

by Allison Deerr

Eco-friendly brides are more likely to shop at local businesses, which is great news for you.



Here Comes the (Green) Bride

With more customers focusing on “green” living, it’s time you capitalize on the movement.

Environmentalism has been around since the 1800s, but today’s “green movement” is growing faster than ever and has now expanded into the retail environment.

Simply put, people involved in the green movement are interested in doing anything they can to help protect the environment. This includes recycling, reusing and repurposing goods; finding sustainable alternative energy sources; and reducing both consumption and waste. It also frequently means (good news for you!) buying local products and supporting local businesses.

Indeed, awareness of environmental issues has never been more widespread, according to Alexandra Kennaugh, director of the National Resources Defense Council’s Green Living Initiative. Kennaugh cites events like Hurricane Katrina and former Vice President Al Gore’s global warming documentary “*An Inconvenient Truth*” as recent catalysts for increased interest in environmental issues.

“One of the things that is

great about today’s green movement is that it isn’t the traditional hair-shirt environmentalism: “What do I have to give up now?” she says. “There is so much choice that you don’t have to compromise on the quality if you want to make a green decision.”

And given the growth of the green movement, it’s only natural that couples living a greener lifestyle will want their wedding celebrations to reflect these values.

While it’s difficult to pinpoint exactly how many weddings qualify as green these days, “there’s no doubt that the number is increasing, spurred on by the economy and greater environmental awareness,” says Mireya Navarro, West Coast style correspondent for *The New York Times*, and author of “*Green Weddings*” (Stewart, Tabori & Chang, January 2009). “Purchasing decisions follow that trend toward reducing waste, avoiding excess, and doing what you can to contribute to the solution to global warming.”

“I think there’s a myth that

going green costs more, but it can cost as much as 40 percent less,” says Kate L. Harrison, author of “*The Green Bride Guide: How to Create an Earth-Friendly Wedding on Any Budget*” (Casablanca, 2008). “And then there’s the spiritual element – you’re creating a day that starts the rest of your lives together, and (want) to do it in a way that’s sustainable, that keeps the larger community and world in mind.”

What a Bride Wants For Her Eco Wedding

The green bride wants what every other bride wants: a celebration that reflects her personality, sense of style and values. There is one caveat, however: This celebration needs to have as little impact on Mother Earth as possible.

Green brides tend to be younger – in their 20s, Harrison says, “because (that) generation has grown up with that set of values.” However, age is certainly no barrier to planning a green celebration.

“I think there’s a focus on local and artisanal that’s equally

important," Harrison says. "Buying a dress from a small local store is going to feel much greener than buying a dress from a chain store."

Additionally, these brides "want that connection; they want that personalization. Supporting local business is part of the green experience," Harrison adds. "It's all about distinguishing yourself. So if you're getting something unique and you're getting it from a small local store and supporting the local economy, you're half the way there."

Green brides come in all forms, from the bride who wants certain natural elements in her wedding to the one who wants every detail to be as eco-

conscious as possible.

So what's an independent retailer to do? First step: Make an effort to "green" your store. (See sidebars "Small Steps, Big Impact" and "Saving Energy – And Cutting Costs" for ideas).

"One thing that is very daunting for consumers is figuring out who is truly green," Navarro says. "I would encourage bridal businesses to 'green' themselves, not just talk the talk, but walk the walk."

She continues, "As a business, engage in green practices from recycling to switching to renewable energy sources to giving away some of (your) profits to environmental organizations or chari-

ties. The overt gestures really matter."

Furthermore, Navarro says, it's a good idea to be transparent about what your store has done to green itself.

"If your packaging, for example, uses recycled paper, say so," she says. "Post it on your Web site."

Once you have taken steps to make your business as green as possible, then you can also list yourself in directories such as the American National Green Pages (www.greenpages.org), which details nearly 3,000 businesses that have made firm commitments to sustainable, socially responsible principles, including the support of sweatshop-free labor, organic farms, fair trade and cruelty-free products.

There are many easy, inexpensive — or even free! — ways to "green" your store.

Small Steps, Big Impact

A bridal store of any size can be "greener" — more energy efficient, less wasteful and more involved in the local community. Here are some ways to get started.

