

# Meet the wedding planner

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Fiona Deans-Dundas, the founder of Couture Wedding Planning, is living her dream, and loving life as a wedding planner. Photo: Sasha Woolley



by **Anne Fulwood**

Christmas didn't happen for Fiona Deans-Dundas a few weeks ago, and she is fine with that. As the founder of Couture Wedding Planning, she was focused on doing what she does best – ensuring her brides and grooms had the most memorable day of their lives, getting hitched without a hitch.

Based in Sydney, Deans-Dundas had her busiest month of the year, having organised five weddings in December, including three in the Christmas week.

All part of the plan to seize her share of the wedding industry in Australia – worth \$6.6 billion a year, according to a 2013 “Cost of Love” survey by *Bride To Be* magazine, using figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. One in 10 brides, it says, will use a wedding planner and the average cost of a wedding is reportedly about \$54,000, double what it was in 2001.

Deans-Dundas, 32, takes a 10 per cent cut of the cost of all goods and services she provides to brides and grooms for their wedding. She says her focus is on delivering high-end events to the highest possible standard, using only premium suppliers.

She admits that a wedding planner is not for everyone: “We are a luxury item. That said, I don't know how people do a big wedding without a planner.”

Among her suppliers are about 20 stylists, hair and make-up artists, florists, hire-car companies, videographers and photographers, and cake makers. Her favoured venues include the Sergeant's Mess at Mosman at \$200 a head, including catering, Quay restaurant at \$240 and a marquee at the Sydney Opera House for \$240 a head.

“Those prices do not include all the prettiness,” she laughs. “We have to bring in all the draping, floral and styling items.”

## Style influences

The movie *The Great Gatsby* was a big style influence in 2013, but Deans-Dundas says more recently the television show *Revenge*, based in the Hamptons in the US, has led to an emergence of navy colours, hydrangeas and striped ribbons.

She derives income through two channels – either as the wedding planner from start to finish after the engagement has been announced, or as co-ordinator for the wedding day for couples who have planned their own. As co-ordinator only, she charges an hourly rate on the day and for meetings in the lead-up.

Her “Haute Couture” full package includes sourcing all suppliers, then meeting with the couple to choose venues, florists and photographers: “What I love to do is work with the venues, the clients, find the right florist for them, and basically achieve the look and feel they want for their wedding. On top of the wedding dresses, that is the fun part.”

About 70 per cent of clients already have planning under way; the other 30 per cent are her “blank canvas”. Deans-Dundas says the total value of weddings she worked on in 2013 was more than \$1 million.

She did 30 weddings in 2013 and already has about 20 booked for 2014. High season for weddings is September to March, “where you do the bulk of your work”, while the quieter months are spent in preparation and promotion of the business.

Her highest-priced wedding so far, in September 2011, had a budget of \$250,000 and a guest list numbering about 200. For an event of that scale, Deans-Dundas employs at least two assistants who “have the same eye as me for detail”.

## Focus on social media

A 2014 focus will be on social media, which Deans-Dundas admits she has neglected during the recent wedding rush hour. It's the big driver of business, using more visuals than ever through Facebook, Instagram or Pinterest: “Most brides these days are following wedding blogs and using social media, rather than magazines, to find pictures of what they want on their special day. If you don't have a Facebook page you don't have a business.”

She manages all her own social media.

Smiling and effervescent, Deans-Dundas remembers always having the wedding bug, even as a young girl, the second of three sisters born in Zimbabwe. Planning for her own wedding in January 2009, she “got the extreme bug” and launched her business in May that year.

She arrived in Sydney aged 18, having won a place at the Blue Mountains International Hotel School, where she graduated with a Bachelor of Commerce in event and hotel management, worked at the Observatory Hotel (now the Langham) in Sydney's The Rocks, the Stamford Plaza in Double Bay, and then did a stint in Oxfordshire in the UK.

Returning to Sydney, while studying for her Master of Accounting, she worked part time at Panache Bridal Shoes in the CBD, a well-known supplier that Deans-Dundas now uses. “Shoes, weddings and me – it was a wonderful combination,” she says.

She arranged a \$25,000 loan from her bank to start the business, paid for a number of wedding planning courses and had the designer of Ooh-Aah Invitations, another wedding supplier, design her logo and website. Most of the seed money was used in marketing and advertising on blogs and in bridal magazines.

Two weeks after launch, she had her first client, but says the first year was slow as bookings for weddings are generally at least 12 months ahead. Her quickest turnaround was three months: “They just couldn't wait to be married.”

The next stage of Couture Wedding Planning, says Deans-Dundas, is to move her office out of her home studio and into her own business premises. “Personally, I need a bit of division because I could work 24 hours a day, seven days a week.”

The ultimate achievement would be to have her own styling company, with a warehouse full of wedding accoutrements, accessories and, of course, lots of draping.

In this she is similar to the planner of her dreams, America's premier wedding stylist, Preston Bailey, who is in Sydney in February for a wedding summit. Deans-Dundas booked her tickets early and is “super excited”.

“We don't get those incredible stylists here,” she enthuses. “America takes it to a whole other level which you never see in Australia. It is certainly what I aspire to.”

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*The Australian Financial Review*

