

## **Guide to Wedding Etiquette and Protocol**

We have probably all been to a Wedding where a speaker didn't gauge how different the families were and said something that either upset or offended one side. To help you avoid this embarrassing situation plus looks that could kill from the bride's father, we have provided some useful hints about "traditional etiquette" below.

The first and most important principle to follow is that the speech should be suited to the families and guests involved. For example, if a very casual reception is intended, do make this clear to the guests and speakers, otherwise they will be confused and uncertain of what is expected from them.

Nowadays it is common to depart from the strict formality of the past, so guests can no longer rely on the 'traditions' to guide them. Speeches are dealt with in detail on Page 3.

In today's world the reasoning behind some of the traditions is no longer relevant, or their purpose is no longer appropriate. Many weddings, if not most, now involve brides who are older than 20; furthermore the new wife is often NOT financially dependent on the new husband.

The world has changed, but there are certain customs that are still expected and nice to observe in celebration of the love and aspirations of the happy couple.

Some guidelines to consider:

### **Dress....**

Apart from the choice of the Bride's dress (a closely guarded secret, of course) have you thought about avoiding possible embarrassment by discreetly ensuring that the two families confer on how they intend presenting themselves on the day. And it is the Bride (or her mother) who should take the initiative. After all, the family backgrounds of the Bride and Groom are often different and it is best to avoid the possibility of the two families arriving in sharply contrasting outfits.

### **....and Formality**

No two Weddings are the same. A couple in their 20's, with friends and families expecting a fun party will want a quite different day from that which might be preferred by an older couple - perhaps re-marrying, who want a quiet celebration with their families and a close circle of longstanding friends.

It will be the Bride (naturally in consultation with her husband-to-be) who will decide the tone they wish to set. If the Bride or her family have decided upon a degree of formality, it is only diplomatic to discreetly let the other side know! Again, on this day of celebration, it is important that no-one should feel uncomfortable.

### **The Toastmaster**

A more formal wedding may have a toastmaster. The toastmaster opens the proceedings and keeps them flowing smoothly. Engaging a toastmaster takes the worry from the bridal party - particularly the bride's mother - because they control the proceedings before and during the reception. This is sometimes a difficult task when dealing with so many people: suppliers and guests!

A toastmaster performs many functions: dressed in their distinctive scarlet coat, they bring dignity to the occasion by controlling events, announcing guests, calling toasts and ensuring that all the plans for the day are carried out correctly and efficiently, and dealing with any unforeseen problems along the way. The bridal party can therefore relax and enjoy the day to the full.

It is important to book your toastmaster well in advance of your wedding in order to make the most of the services they can provide. They will be in contact with you to discuss your particular needs and requirements, and from then on will not only be available for advice, but will also be your professional link between your reception venue or catering company. They will even assist with writing speeches!

In the absence of a toastmaster the Best Man usually undertakes some of the tasks.

The Toastmaster's role includes:

- Arranging the receiving line, and
- Introducing guests by name to the hosts.
- Asking guests to take their seats, after the receiving line has welcomed everyone.
- Announcing the arrival of the Bride and Groom, and escorting them to their places.
- Introducing prayers before eating. If no clergyman is present, and no senior member of the families wants to, then the toastmaster often leads grace.
- Announcing the cutting of the cake, and inviting guests forward to take photographs.
- Introducing the speakers, who will be proposing the traditional toasts.

Have a look at **The Toasts** and **So Who Says What?** on page 3, for more detail.

### **The Purpose of the Reception**

The traditional purpose of the reception is to welcome the guests who have often travelled a long way to be with you. It is also an opportunity to introduce members of the two families to each other. Unless the families of the Bride and Groom actually live locally to each other, it is most probable that they do not recognise each other, so some introduction is helpful.

The formal part of this welcome is achieved by arranging a 'receiving line'. Wherever possible, the Bride and Groom together with their parents should arrive at the reception venue before the other guests so that they are available to meet them as they arrive.

### **The Receiving Line**

The toastmaster or best man will arrange the receiving line. The best place is in an assembly area or the entrance to the dining hall. The toastmaster should introduce each guest, by name, to their hosts.

The traditional order in the line is:

- The Bride's mother
- The Bride's father
- The Groom's mother
- The Groom's father, then a small gap
- The Bride
- The Groom

This introduction is not the time for a chat but for a quick courtesy comment. A compliment, thanks for the invitation, congratulations on the event, comment on the lovely service, etc. At some venues the design of the building or the number of the guests means that there is simply not enough space to hold a full six-person receiving line. In this case tradition allows for the Bride's mother to act as host, while the Bride and Groom circulate among the guests to welcome them.

### **The Celebration Meal**

Once all the guests have been formally 'received' the toastmaster will ask them to take their seats for the meal. There is usually a seating plan and name cards at each table place. Once the guests are seated, the toastmaster announces the arrival of the Bride and Groom and escorts them to their places on the top table. The guests stand and applaud during this. Normally seated at the top table are the Bride and Groom, their parents, the Best Man and the bridesmaids.

If *Grace* is to be said, then while everyone is still standing is a good time. (Tip: The Bride and Groom should stay on their feet, as seeing them sit is a visual cue for the guests to sit also). If a clergyman is present, usually the one who performed the ceremony, then they will usually be asked to say *Grace*. Otherwise a senior member of either family or the toastmaster may lead *Grace*.

