before a single photo is taken. Have your coordinator keep those doors shut until the grand entrance.

35 Seat People Who Do Not Know Each Other Together on Purpose

The instinct is to seat friend groups together. But some of the best wedding moments I have witnessed happen when couples strategically mix tables: the groom's college friend next to the bride's coworker who shares the same obscure hobby. Include a fun detail on the place card or menu that gives tablemates a conversation starter.

36 Stagger Your Food Service

Put light appetizers out immediately during cocktail hour. Bring more substantial bites 20 minutes in. At the reception, a late-night snack (pizza, sliders, tacos, or even fresh popcorn) two hours into dancing creates a second wave of energy and keeps guests from leaving early. The "late-night bite" is one of the most talked-about elements at every wedding that does it.

37 Do Not Do the Bouquet and Garter Toss Unless You Want To

These traditions are fun for some couples and cringeworthy for others. If it does not feel like you, skip it. Nobody will miss it. Replace it with something that does feel like you: a last-dance song, a toast from the couple, or simply more dance floor time.

38 Tell Your DJ or Band Your "Do Not Play" List

Everyone focuses on the "must play" songs. Equally important: the songs you absolutely do not want. "The Chicken Dance," "The Macarena," or that one song your ex loved. A quick "do not play" list of five to ten songs prevents any awkward moments on the dance floor.

39 Lighting Transforms Any Venue

Uplighting, string lights, or even candles can completely change the feel of a room. If your venue has harsh overhead fluorescents, ask if they can be dimmed or turned off. Warm, low light makes everyone look better, feel more relaxed, and stay longer. This is one of the highest-impact, lowest-cost upgrades you can make.

40 Can You Dance in Your Dress?

This question does not get asked enough. If your dress is stunning but restrictive, consider a reception outfit change. A growing trend is switching into a fun shorter dress, a jumpsuit, or adding sneakers for the party portion of the evening. You spent months choosing the perfect ceremony dress; make sure you can actually celebrate in whatever you are wearing for the reception.

Part 6: The Day Of

41 Be Ready 30 Minutes Before You Think You Need to Be

Everything takes longer on a wedding day. Hair and makeup runs behind. Someone forgot the rings in the hotel room. The photographer wants one more shot. If you build in a 30-minute buffer, you will arrive at every moment feeling calm instead of rushed. The difference is visible in your photos and felt by every guest.

42 Eat Before the Ceremony

You will be busier than you have ever been, running on adrenaline and emotion. Eat a real meal before the ceremony. Not a granola bar; an actual meal. I have seen too many brides and grooms nearly faint because they skipped breakfast and lunch. Also, eat during your own reception. Have your coordinator set aside plates for you, because you will be pulled in twenty directions and forget.

43 Designate a "Point Person" for Problems

Choose one person (your coordinator, a trusted friend, a family member) and give them full authority to handle any issue that comes up. The caterer has a question? They handle it. A guest needs something? They handle it. The only things that should reach you on your wedding day are hugs and congratulations.

44 Take 10 Minutes Alone Together

At some point between the ceremony and the end of the night, sneak away with your new spouse for ten minutes. Just the two of you. No phones, no photographer, no family. Stand there, look at each other, and take in the fact that you just got married. Every couple I have talked to who did this says it was the best moment of the entire day.

45 Have an Emergency Kit

Pack a bag with: sewing kit, safety pins, stain remover pen, clear nail polish (stops stocking runs), pain reliever, antacid, breath mints, tissues, phone charger, blotting papers, hairspray, double-sided tape, superglue, band-aids, and a snack. Give it to your point person. At least three of these items will save someone's day.

The flowers will be slightly different than you imagined. The timeline will shift. A speech will run long. The cake will lean. Here is the truth: your guests will not notice any of it. They are there to celebrate you, and they are having a wonderful time. The only person who notices the imperfections is the person looking for them. So stop looking.

"In all my years of performing at weddings, I have never once heard a guest say, 'The napkin fold was wrong.' I have heard hundreds say, 'That was the best wedding I have ever been to.'"

-- Chris Wheel

Part 7: After the Wedding

47 Send Thank-You Notes Within Two Weeks

Handwritten thank-you notes are one of the most meaningful gestures you can make, and they are rapidly becoming rare, which makes them even more powerful. Mention the specific gift or their presence. Keep them short and genuine. Two or three sentences is perfect.

48 Leave Reviews for Your Vendors

The vendors who made your day special are small business owners who depend on word of mouth. A Google review, a Yelp post, or even a kind email takes two minutes and means the world to them. It also helps the next couple find the same great people.

49 Plan Something for the Week After

After months of planning, the sudden stop can feel jarring. Some couples call it the "post-wedding blues." If you are heading straight to a honeymoon, that transition happens naturally. But if your honeymoon is weeks or months away (or if you are not taking one right away), plan something small for the week after: a quiet dinner together, a weekend getaway, or even just a movie night where you watch your ceremony video and eat leftover cake. Give yourselves something to look forward to beyond the big day.

