

*Romantic Visions Photography
presents*

5 *Secret Steps to
Uncovering the
Ideal Photographer
for **YOUR** Wedding
(...and How to Afford Them.)*

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Introduction

The old saying was “Everyone's a critic.” but with the digital revolution in photography and videography the phrase should be “Everyone’s a photographer.” The common wisdom is that the internet has made the search for goods and services easier by giving us more choices. Toss a stone into your favorite search engine and you are going to hit thousands of potential options hoping it will be them with a goose-egg shaped bump on their noggin. This is certainly true regarding wedding photographers. In a Facebook group page for Wisconsin (WI) Wedding Photographers, when a bride posts her interest in a photographer for her upcoming nuptials, within a couple hours there can be as many as 50 to 100 comments from photographers asking to be considered by posting their website URL. You should ask yourself, is that really easier? Sure, the bride now has more names and contacts, but how do they choose? The *5 Secret Steps to Uncover the Ideal Photographer for Your Wedding* is not going to make it easier, but it will make it possible to find that one truly ideal choice for you.

One step too many couples will try in order to cut through the weeds of potential photographers is by price. This rather brutal method is nearly guaranteed to eliminate the ideal photographer for them. Couples going through the long list of want-a-bes will toss out many high quality choice photographers as being too expensive, or possibly pass over lesser known talent that would have connected with them better than a photo-technician that shoots proficiently but without passion. Choosing a photographer that has a style of imagery and working philosophy which matches that of the bride and groom, and even other wedding party and family members, is the foundation of finding the ideal photographer for your wedding. A wedding should never be about taking pictures, or video. A wedding should always be about the united commitment of the couple and the support of those that care about them. The photography should record and artistically illustrate that commitment and those celebratory feelings we should all have for those that found their match in another. Therefore, letting price be your guide to finding the ideal photographer for their wedding is a misstep too many couples turn an ankle on on their way to their ceremony.

This guide will give insightful, yet rarely taken, actions that wedding couples can implement to find the ideal photographer for them. From learning what the couple really do desire from their wedding photography through how to be able to afford the highest quality image-makers that can bring those desires to them. This is not the same as finding a life partner, but couples that want images which remind them of the romantic visions they have of that day they said “I do!” should heed some of these ways to avoid seeing images that disappoint or make the memories less joyous than they should be.

Step 1: Find Your Style

Good news! The first step is the easiest and most enjoyable, finding out what is quality photography and what you like, as these two things can be mutually exclusive. It should be understood by both the parties, the couple and the shooter, that photography should be regarded as an art. For many, this may seem obvious, but given the ease and ubiquity of digital image taking devices in today's world snapping pictures is often regarded as just something we all do. Should we all consider weddings in the same light, as just something we all do? Of course not. Therefore wedding photography should be something artistic, special and far far above a selfie with your peeps.

Quality wedding photography therefore should not look like those selfies, with or without a snapchat filter, nor should they look like the family vacation pics with distracting background objects, harsh shadows or demonic red eyes. Professional photographers should have the where-with-all to avoid any of that, and add drama, strong composition, and sharp subject-defining focus. Stand and shoot was never enough for a quality photographer that would purposely lay on the floor or climb a ladder to make an image that grabs the attention of the viewer and captures more than just a recognizable face. As an art, imagery with photography in particular, needs to be something a couple fully immersed themselves in.

Going to art galleries, paging through bridal magazines, watching YouTube videos about the history of portraiture and scrolling through random wedding images, are all important for any person looking to commission a photographic artist to render images of their life's biggest celebration. Curated gallery collections can help define certain artistic norms, while the unabridged barrage of internet images will expose how those norms can be used, challenged, or completely ignored. How does a skilled photographer light the smooth surface of a bride's cheek and still maximize the intricate beading on the bodice of a bridal dress? How do artists compose groups, or pairs, within the frame of an image? How can setting and background support the mood of the overall picture, or does it distract and clash?

A brief word to grooms here. The feminine is discerning of static qualities like color, texture and form, while the masculine is hardwired to be interested in motion, action films with daring stunts and flaming explosions is prime proof of this. Yet, overcoming our baser instincts is the way society gets along, especially for a groom with a bride. So, dig deep and page through these images together. Share your thoughts and seek out those images that appeal to your sensibilities. They do exist and you will be able to find the photographer that will meet your vision as well as your bride's.

