

For many couples, less time is spent on choosing the DJ than any other aspect of the reception - this can be a costly and disappointing mistake! Overlooking this aspect of your wedding planning is easy to do. However, choosing the right DJ is crucial to the success of your wedding reception and my top tips below should help you accomplish this:

## **1. Know what you really want in terms of music before you begin looking for a wedding DJ**

This is crucial and is the simplest way to eliminate DJs that aren't quite right in the first round. If you and your fiancé are dreaming of classic Big Band sounds, be very up front about this the first time you talk to prospective DJs. A DJ who specializes in rock and pop music may be wonderful, but his play list will be limited when it comes to what you want, and you'll be disappointed. Don't be afraid to build a "grooveshark" playlist. Professionals can pull the songs directly from your playlist.

## **2. Ask for references**

Any DJ who consistently pleases his clients should be more than happy to provide you with contact details so that you can obtain recommendations from other satisfied customers. When you do this, be sure and ask the other customers when the reception took place - the references must be recent, not ten years old! If the DJ has no recent references be sure to ask why this is. Additionally, if the DJ has a website (which is now the popular trend) you should take a look at it to see whether it contains any testimonials. You want to be sure that your DJ has a good reputation for overall conduct, interaction with guests, use of alcohol, punctuality and ability to work alongside other wedding service providers. I recommend that you check at least four references for your chosen DJ. In a business where any unqualified person can easily enter the DJ profession you need to do research to ensure that you hire someone that will provide you with a top quality service.

Obviously if you do your own research and start asking friends and recent newlyweds for DJ recommendations you have there the best type of reference possible! Do make sure that if a friend recommends a DJ to you that you check that you and your friend's music tastes and expectations of a wedding DJ are similar!

You must ask the DJ how much experience they have had in this business. Has the majority of their work been at weddings, or is for the corporate market? These types of questions will enable you to determine whether they are the right person to perform at your wedding reception.

### **3. Always meet your DJ in person**

Once you have whittled down your choice to 3 or 4 prospective wedding DJs it is recommended that you meet each one in person. This way you can check out their personality and general appearance, something you just can't do properly over the phone. Finding out a DJ's personality is very important (how many cheesy wedding DJs can you remember - far too many I bet!) as you definitely want your guests enjoying the music at your wedding rather than spending the night commenting on how bad the DJ is! By meeting with them in person you get an indication of whether they are punctual. You might find in some instances that the DJ fails to show up for your meeting - it is better to find out if they are unreliable in the planning stages rather than find this out to your detriment on your wedding day!

During your meeting with the DJ watch them to see whether they are paying attention to your specific requirements for your wedding music. Are they taking notes? Professional wedding DJs always have a pad and pen with them to jot down notes about what style of music is going to suit your wedding. No DJ has that great a memory that they can memorize all of your musical preferences!

### **4. Discuss your wedding song play list and look for flexibility**

Is it your intention to have a DJ that will be proactive in getting the dance floor full right from the beginning of the evening or is a more laid back approach more your style for your wedding reception? Ask the DJ for a consultation several weeks before the reception and go over your song preferences with him in detail. Ask your DJ if he has a list of his music collection and if he would object if you highlight a few tracks that you would like him to play during the evening. A professional will take note of which songs you want to hear as well as which songs you don't want to hear. You will need to tell your DJ the wishes for special dances such as your first dance, the father and bride dance etc. Ensure that your DJ knows the flow of key moments throughout the wedding reception so that he can keep the music in synch.

Usually DJs are willing to take requests from wedding guests on the night but you should ask about this specifically beforehand. Ultimately you want your DJ to be flexible but some DJs use pre-programmed music which might make it difficult for them to accommodate your guests' requests.

If you imagine that your DJ will be working for approximately 4 hours and each song is 4 minutes long - that is a total of 60 songs that will be played. Whilst you will want your special songs played you should rely on the DJ to determine the best musical taste to get people on the dance floor. Your DJ will know songs that have worked at weddings in the past. The family and friends you invite to

your wedding probably vary in age from 5 to 85 years old. It is quite a task to cater to all tastes with wedding music but that is exactly what you are expecting of your wedding DJ. An experienced DJ will know when to play which kind of music. They will take note when your guests arrive of what type of music suits the crowd. Ask the DJ what their tricks are for encouraging and motivating people to dance. Can you get a sense from them that they are able to “read” a dance room – can they give you examples of which songs they would use in different circumstances?