50 Write Down Why You Are Getting Married

This one sounds cheesy. Do it anyway. Each of you writes a short note about why you are choosing this person and this life. Tuck it away somewhere safe. On the days when you are arguing about chair rentals, dealing with a difficult family member, or just feeling overwhelmed by the sheer volume of decisions, pull it out and read it. It will reset your perspective instantly. And on your anniversary, read them to each other again.

One Last Thought: The Wedding Is One Day. The Marriage Is the Point.

In the middle of all the planning, the stress, the decisions, and the spreadsheets, it is easy to forget this. The wedding is a party. A beautiful, once-in-a-lifetime party, but still a party. What matters most is the person standing next to you and the life you are building together. Get that part right, and the

rest is just details.

*"The best wedding advice I ever received: nobody remembers the color scheme.
Everybody remembers how they felt."*

-- A bride who stopped stressing and started celebrating

Bonus: The Cocktail Hour Guide

Since cocktail hour is one of the most underrated parts of a wedding, here is a deeper look at what makes it unforgettable.

Why Cocktail Hour Entertainment Matters

Cocktail hour is the bridge between the emotion of your ceremony and the energy of your reception. When it works, guests arrive at dinner already laughing, already connected, and already having the time of their lives. When it does not work, you are starting your reception from zero.

The biggest cocktail hour killer is "dead air": guests standing around with drinks, checking phones, and making small talk with the same people they arrived with. Live entertainment solves this by giving everyone a shared experience and a reason to talk to someone new.

Strolling Magic at Weddings

Strolling magic is one of the most effective forms of cocktail hour entertainment because it requires nothing from the venue (no stage, no AV, no special setup), it moves with the crowd, and it creates exactly the kind of small-group energy that makes cocktail hours come alive. A magician moves from group to group, performing close-up magic that draws in 5 to 8 people at a time. Strangers lean in together, react together, and suddenly have something to talk about for the rest of the night.

It is also one of the few forms of entertainment that works equally well for every age group. The college friends, the elderly grandparents, the kids, and the couple's boss all have the same reaction when a card appears in an impossible place. That kind of universal connection is hard to create any other way.

Other Cocktail Hour Ideas

Live painters capture a scene from your cocktail hour or ceremony on canvas in real time. Lawn games like giant Jenga, cornhole, and bocce ball work beautifully for outdoor venues. Photo booths with props give guests something silly to do together. Cigar rolling stations add a sophisticated, celebratory feel. Interactive food stations (build-your-own tacos, a fresh guacamole bar, a shucked oyster station) turn eating into an experience.

The Two-Peak Wedding Strategy

The most memorable weddings I have been part of use a two-peak structure: entertainment during cocktail hour creates the first peak of energy, and a show or special moment during the reception creates the second. For example, strolling magic during cocktail hour builds buzz and curiosity, then a short parlor-style show between dinner and dancing gives the whole room a shared highlight. Instead of one big moment, you get two, and the energy never dips.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR COCKTAIL HOUR ENTERTAINER

How do you handle groups that are hesitant or shy? What do you need from us (space, timing, point of contact)? Can you perform for all age groups? Do you carry event insurance? Can I see video from a real wedding cocktail hour? How far in advance should I book? What happens if you have an emergency?

About Chris Wheel

Chris Wheel is a professional magician and event entertainment specialist based in Central New York. He performs at corporate events, private parties, fundraisers, holiday celebrations, weddings, and everything in between. His shows range from intimate strolling magic during cocktail hours to full stage productions for large audiences.

By day, Chris is a certified school psychologist working in Central New York. That background shapes everything about the way he performs. He understands how people connect, what makes someone feel included in a room full of strangers, and how shared experiences create real bonds between people. He knows how to read a room, meet people where they are, and turn a hesitant observer into the star of the show.

There is a reason his magic feels different. It is not about fooling people; it is about creating a moment where everyone in the room feels something together. The same skills that help a child open up in a school setting, building trust, listening, finding the right moment to surprise someone with something they did not expect, are the same skills that make his performances warm, genuine, and impossible to forget.

Chris has performed at hundreds of weddings and events. Event planners love working with him because he is professional, low-maintenance, and makes their job easier. Couples love him because he makes their guests laugh, gasp, and leave with a story worth telling.

If you are planning a wedding and want to explore adding magic to your cocktail hour or reception, Chris would love to hear about it. No pressure, no pitch; just a conversation about what would work best for your celebration.

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"He is so handsome!"

-- Mrs. Wheel

THE MAGIC OF CHRIS WHEEL

*50 real tips from someone who has been in the room
at hundreds of weddings and seen what makes people say
"that was the most amazing wedding I have ever been to."*

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from someone who wants your wedding
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