Now it is time to come to two obvious realizations, there is a lot of repetition in wedding photography and art is completely subjective, meaning it has no intrinsic appeal. It all comes down to what you, your beloved, and anyone else that will see your wedding images, likes. Anecdotally, there was once a newly wedded groom that did not like any of the images a

photographer had taken because in his words, “there are no shadows.” Even his bride was perplexed by his strongly spoken words of disapproval. Therefore, making the effort to educate oneself in what is considered appealing and unappealing is the first step in finding the ideal photographer for one’s wedding.

Once you have formed your own understanding and preferences of the portrait art form, it will be time to make a short list of those photographers, or studios, that have an image style that connects with your vision. Let a photographer’s existing portfolio be your strongest guide. Nothing else, not price, not experience, and not even glowing client testimonials, will be a more important factor in finding the ideal photographer for your wedding. If the photographer’s image style does not match with the couple’s own, the regrets will return each time that couple looks back on their wedding pictures.

Step 2: Work the Short List

Compiling a short list of contending photographers will also be fairly easy and somewhat fun. Bridal shows and websites make it easy to see the work of those photographers you wish to work with, some of which may be a fair distance away. Given the power of the internet photographers can ply their wares in places that they may have a valid reason to travel to. One intrepid photographer had siblings and parents living in five different states across the breadth of the nation, so he placed advertisements in each area and after completing his photographic duties would spend an extra day or two visiting family. The point is, brides and grooms today have the opportunity to look beyond the local studios or traditional choice. However, it is not wise to be contrarian just to be so. If there is a historical family relationship with an artist or studio, and it has the portrait style you enjoy, chances are you will get top notch results.

Working the short list means making contact and understanding all the lingo or jargon unique to each studio. Think of Starbucks with short, tall, venti and grande. Some of those terms make simple sense in the wedding photography world, but couples will only be visiting for a relatively short time. Examples: Ceremony Space refers to the precise location of the ceremony, whereas it is increasingly less likely to be a traditional church altar. In contrast, Altar Returns holds onto tradition regarding bringing everyone back to the ceremony space after the receiving line and then setting up all the family groupings that parents insist upon. Wedding Party Formals which means all those fun or fanciful images only involving a wedding party between the ceremony and reception hall. This is often when photography gets to its creative apex for the day, especially with those involving just the bride and groom.

This initial contact will also require sharp attention to what services are being offered. Some photographers may charge by the hour, some in a lump sum, and others offer a dizzying array of packages filled with all sorts of accessories. This can get challenging, even frustrating, but also place the couple in a better position to see what they are, or are not, getting for their money. Be wary of studio pricing that is a little too simplistic and looking to compete on price over photo quality. The phrase, “you get what you pay for” can have couples paying in regret, if not tears.

Another factor that can lead to bad feelings comes when considering a large studio with multiple staff photographers. Ask to see a ‘personal’ portfolio from the actual photographer whose work brought you in, and make sure you can see examples that capture a whole day’s coverage. Wedding albums were originally attended as illustrated storybooks and so it should be with each wedding, even digital ones. This is not to say big prodigious studios are no good, in fact the opposite is often the key to their success, but being aware that the name on the door does not necessarily translate into what, or more accurately “the who,” that couples are looking for.

Packages are the most common method of wedding sales, with some showing an ala carte option with photography by the hour and prints or files purchased individually. Making sure you know what is being offered and what will be delivered. Packages, all tied up in a bow, can reduce your choices, yet ala carte will require having to make choice after choice. There is no judgment

being made in this guide regarding either option, it will be buyer's choice. Yet, the fine print must be clearly understood in order to get the most desirable service at the most inoffensive price.

Many photographers will offer a free engagement session as a door opener to couples looking for wedding photography. Do this! Yet, again make sure the photographer will be the one seen on the wedding day. Now that 99.9% of the profession is digital, this free session will literally cost nothing to the photographer other than time, yet be extremely valuable to the search for the ideal photographer for your wedding. Actually getting one-on-one time with any contending photographer will either build rapport, or clarify feelings of unease before getting in deeper. No one is cheating if a couple goes through multiples of these free sessions to find the ideal fit.

After the engagement session, if one is offered, there will be a great deal of pressure, explicit and implicit, to sign a contract, put down a deposit and "secure your date". Even more so if the couple audibly praises the images that result from the session. Special offers will be floated to make it nearly impossible to resist signing on the spot. Photographers and their salespeople want to stop the dance as soon as possible. You would too if the positions were switched. However, there is just one more bit of two-step needed to really fill the dance card.