Have these open discussions with your DJ and ensure you are on the same wavelength to avoid any confusion on the day. It is important that you discuss the types of artists and styles of music you enjoy - remember your DJ isn't a mind reader! You want to be able to form a good relationship with your wedding DJ. Does he listen to your suggestions? Does he offer you his professional opinion or simply agree with everything you say?

## **5. Ensure your DJ's music is up to date**

Make sure that your DJ has a wide range of music including the most recent chart-topping songs. Beware of amateur DJs who claim that they can obtain any song that you want for your wedding by downloading it online. Even though you and I might obtain our music from internet downloads, this is definitely not the approach a professional DJ should take. Nowadays all professional wedding DJs subscribe to paid services such as [Promoonly.com](http://Promoonly.com) and [Tophitsusa.com](http://Tophitsusa.com) so that they can be sure to have the most up-to-date song releases on a weekly or monthly basis. Your DJ should have a wide range of music including the most recent songs in the charts and you can check this by asking to see their latest CDs and verifying their release dates. Do provide the DJ with a list of specific songs which you want to be played at your wedding so that he can source them out prior to the wedding reception if he does not have them in his current music collection.

## **6. Does the DJ perform emcee duties?**

Although this seems obvious, there are some DJs, particularly if you are using a non-professional DJ, who simply play the music at the wedding. If you want the DJ to make announcements, such as the introduction of the newlyweds' first dance, the cake cutting or the bouquet being tossed, and act as an overall emcee during the evening entertainment be sure to check that they are comfortable doing this. It takes years to build up experience as a DJ of speaking into a microphone. If you are unable to get an opportunity to see the DJ performing live, ask to see a video clip. For a wedding you need to choose someone who has a fun personality and a professional delivery for announcements.

## **7. What music format does your DJ use?**

You should ask your wedding DJ whether they will be playing CDs, MP3s or even vinyl records. This is important as you need to know that they have a back-up plan if their sound system fails - you don't want to have to wait for your first dance as man and wife whilst the DJ reboots the PC attached to his mixing desk! Most DJs have progressed into the digital era nowadays.

## **8. Ensure your DJ knows the dress code**

Always ask about how they intend to dress on the day of your wedding. Your DJ should always dress in a manner that is appropriate for the occasion. Whilst this does not mean that he must wear a tuxedo you do not want the other extreme of him turning up in shorts and sandals! The DJ is a service provider on your wedding day so should always be neatly dressed. If you are having a themed wedding make sure you have informed your DJ so that they can fit in as best they can with the theme of your wedding.

## 9. Ask about emergency arrangements

It is any DJ's worst nightmare that the sound system fails during a performance. It is really important that you ask your DJ beforehand if he has any backup equipment available for use in case there is a problem during your wedding reception. Although it doesn't happen often, equipment can fail, and if it happens on the night of your reception and it is the only set your DJ has, you may find yourself faced with a night without music!

Also, discuss what alternative arrangements will be made in the event that the DJ you hire is sick or unavailable for your wedding reception. Will he provide a back-up DJ that is suitable for the occasion? It is vitally important that you get the reassurance that you are covered in the event of a problem – this should be fully dealt with in your contract too. If you book an active member of the American Disc Jockey Association they are more likely to know a fellow professional that can take over in the event of an emergency. I can't emphasize enough how important it is to have a full backup plan!

## 10. Does your DJ own quality audio equipment?

A professional DJ will generally have spent over \$10,000 on their equipment and will be proud to discuss the technical side if asked. I recommend that you ask them which brand of equipment they use – you should look out for names including [Crown](#), [Denon](#), [ElectroVoice](#), [Rane](#), [JBL](#) and [QSC](#) as these demonstrate your DJ is serious about [DJing](#). The mention of names like [American DJ](#), [FBT](#), [Gemini](#), [MTX](#), [NEXT](#), [Peavey Sound](#) [Behringer](#) and [Tech](#) should make you a little more cautious because they are poorer sound quality. By finding out the brand names of the DJ's equipment you will quickly be able to gauge the quality of their audio equipment and this should help you to decide whether or not you want to use their services for your wedding reception. Proper equipment will give good sound quality that will not be disturbing for your wedding guests. There is nothing worse than being seated next to a speaker at a wedding that is producing poor sound quality. Like anything though the use of top quality equipment does not guarantee that the DJ is a huge success, but at least you will know that you will be listening to professional quality sounds for starters!