- Get an energy audit of your business. Most utility companies now are providing these as a free service, says Alexandra Kennaugh, director of the National Resources Defense Council's Green Living Initiative.
- Refill printer ink cartridges rather than buying new ones, or trade in old cartridges when you buy replacements.
- Print using both sides of the (recycled!) paper. Recycled paper is price competitive with non-recycled paper; Kennaugh says. Plus using 40 cases of 100 percent post-consumer recycled copy paper saves 7,000 gallons of water and 60 pounds of air pollution.
- Cancel that bottled water order and install a water purifier at the tap. Purchase reusable drinking cups, coffee mugs and water bottles.
- Stock organic coffee, tea, juice, etc. Select organic, locally grown treats for staff and shoppers.
- Buy recycled toilet tissue and paper towels in bulk. Use biodegradable trash bags.
- Hire "green" caterers and bakers for special events. Work with local suppliers of organic food and flowers.
- Use reusable shopping bags and garment bags.
- Recycle as much as you can: paper, aluminum, etc.
- Use natural, local products in merchandising displays.
- Search out auctions, salvage yards and thrift shops for store fixtures.
- Clean with non-volatile, biodegradable products or make your own. Kennaugh says a basic solution of 1 part vinegar to 4 parts water; with a squeeze of lemon for scent, will do the trick.
- Check into greener fabrics for staff uniforms. You can even get comfortable recycled shoes.
- Carpool or have "Ride a Bike to Work" days.
- Print your company logo on canvas bags and sell them at the front counter to avoid using plastic bags for smaller merchandise.



Picking Out That Green Wedding Gown

Obviously, the wedding gown is a customer's core purchase in your store, so you must take steps to offer products that green brides want.

But keep in mind that these brides aren't all seeking the same thing. Some may only be interested in looking at designers who work with eco-friendly fabrics, whereas others may not care what the dress is made from provided it's a style she can recycle (i.e. wear again and again and again).

The only way to discover what a green bride is after is to ask her. During the registration process, ask detailed questions about her desires, and take careful notes.

As well, it's important that you be educated on green fabrics if you're planning on stocking them.

Such eco-fabrics include tencel, which is made out of wood pulp and incredibly soft; bamboo, which is sustainable and to some extent antibacterial; and pina, a lightweight fiber made from the leaves of pineapple that has an elegant appearance similar to linen. Unbleached organic cottons and silks fall into the eco-friend-

For other ideas check out the NRDC's Web sites simplesteps.org or <http://www.nrdc.org/cities/living/gbusiness.asp>.

ly category as well.

As for cost? While eco-fabrics are generally more expensive, experts say prices are likely to come down as more designers work with them, therefore increasing the demand. Even so, there is

a large price range to choose from that should work with any budget.

"There are \$100 organic cotton wedding gowns and \$8,000 couture tencel gowns," Harrison says.

Furthermore, anything recycled is

green, including vintage gowns and once-worn g o w n s , Harrison notes. And sample gowns sold off the rack are green because they're being re-purposed.

Harrison encourages shops to buy back wedding gowns as a way of offering a selection of affordable dresses. You could also donate a percentage of every sale from a certain line of dresses to a local charity.

Another way to "green" any wedding gown is to encourage the bride to recycle her gown after it's worn. There are several organizations that resell donated bridal gowns to support charitable efforts including Brides Against Breast Cancer (www.makingmemories.org) and the I Do Foundation (www.idofoundation.org). Donate maids' dresses to the Los Angeles Cinderella Project (cinderellaproject.net) or the Chicago-based Glass Slipper Project (glassslipperproject.org), which provide dresses to teens who can't afford formals for prom and graduation. You should also check into local groups that may have similar programs.

I'm Your Local Wedding Expert

The list of green wedding products and services grows every day. There are environmentally aware companies dedicated to transport, jewelry, wedding attire, invitations, lighting, catering, flowers, photography, music and more.

Realistically, as a bridal retailer, you won't be the prime source of many of these wedding-related goods and services. But you can certainly serve as a resource for your customers.

Compile and distribute to your brides a list of local wedding-related vendors that offer green services. And make sure to call particular attention to any of your current referral partners that offer green options.

Your staff will have to come on board as well, familiarizing themselves with green options and ser-

Educate your staff on green fabrics and be prepared to answer customer questions.

Saving Energy – And Cutting Costs

In today's era of escalating energy costs and climate change, energy efficiency is the most important aspect of greening your business, says Daniel Sitarz, author of "Greening Your Business: The Hands-On Guide to Creating a Successful and Sustainable Business" (EarthPress, 2008) www.greeningyourbusiness.org.

"You can reap immediate savings by lowering your overall energy use, and doing so will automatically reduce your business' carbon emission footprint," Sitarz says. "You can also save money in the areas of waste reduction, equipment use, transportation and building design."

The best news, Sitarz says, is that the same energy improvements that lower utility bills also foster a more comfortable retail space, with better lighting, temperature control and indoor air quality.

"That means employee morale and retention improve, and customers are more likely to return often," he says.

Here are some of the ideas he shares about "greening" your business.