### **Cutting the Cake**

Once the dessert has been completed the toastmaster will announce the cutting of the cake, and invite guests forward to take photos, if practical. The real division of the cake is usually performed by the catering staff and served to the guests with coffee.

Champagne: After the coffee, champagne or other drink is served.

### **The Toasts**

At this point the toastmaster begins by introducing the speakers who will propose the following traditional toasts:

- The Bride and Groom - normally by the **Father of the Bride**, or an old friend of the family.
- To the health of the Bridesmaids - normally by the **Groom**.
  - ❖ (Presents now?) - If the groom is giving gifts, now is a good opportunity.
  - ❖ (Bride's speech now?) - If non-traditionally the bride wants to say a few words, now is a good opportunity.
- To the health of the parents, of the Bride and Groom - normally by the **Best Man**.

At the end of the formal speeches the toastmaster may ask the guests to applaud the Bride and Groom, or the entire top table, while they leave the reception room. At modern weddings the bride may feel that she wants to say a few words, there is no special order for this and it can be fitted into the order at any point by agreement, make sure that the Toastmaster knows!

### **So who says what?**

Here are some guidelines on what is usual - but the three traditional speeches are not necessarily the limit. It is becoming increasingly common for the Bride to add her own thanks or make other comments about the couple's plans for the future, extending invitations for those gathered to visit them...and so on.

But there are traditions concerning the content of the principal speeches, and it is still important to preserve these:

### **The Father of the Bride's Speech**

The Bride's father will be predictably proud, listing her achievements - he will be loving, sorry to see her go and forever caring for her.

- Welcome all the guests to the wedding, on behalf of your wife and yourself.
- Thank them for coming to help you celebrate the wedding of your daughter.
- Tell them about your daughter - skills, abilities, achievements, character, recollections. It is common for there to be gentle teasing.
- Tell them about your new son in law - skills, abilities, achievements, character, reminiscences. Perhaps more gentle teasing?
- Toast the Bride and Groom. "So, ladies and gentlemen, family and friends, let us raise our glasses and join together in wishing them every happiness. I give you the toast of the Bride and Groom, ... And (entirely optional)... May God bless them."

### **The Bridegroom's Speech**

The Bridegroom is expected by the gathering to be loving to his new Bride and respectful to both of their parents and wider families; not too many jokes and he is not there to show off his skills as an orator!

- Thank the Bride's father for proposing the toast.
- Thank him for the wedding feast (if appropriate). Thank him for his kindness and friendship.

- Thank him for his daughter.
- Thank the guests for their good wishes, and for coming.
- Thank everyone for their gifts.
- Thank your 'new' wife for marrying you!
- Thank the Bridesmaids who have helped your wife through the day. Comment on their charm & beauty, but not too much, though, as you may make your new wife jealous!
- As well as the traditional thank-you's, the Groom may wish to add a few words about how he met his wife, activities they share, etc. Gentle teasing is allowable.
- Toast the Bridesmaids: "Ladies and gentlemen, will you join me in drinking the toast of 'The Bridesmaids' - thank you."

### **The Best Man's Speech**

But, in a sense, a particular highlight reminding everyone of the party atmosphere, will be the Best Man's speech: he has the implied permission to go a little further than the others by teasing the Groom with recollections of their youth together and pointing out to the Bride that she is getting a raw deal! He has to judge his remarks carefully though, for obvious reasons - the Bride should not be leaving her Breakfast with serious questions on her mind!

The Best Man speaks on behalf of the Bridesmaids (and other helpers - ushers, etc.), and

- Thanks the Groom for his toast. He also:
- Toasts the Parents: "I should like to add to the thanks to the parents which (Bridegroom) has already expressed on this wonderful occasion. I ask you to join me in drinking the toast of 'The Parents'".
- In addition to these two 'official' components, the Best Man's speech usually includes various anecdotes about the Bride and Groom. Again it is common for there to be gentle teasing.
- Telegrams, cards and emails may be read out from people who were not able to attend, unless this task has been delegated to the Toastmaster.

### **The Bride's Speech - entirely optional!**

By no means generally expected, there are no traditional components to a Bride's speech. But economic and social realities have changed over the years and the Bride will often feel entitled to add her own comments - perhaps thanking her parents for their wisdom and guidance over the years. She may want to offer a particular tribute to a grand-parent, another relation or particular guest for some unique help from which she has benefited in the past.

### **Presents**

The Bride and Groom usually give presents to say thank you to:

- the Best Man
- the Bridesmaids
- their Parents

During the Bridegroom's (or the Bride's if applicable) remarks is a good time for such presentations.

### **Final Comments**

As you can see, many of the traditional components of the wedding celebration assume that:

- It is a religious ceremony.
- The Bride's father is paying for the reception.
- The Bride will be financially dependent on the Groom.

Nowadays these assumptions are often invalid and you may need to adapt to the individual circumstances. Therefore one or two of the above notes on traditional forms may need to be altered.

However good manners will always dictate the structure for wedding celebrations:

- Welcome guests
- Celebration meal
- Speeches of congratulations and thanks

Remember, traditions give people guidance on what is expected of them. If you want to be different, tell your Toastmaster or let the guests know so they do not feel uncertain and uncomfortable.

Congratulations on your forthcoming wedding, and have a wonderful day!

*Mike Wabe - Toastmaster*

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