### **11. Will your DJ be using a wireless microphone?**

Wireless microphones work well at weddings and allow the DJ to roam the dance floor without tripping over a chord. This is great as it gives them the flexibility to teach wedding guests all the steps to a group dance. Sometimes DJs prefer sticking with a chord microphone because they are more likely to get interference from a wireless microphone. Personally I think that this is a bit of a cheap get-out because if their sound system is properly setup with today's technology they generally should not get a problem when using a wireless microphone. If you have a preference discuss this with your DJ beforehand.

### **12. Has the DJ worked at the venue before?**

Do ask your DJ whether they have performed at your choice of wedding reception venue before. Although this is not essential, the more familiar they are with the layout and staff at your chosen venue the better. If they have not played there before, it is best to meet your DJ at the venue so that you can discuss the specifics of setting up the DJ table, dance floor location and speaker positions.

### **13. Does your DJ understand the best way to set up speakers at your venue?**

Always ask your DJ how many speakers they intend on using. As a bare minimum there should be a subwoofer or a pair of speakers positioned on the ground and a pair on stands. Anything less will cause problems - having two speakers solely on the ground will produce a muffled sound and lack of clarity when announcements are being made. Equally a pair of speakers on stands is great for microphone clarity but won't be ideal for the music as this will sound hollow.

If your reception room is large you should ask your DJ whether he will be using far-field speakers. These are ideal for throwing the sound further than normal speakers and are essential if you are dancing outside. Ask your DJ whether he intends to perform sound checks prior to the entertainment commencing.

Ideally you will meet your DJ at the venue so that you can discuss the actual positions for the speakers. If there are hard surfaces like marble ask them how they are going to overcome issues such as acoustical echoes. Solutions to overcome this problem could be as simple as setting the ground speakers so that they point upwards at 45 degrees. If the speakers are obtrusive or ugly looking, feel free to ask your DJ if they can be covered to make them less visible.

#### **14. How much time will your DJ need for setting up?**

Normally the DJ will need at least an hour to set up his equipment at the reception venue. Check with your DJ whether this will be sufficient for his requirements beforehand and let the wedding venue know if he needs more time. It is important that if you are eating your meal in the same room as the dance floor, you arrange for there to be a time lapse between the end of the meal and the tables being cleared to the evening entertainment commencing. Usually guests are quite happy to mingle in the bar area or stretch their legs outdoors after the meal.

#### **15. Who pays for your DJ's food?**

Feeding the DJ is often overlooked but it is necessary. They are providing a wedding service for you so you should definitely feed and water them during the course of the wedding reception - you don't want them wilting halfway through the evening's entertainment! I would not recommend adding another cover to your wedding breakfast total (that's far too expensive and totally unnecessary). You should arrange to provide the DJ with a smaller meal that is quite inexpensive - you can pre-arrange this with your catering manager and confirm this with the DJ. Alternatively, if you have a wedding buffet in the evening you can let the DJ know that they are welcome to help themselves to it - within reason!

#### **16. Will your DJ provide a lighting system?**

Before you even get into a conversation about lighting systems you must be very confident that your DJ can deliver on the music front first. Why? - because it is the music and the DJ's emcee skills that are most important! Once you have chosen your ideal DJ then you can discuss the lighting with them.

Most DJs will be able to offer an [intelligent lighting system](#) which is choreographed with the music. This is much more sophisticated than the old days where a few flashing lights and a mirror ball constituted a lights show! Typically most DJs offer a basic lighting system within their fee but if it is within your wedding budget you could pay extra and upgrade. How about an amazing light show that includes your names and those of your guests projected in laser light on the wall as their names are announced at the reception! That is a little over the top for me, but there are other variations available with the lighting - discuss it with your DJ. Undoubtedly he will have plenty of options he can tell you about.