Step 3: Ask to Attend a Wedding

Although portrait photography and wedding photography are intricately linked, the requisite skills for each are not equal, nor always embodied in the same photographer. A portrait session with a couple is slow and graceful, even calming. A wedding is fast, dynamic, and stressful. A photographer needs to command attention and compliance without causing friction. It also requires stealth and quiet acumen when needed. It even requires a dash of team building and camaraderie. Yes, an engagement session with a photographer will give you that opportunity for close interaction, but being able to watch a photographer work in the heat of a wedding, sometimes literally, will really show how they are able to measure up.

There are in-studio photographers that can generate truly stunning images under controlled conditions, but simply are not able to perform up to scratch at a wedding. In fact, there are some photographers with better people skills than photography skills. In the end a couple should look at their images and think what a fantastic time was had by all and not what a lengthy aggravating nightmare the picture taking was. The ideal photographers can enhance the wedding day, not just record the event. More on that in Step 4.

Asking to attend a wedding, where a photographer can be observed, should not be considered a problem and in fact should be seen as another opportunity to prove to a couple that their choice will be the ideal for them. Unless the observing couple are totally invisible it is likely that the photographer will identify and acknowledge them immediately and welcome the visit. In the case of a staff photographer from a larger studio, there might not be a person-to-person meeting between the couple and the photographer before the visit, so they should introduce themselves. Again, a quality photographer will smile and be welcoming, if they become flustered then someone just missed making a mistake.

This observation can take as much as 2 hours, and could mean attending the wedding of total strangers. Odd, perhaps, but not as though you are going to be disruptive or disrespectful. People can celebrate the special union of another couple just like anyone else. In fact, it can be a rather affirming experience. The very first thing that will be noticed is the style of dress the photographer(s) have on. Some will wear a suit and tie or a tea-length cocktail dress. Others may wear a dress shirt and khakis. Or they may have a dark solid colored t-shirt and clean untorn denim pants. This is subjective, but the clothing choice can reflect on the attitude of the photographer towards the profession. Does the aesthetic match the couple's vision as well?

What a couple will want to observe is the exchanging of the vows and the altar returns. These two portions of the day are when the photographer is forced to adapt to the situation far beyond anything a studio portrait photographer would have to deal with. The vows and rings exchange is a completely "as is" event. How does the photographer move, place themselves, and capture the event as reverently and discreetly as possible? If there are two shooters (again wait until Step 4), how do they coordinate? Often, a photographer will need to move closer to the ceremony space up the aisle, do they move with quiet confidence or tentatively and distractingly?

Tech tip: The farther away the photographer is from the ceremony space, the more difficult it is to get a sharp image. Camera shake issues are magnified by distance. The one ideal way to resolve this, without moving in close with a flash, is a sturdy tripod used farther back.

The other phase of the ceremony that requires special observance is the altar returns. The wedding party and family have all left the ceremony space and the rest of the guests are funneling out. Now the photography shifts to what needs to be a highly efficient group portrait operation. Some ceremony spaces limit the time to only 30 minutes. They operate on a turn-around basis, sometimes booking up to five or six weddings on a Saturday. This makes it very important for the photographer to have the gentle command to get everyone back to the ceremony space, move through more than two dozen different family and wedding party combinations in a short amount of time, and still make each exposure a viable image choice for the couple.

Much of the success of the photographer can be put to pre-planning or just having a system. For example, what is done with a family elder that would not easily make the trek to the back of the church after the ceremony, return to the front for pictures, and then back out again to the reception? Planning could allow for that beloved member to stay seated at the front while the other guests file out. Will the ceremony space need enhanced lighting in the case of studio strobes or other lighting options and are they quickly set up? Does the photographer allow for those guests that would try to take their own series of quick images, so they can run to Walmart before the reception, make prints, and deliver their own mini wedding album as a wedding present? (Yes, this has actually happened.) Or is there an insistence of exclusivity to the poses that will be put together from experience and practiced talent. Or maybe there is a compromised combination.

As the altar returns progress, some waiting will occur and some of that waiting can build into agitation. Refer back to how wedding photographers need people skills equal to or exceeding their photography skills. Seeing if the photographer is able to call the names of individuals to get posing and expressions correct is a sign of someone that understands group dynamics building cohesion by treating each member as individuals. Altar returns done properly, with pleasantness, joviality and efficiency, will be remembered as a grudging necessity, not a grinding torment. The smiles on the faces in the pictures should be expressions of genuine happiness, not masks hiding discomfort.

