

Review: Google Docs, the perfect bridesmaid

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The screenshot, taken on Jan. 11, 2012, shows a Google Docs template for couples-to-be to solicit mailing addresses from guests for wedding invitations. It's one of many online tools available through Google and elsewhere to plan for weddings. (AP Photo/Google Docs)

(AP) -- For do-most-of-it-yourself brides, wedding planning means lists, lists and more lists, with some spreadsheets thrown in for good measure. There are also the long, endlessly pored-over documents of vows, readings, even toasts. Did I mention lists?

Enter [Google Docs](#), the search company's free, easy-to-use online document software. With templates for the spreadsheet-challenged and a slew of pretty Web tools, the service is like the perfect bridesmaid. She's calm, collected and full of good ideas but not overly pushy, letting you steer the ship. She's there when you need her.

I started earnestly planning my April 2011 wedding around this time last year. After lots of pen-on-paper scribbling, I decided to join the 21st century and move my planning online. Do you have a wedding, civil union or other commitment ceremony coming up this year? Let good old Google help.

I picked Google's tools over dedicated wedding-planning websites such as The Knot for a few reasons:

- I didn't want to be bombarded with girly girl ads, think-inside-the-box advice and expensive "must-have" lists. No flower girls, cutesy favors or bright bridesmaids' dresses for us (though we did have bridesmens' suits).

- I didn't want to join a site that asked for my full name, address and other personal information. I didn't see why I should have to provide all that. The Knot's privacy policy had not been updated since 2008. It says it participates in Facebook's Beacon sharing program, which was shut down more than two years ago over [privacy complaints](#). Time for an update, perhaps?

- Finally, I've been using [Gmail](#) since 2004 without a hitch (I'll just let Buzz slide). I saw no reason why I shouldn't let Google help me get hitched.

To start, I armed myself with a to-do checklist from the popular wedding blog Offbeat Bride - another invaluable Web tool for independently spirited brides.

With my fiance and now husband, I took to Google Docs for our first task. We listed friends and family members we hoped would share our special day. With a set budget and relatively small families, this wasn't too difficult.

The next step, a bit more so. Because so few people send cards and letters through the mail these days, one of the more annoying tasks in planning a wedding is hounding your friends and relatives for their mailing addresses.

Google Docs has automated this with a simple email template. Once you're on Google's weddings site at <http://www.google.com/weddings> , you can click "Plan" in the top right corner. This will take you to a set of planning documents. Select "Address Book" from that list, then click on "use this template."

You can use that to send a form email to your guests, complete with a pretty picture of a wedding cake or whatever else theme you pick ("Wall St." anyone?).

The email has boxes that your guests can fill in with their street, city and other address information, along with their phone number and any comments. When friends and family send that back, Google automatically adds the information to a spreadsheet. You can then tweak the spreadsheet to add columns for meal choices and other such details.

Easy-peasy right? Sort of. Our young, tech-savvy friends responded quickly, and soon we had a spreadsheet with about half of our guests. But some people didn't seem to know what to do with the form. Others thought it was spam. I had to send regular emails, not pretty forms, to some people, saying hey, that form was not spam, please fill it out.

For many couples, there might also be those older folks who do not use the Internet at all and need to be called to get addresses.

The spreadsheet, once completed, proved invaluable. It's simple to share documents through Google by entering recipients' email addresses, or to restrict them so only you can see them. I shared the list with my fiance

and with the people who were planning our bachelor and bachelorette parties. Over time, we added columns such as "invitation sent" and "gift description."

Besides a DJ and a photographer, we also hired an online officiant to help put together our ceremony. A friend of ours performed the actual ceremony after getting ordained over the Internet. Cobbling together the ceremony was much like collaborating on a script among four people in three locations.

Google Docs again proved invaluable. And because the documents are stored remotely, on Google's servers, there was no danger of losing them. That's what happened to a co-worker who was planning her wedding around the same time. Her computer died, and her carefully curated passages were gone.

Not everyone uses Google Docs, though. Our online officiant didn't, so she sent us attachments of her drafts using Microsoft Word. I converted those to Google Docs and shared them with my fiance and the friend who'd be performing the ceremony. We all tweaked the script until it was perfect.

Google lets you share documents with people as "can view" and "can edit." After the wedding, I shared the final document with my mom, so she could keep it for posterity - but not edit it, lest she insert some new vows she'd like my husband to keep.

You can download documents to store on your computer in various formats. These include PDF, Word or a text file. For those who didn't want to use Google Docs, I simply downloaded documents as Word and sent them as an attachment. No biggie.

Besides documents, Google also offers wedding tools to build your

wedding website (a must-have these days) and share photos. Although we did not use these services, they are worth checking out.

There's also a budget-planner template, which we did not use. It had too many things that we had no intention of using - calligrapher, flower girl basket, gown preservation, to name a few. And come on, a "wedding planner/organizer" and a "consultant/coordinator" sound like the same thing to me.

I suppose I could have just put in "0" for all the unused options, but it would have been nice to have a range of budget templates for simple, average or lavish weddings. And, this being 2012, it would be nice to see more options for same-sex couples to plan weddings and civil ceremonies.

Besides the ceremony script and guest list, we also scanned in and saved the seating chart, the passages and poem that we had our friends read during the ceremony. We kept a detailed schedule of the day's events that we gave to the wedding venue and all the friends who were helping us. On the big day, We also printed out a list of important phone numbers and addresses and extra copies of everything - just in case.

The actual wedding could not have gone more perfectly. Though I owe the most thanks to my tireless friends and family to help pull it off, Google Docs certainly made it a lot easier.

More information: <http://www.google.com/weddings>

<http://www.offbeatbride.com>

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