## **17. How much will your DJ cost?**

Everyone with one eye on their wedding budget wants to cut their costs down, but make sure that you are not selling yourself short by drafting in a bargain-priced DJ - you might be paying for what you are getting in this instance! Don't fall into the trap of thinking that you are paying over the odds for your DJ because all that they are being paid for is to play music for 4 hours! Professional DJs will have invested a lot of time in your wedding prior to your actual wedding reception. Typically they will be spending between 10 to 20 hours consulting with you, purchasing the music, editing, preparing, setting up the equipment, packing up the equipment and other administrative tasks.

DJ prices can vary enormously and it is important to realize that a lot of couples say in hindsight that they wished they had spent more of their wedding budget on the entertainment. Research shows that you can spend between \$400 and \$3200 on a wedding DJ, but in general \$1200 for 4 hours is the average for a professional DJ.

You will generally pay more if you hire a DJ as part of a wedding venue's package deal compared to finding your own DJ and paying them directly.

## **18. Ensure you include all the details in the contract**

Finally, after choosing your wedding DJ, do remember to get everything in writing. Most DJs provide formal contracts. Make sure that any changes you have requested are attached to the contract and ensure that it is signed before you proceed any further. The contract should include a clause regarding what happens if the reception overruns - will there be extra charges and what will they cost? The contract must specifically state the name of the DJ who you have requested for your wedding day - you don't want someone else from the same company but who you have never met before. Remember to confirm the arrangements with the DJ in a phone call during the week preceding your wedding.



## **T.I.P.S.**

### **Keep the DJ Next to the Dance Floor**

You don't expect the chef to prepare a delicious meal from the lobby do you? Keep the DJ next to the dance floor so he can feed off of the energy of the crowd, see their responses to different songs and interact with them. In addition to not being able to read the crowd, if the DJ is on the other side of the room from the dance floor their speakers will be blaring across guests tables to reach the dance floor. This will make it way too loud for the guests seated at their tables. Keep the chef in the kitchen and the DJ next to the dance floor!

### **Seat Older Guests Away From the DJ**

A professional DJ will monitor the volume level of the music throughout the evening ensuring it is at the proper level for cocktail hour and dinner to allow your guests to have a nice conversation. When it comes time for dancing, the DJ will turn it up to create energy on the dance floor. Even at low volume levels during dinner it is still going to be louder directly in front of the speakers and quieter towards the back of the room. Older guests sometimes have a problem with even background music so make sure you do not place their table in front of the speakers.

### **Make sure your DJ has a Clear Line of Sight**

If your DJ will be doing announcements make sure they can see the activity around what they are announcing. This includes everything from your special dances to your cake cutting and definitely your introduction line. If there are any other formalities (slide shows, speeches ect.) Make sure your DJ has a clear line of sight, otherwise they may not be able to cue songs and make announcements at the appropriate times.

Speaking about tips, we are often asked what the proper edict is. When you're already dipping deep into your (or your parents') savings for so many wedding expenses, shelling out gratuities on top of that can be hard to handle. Well, rest easy: unless a service charge is spelled out in your contract, you're never obligated to tip anyone.

However you can't ignore the fact that some vendors will expect a gratuity, which forces tipping to be considered on a case-by-case scenario. Some general rules: Don't tip business owners, only tip their employees (however, you can/should tip an owner when the service exceeds expectations); tip vendors who offer exceptional service; thank-you notes are always appreciated; and assign the responsibility to a trusted deputy such as your wedding planner, a parent, or the best man. For a breakdown of what's customary for each vendor, read on.

### Wedding Planner

Wedding planners won't likely expect anything; however, if yours did a great job you can always offer a token of your appreciation. (Note: Non-monetary thank-yous like professional photos of the wedding for the planner's portfolio can go a long way too.) Approximately 50 percent of couples do tip their planners -- typically those with more opulent weddings.

**Protocol:** Optional

**The \$standard:** Up to \$500, or a nice gift

**When to Tip:** The bride should hand off the envelope at the end of the reception, or, she should send a thank-you note with photos or a check after the honeymoon.

### Wedding Hair Stylist and Makeup Artist

This is one area where a gratuity is definitely expected. Tip between 15 - 20 percent just as you would in a hair salon, and consider giving a little extra if there's a crisis, like one of your bridesmaids has a meltdown over her updo and it requires a redo at the last minute.