- Make it company policy to shut off all lights, machinery and equipment when not in use, particularly when the store is closed. Replace power strips or surge protectors with high-efficiency versions.
- Lighting accounts for up to 40 percent of a business' energy costs. Install motion-sensor and/or automatic dimming switches for all lighting to be certain you aren't lighting areas when no one is present.
- Replace incandescent lighting with new compact fluorescent bulbs. Older 1.5" diameter fluorescent tube lighting should be replaced with newer 1" tubes and solid-state electronic ballasts.
- Reduce the amount of heated or cooled air that escapes from your building by plugging all leaks in your building's outer shell with weather stripping or caulking. Use expandable foam to fill any gaps. Also, window films, shades and awnings reduce heat gain in the summer.
- Install programmable thermostats to automate your HVAC system, and to significantly scale back your heating and cooling costs outside of store hours. Also remember that thermostat settings of three to five degrees higher can feel as comfortable by using fans.
- Upgrade to higher-efficiency, Energy Star-qualified products. The Energy Star label indicates the most efficient light bulbs, computers, printers, copiers, etc. Bonus: You often get tax credits or rebates for purchasing these products.
- If you will be remodeling or building a new facility, check the LEED standards for the latest efficiency techniques. See the U.S. Green Building Council Web site, www.usgbc.org, for more information.
- Install low-flow bathroom and kitchen fixtures. Also, check your building for water leaks and repair as necessary.
- Use laptops as desktop computers; they consume up to 80 percent less energy. As well, inkjet printers use 75 to 90 percent less energy than laser printers.
- For shipping, look into the EPA SmartWay Transport Partnership, an innovative collaboration between the EPA and the freight industry to increase energy efficiency while significantly reducing greenhouse gases and air pollution. See www.epa.gov/smartway for more about this program.



Giving Back – Choosing a Charity

One of the “greenest” things your business can do is to give back to the local communities where you and your customers live and work.

But how do you choose the charity or organization that’s right for you? Because there are so many worthy causes out there, you’ll first have to hone in on what matters most to you or your business: the environment, medical research, education, relief services, the arts, etc.

Perhaps there’s a cause that’s close to your heart. And if not, ask family and friends where they contribute to give you more ideas.

Once you have selected a cause, you’ll need to decide whether to invest your charitable dollars close to home or on a national or worldwide scale. After you select a charity of interest, you’ll need to validate the legitimacy of the organization. Here are some smart steps to take:

- Contact the charity and ask questions. If possible, visit in person and get a tour. Ask how long they’ve been in operation, who’s on the board of directors, and about primary funding sources.
- Ask for proof of incorporation and/or a business license.
- The Internal Revenue Service maintains a list of all organizations listed as charities. So before donating, make sure it is a 501(c) (3) charity that has filed paperwork with the IRS, registering it as a U.S. nonprofit. This status allows you to get a tax deduction for your donation.
- You can also check with your state’s attorney general or charities office.
- Contact your local Better Business Bureau.

If the charity is legit, you’ll then want to find out how efficiently it uses donated funds. You can get this information by:

- Contacting the organization directly and asking for it.
- IRS Form 990, which must be filed by charitable organizations taking in more than \$25,000 annually. Form 990 covers revenue, expenses and service accomplishments. Look for fundraising and administrative costs at 25 percent or less (www.charitynavigator.org evaluates organizations based on most recent Form 990 data).
- Annual reports, usually available on group Web sites, list revenue sources and how they are allocated, as well as the group’s mission statement.
- The Better Business Bureau Wise Giving Alliance, www.give.org, offers free analysis of national charities.

A final consideration is whether you’ll want to donate cash, goods or time/expertise. Start by asking if the group accepts donations of merchandise, office equipment, etc.

Also keep in mind that some groups welcome volunteers, others don’t. Furthermore, if you’re donating funds, you’ll need to determine if you can opt for either a lump sum or pledge smaller amounts over time. If you’re concerned about reducing the tax burden on your estate, look into a charitable trust.

One additional caveat: Avoid making donations by phone, unless you already have a connection to the soliciting group. It’s harder to determine the legitimacy of the organization, and unannounced to you, a large percent of your donation may go to the group’s fundraising costs.



VICES offered in your area.

Ultimately, working with green brides will require doing your home-

work on the growing number of green wedding products. You should also be ready to answer questions such as “Do you recycle?” or “Where does this product come from?” because these couples tend to be very passionate about the green aspects of their weddings, Navarro says.

Advertise Your Store’s Greening Efforts

The good news is that marketing your green efforts isn’t expensive. The best approach is simply to piggyback your message on existing advertising/promotional media, such as your Web site (consider adding an entire section on green weddings); your newsletter (if applicable, include the message “printed on recycled paper”); and your window displays and counter-top (a small sign stating “We recycle” should do the trick).

As well, many green couples have created wedding Web sites, which are a popular way to convey what they’re trying to achieve and why. If possible, see if you can get them to post a link to your business on their site. It costs them nothing, and could pay dividends to both the environment and you.

Finally, if you’re involved in your community, advertise this fact because it’s more proof of your green efforts.

Just remember that no matter what marketing approach you try, it’s important to keep the green message subtle. After all, your goal is to serve this niche in the bridal market without seeming judgemental of brides whose weddings aren’t as green.

If you are able to achieve this balance, every step you take to green your business will benefit you, your staff and your customers.

Advertise your store’s green efforts subtly so you don’t turn off other customers.