The observing couple do not usually stay through the entirety of the altar returns, but should witness enough to get a clear and decisive feeling about their choice. From here there are only a few last things to uncover before selecting the ideal photographer for your wedding.

Special Note: The reaction to Covid (2020-2021) was particularly rough on wedding professionals, including photographers. The drop off of weddings placed many studios in a rebuilding mode, sometimes causing highly talented photographers to have limited events booked for the upcoming wedding season (so far). Any particular photographer may not be able to invite a searching couple to an observable wedding prior to signing a contract. This step can still be taken once opportunities become more available to the photographer, and should only reinforce a couple's satisfaction with the final selection.

Step 4: What Else is There

Can a professional wedding photographer do more than take great images of the event? The simple answer is, a professional photographer should do much more than take great images, and should be expected to actually enhance the whole wedding day experience. The fact is that photographers are the one professional that will be spending more time focused and actively working on the success of a wedding celebration than any other, barring some wedding coordinators. This is because once the night is over, the tuxes are returned, the flowers wilted, and the fancy 4-slice toaster somehow darkens the mood of some future breakfast, the photographer's work and the memories rekindled by the images created on that day will remain.

Regarding multiple photographers at a wedding. Do they look and operate in a team coordinated way, helping each other in the service of the wedding couple? There are many combinations, but a male/female team is able to communicate with a female bride and male groom in more relatable ways. The responsibility of preparatory images can be conquered separately or collaboratively. A bride and her ladies can get ready and be relaxed with a female photographer in the lounge. A groom and the guys can joke more openly with each other with a male photographer. Additionally, if there is one member of the team with a stronger personality, that photographer can purposely garner more attention, making it even easier for the second shooter to capture images of a more candid nature.

While on the subject of candids, refer all the way back to Step 1: Find Your Style. Maybe a couple wants a total cinema-verté wedding experience, with no posing and catching it when it happens style. There are photographers that specialize in that type of coverage. Other couples may prefer to have a more traditional portrait style with images suitable for hanging above the fireplace. Again, those exist too. Most likely however, is a desire to have a nice balance of both, and a team of at least two photographers will be better at bridging the gap.

A professional photographer can suggest ways to make the event go smoother and more photogenic. Example: Some celebrants consider it better to allow the bride and groom to turn out towards the congregated guests by walking around, standing "in-front" of the couple with his/her own back to those gathered. Yet, this makes it more difficult to view the exchange of vows and rings for the photographer in the aisle. Given time constraints, is a reception line at the back of the venue better than table hopping at the reception? Does the way dinner will be served mean there can be pictures of every table and guest, or not? These are examples of things experienced professional photographers ask about.

But what else? One photographer offered the covered back of their pickup truck to protect the wedding gifts after the skies started to pour rain onto an outdoor wedding. Another had to help transport three bridesmaids from the hotel to the ceremony due to a groomsman forgetting to do so. Another thoughtful photographer collected the names of all the wedding party, family and important guests and mailed a detailed wedding day itinerary, in a hand addressed envelope, the week of the wedding and appeared at the rehearsal to answer any last

minute questions. This last one made it possible to complete all of the day's photography in a most stressless and organized way.

Detailed pre-planning with the photographer will de-stress any wedding couple. The chosen photographer should be completely informed of the couple's plans and wishes. If there is to be a surprise for either or both of them, the photographer needs to be read into the brief. At one reception, an Uncle cornered the photographer and said, "Be ready, I have a surprise for the couple." The photographer said, "What is it?" and the Uncle attempted to obfuscate, claiming it to be a secret. The photographer firmly said, "The surprise is for them. Not for (the photographer) if the Uncle intends to capture the looks of surprise on the couple's faces." It ended up being an epic surprise with fantastic reaction shots.

Other special hints a photographer may offer are to make sure there are copies of a single sheet of paper with all of the wedding vendors, contacts, and phone numbers, in **LARGE PRINT**, distributed to the two most trusted members of the couples' entouragés. Note, those people may not be standing up in the ceremony. There was an incident when the limo was late, and the couple could not remember which service they had finally chosen. Have bug spray, umbrellas for rain or beating sunshine, and if the wedding is taking place during a season of heat and humidity, consider asking for a second shirt for the groom from the tuxedo shop. Some photographers may even have recommendations of vendors that they have worked with in the past, and may even have images of their wares.