**Protocol:** Expected

**The \$standard:** 15 - 25 percent, depending upon the quality of service

**When to Tip:** At the end of your service

## Wedding Delivery and Set-up Staff

Slip a few dollars to anyone delivering important items to the site (wedding cake, flowers, or sound system). And if a lot of gear needs to be brought in and set up (tents, chairs, or port-a-potties), the workers deserve a tip too.

**Protocol:** Expected

**The \$standard:** \$5 - \$10 per person

**When to Tip:** Drop off cash envelopes the day before the wedding to the catering manager so the person accepting deliveries can turn the tip.

## Wedding Ceremony Officiant

If your officiant is affiliated with a church or synagogue, you're often expected to make a donation to that institution. If you're a member you'll probably want to give a larger amount than if you're not. However, if you're getting married there and they're charging you to use the space, feel free to give a smaller amount. If you're using a nondenominational officiant, no tip is required because they will charge you for their time.

**Protocol:** Expected (depending on officiant)

**The \$standard:** Donate \$500+ to the church or synagogue, or, for a nondenominational officiant, an optional tip of \$50 - \$100

**When to Tip:** Most ceremony fees are required prior to the wedding. Otherwise, have the best man pass the cash envelope at the rehearsal dinner if the officiant is in attendance.

## Wedding Ceremony Musicians

If you worked with a mini orchestra to come up with the perfect score for your service (and they pulled it off flawlessly), consider showing some monetary thanks for their talent. However, you probably don't have to tip the solo church organist who was required to play.

**Protocol:** Optional

**The \$standard:** \$15 - \$20 per musician

**When to Tip:** At the end of the ceremony.

## Wedding Photographer/Videographer

You're not expected to give your shutterbugs any dough beyond their normal fees. Yet if the wedding photographer or videographer doesn't own the studio, consider tipping each person (or give a certain amount with a thank-you note to disperse to staff).

**Protocol:** Optional

**The \$standard:** \$50 - \$200 per vendor

**When to Tip:** At the end of the reception.

## Wedding Reception Staff

This type of staff includes the on-site coordinator, maitre d', and banquet manager. A service charge (typically 2 percent) is almost always built in to the food and drink fee, so check your contract. If the gratuity is not included, tip as follows.

**Protocol:** Expected

**The \$standard:** 15 - 20 percent of the food and drink fee (based on labor, not the cost), or \$200 - \$300 for the maitre d'.

**When to Tip:** If it's covered in the contract, the final bill is typically due before the reception. Otherwise, have the father of the bride or best man hand the envelope to the maitre d' at the end of the reception since you will need to know the final tab to calculate the percentage.

## Wedding Reception Attendants

When it comes to bartenders, waitstaff, parking, bathroom, and coat-room attendants the rules of tipping are dictated by your contract. If the service fee is included, consider doling out extra only if the service was exceptional. If it's not included, ask ahead of time how many attendants will be working your wedding and calculate on a per person basis.

**Protocol:** Optional, based on contract

**The \$standard:** \$20 - \$25 per bartender or waiter; \$1 per guest for coat room and parking attendants; \$1 per car

**When to Tip:** Although tips are traditionally passed out at the end of the event, you could alternately distribute them at the beginning of the evening, to encourage all the workers to give you great service.

## Wedding Reception Band or DJ

Whether you hire 12-piece swing band or grooving to a DJ, tipping musicians is completely optional. (Depending on the quality of the job and how willing they were to follow your ideal playlist!) And don't forget about any sound technicians they bring with them.

**Protocol:** Optional, yet preferred

**The \$standard:** \$20 - \$25 per musician; \$50 - \$150 for DJs

**When to Tip:** At the end of the reception, by the best man.

## Wedding Transportation

Again, check your contract, as gratuity is usually included. If it isn't, plan to tip provided they show up on time and don't get lost!

**Protocol:** Expected

**The \$standard:** 15 - 20 percent of the total bill

**When to Tip:** At the end of the night or after the last ride. If you used a separate company for the guest buses, designate a bus captain to hand the driver a tip, otherwise, this duty falls to the best man.