Once all the couple's ideas and visions have been considered, accepted, or rejected, a professional photographer will have an info sheet or itinerary to ensure the wedding day can be put on cruise control and enjoyed by everyone.

Step 5: How to Afford the ideal

Finally, we need to talk about the price. It is not uncommon for couples to incur at least some debt from throwing the most elaborate and substantial celebration of their lives. The traditions, the expectations, the vendors, the multiple locations, and of course all those guests will tax the imagination, sanity and pocketbooks of a couple that want nothing more than to share their commitment to each other with the world. The ideal photographer has been found! However, the financial value they place on their time and images is not likely to be satisfied by the change in the sofa cushions. What can be done about this?

First a couple needs to decide how much value they place on the photography of their wedding. Some will spend as much as \$10,000 on the photography alone and others are not willing to pay that much for the entire wedding. What will the budget allow? What will be comfortable? Is a payment plan an option? These questions need to be answered. There are few exceptions to photographers getting paid before the event. Most professionals expect full payment in advance, many even 30 - 60 days in advance. How can a couple make that work?

Option 1: Ask if there are any discounts to couples that are able to pay for a package in one lump sum. Often the more substantial and pricey packages will have this option, like a percentage off the highest package that may even make it less expensive than a lower priced package. More photography for less money. However, beware of getting an outside loan to make this happen as it can eat up those savings with interest.

Option 2: Ask about payment plans. Many are willing to set out a plan after a retainer is paid. The retainer can be a token amount or a substantial deposit like 50% of the package price. The good thing is that these payment plans rarely involve any kind of interest. However, the ideal way to make payments hurt less is booking far in advance. True, the ideal advice in this whole guide is hidden right here on page 12. **Book the ideal photographer for your wedding as early as possible.** This is because they are bound to be the ideal photographer for other couples too and booking 18 - 12 months in advance will provide the time to build small monthly payments into ultimately the most satisfying wedding photography experience.

Option 3: If the peak still seems out of reach, ask if the photographer has a registry option. What does this mean? Wedding couples are familiar with registering at stores so guests can purchase various household items as gifts, so the same can be true for purchasing a gift of photography for the couple. This is not a way to avoid making payments directly to the photographer, but it can be a way to reduce the costs that used to be made up through follow-up sales to friends and families. Thanks iPhone! A link is created for the couple to share with their guests that allows them to pay for a "Memory Gift" in any quantity, and that is applied against the balance of the contracted package. Either the registry can have a finite ceiling for the amount of the chosen package, or remain open-ended to collect any overpayments and return them to the couple after the registry is closed. All of the payments can be tracked by the couple as well. This option may have an additional setup and monitoring fee.

Conclusion

What has been learned in our search for the ideal photographer for your wedding? The lesson is due diligence and self-reflection will lead to finding joy in life, and the ideal photographer for the images and memories we all want to cherish at all of the milestones on our paths. This particular search may lead to repeated and happy reunions down the road. Maternity, baby, kids, graduations, family portraits, and maybe the next generation's weddings are important to let others know we were here and keep memories bright. Maybe there will be more weddings too, as bridesmaids or groomsmen as friends and families take the recommendation of the ideal photographer you found. The ideal photographer for your wedding is not the ideal for every couple, but there is an ideal photographer for every couple. May the search be successful and help bring happy memories back again and again.

About the Author

Robert V. Payant is a 35 year experienced portrait and wedding photographer and owner of [Romantic Visions Photography LLC](#). He started building and photographing life-like dioramas with miniatures and models as a child with a fascination inspired by the original Star Wars movie. Once receiving a professional camera from his oldest brother, Robert started photographing people and discovered a talent for posing and natural lighting. Stepping onto his college campus, Robert's first step was to call the Yearbook editor and volunteer to shoot photos. However, after showing his first (film) roll of campus life images, he was asked to take the paid position of Photo-Editor, which included use of a fully stocked darkroom. After graduation, Robert was brought into a prominent Milwaukee portrait studio, and never looked back. After some family moves around Wisconsin, Robert and his beautiful, charming, and intelligent wife Kristine, have settled in the Milwaukee metropolitan area. Together Kristine and Robert capture posed and candid images for brides and grooms from across the United States, as well as teaching and lecturing in the professional photography community.