

Married to the job

Living on a cattle property in north-west New South Wales didn't dissuade Melissa Bowman from becoming a wedding planner.

STORY JANENE CAREY

Melissa Bowman was 35 years old and had three small children when she discovered her dream job. Her husband's brother wanted to get married on the family farm 75 kilometres north of Tamworth, but he and his bride lived in Hong Kong, so he employed a wedding planner to handle the details. As she watched this woman at work, Melissa thought, "That's exactly what I want to do. I've always loved everything about weddings and I love to organise, I love to plan things".

Initially she thought her location would be a big disadvantage. "But with the internet and social media and word-of-mouth, it just hasn't been a problem for me at all," Melissa says. "First of all, I emailed all my friends and family, and on Facebook I went in and asked everyone, even people I'd only met once or twice, to be my friend so they could see that I'd just started this wedding planning business." She also signed up for 'Get More Brides', a marketing course for people in the wedding industry, and says it was "inspirational".

A few other factors worked in her favour as well. She had been a boarder at Kambala, the Anglican girls' school in Sydney's Rose Bay, which meant her friendship network included prospective brides from all over the state. Her former job as a travel agent had given her practice planning other people's itineraries. And she was clued up on weddings, having been a bridesmaid eight times and a flower girl once. She had also organised her own wedding in 2002, which was held on her parents' farm at Cootamundra and involved 206 guests.

That experience taught her that even best laid plans can go awry and generate a funny story. Melissa, who is normally very punctual, left her husband-to-be waiting at the altar for 20 minutes. Her bridal car broke down on the way to the ceremony after a rock flew up underneath it, causing an oil leak. Everyone had to jam into the other two vehicles. "Thank God the police didn't pick us up," Melissa says. "And luckily all the bridesmaids were tiny, because there were five of them in three seats."

Country brides wanting to get married on their family farms make up the majority of Melissa's clientele. Some enlist her help with all the arrangements and bookings, while others only need her to be there as coordinator on the wedding day, making sure everything runs smoothly and allowing family and friends to focus on enjoying themselves.

"A lot are just a marquee on the family farm," Melissa says. "And that's why they want a wedding planner in, I guess, because it's quite daunting bringing it all together. There's a lot more to organise with farm weddings because you have to arrange the guests' transport and the accommodation as well. It's not like in Sydney, where everybody can get a taxi home."

She recommends listing a few accommodation options on the invitations and mentioning that you will be running a bus between these places and the wedding. She also reminds the bride and groom that their grandparents may not wish to party into the small hours. "I usually encourage them to write on the invitation that there will be a bus leaving at midnight and another at 2am or something," she says.

Melissa also insists on a wet weather plan. "If it's raining you need to go to Plan B. Everything needs to be changed. That's where people say to me, 'I don't know how I could have done that without you'. They would have been running around not enjoying their wedding, if I wasn't there."

She says her most complex wedding, planning-wise, was for Emilia and Dean, on a farm near Kiama in southern New South Wales. It was Dr Seuss themed, with figurines of Thing 1 and Thing 2 on each table, and seating plans tucked inside the books. It also involved having 150 guests don gumboots to cross a creek and walk up to a spot with sweeping ocean views. "I had to get everyone's shoe size and decide on the most cost-effective gumboot company," Melissa says. "We had a little gumboot station and people walked through the creek and up the hill to where they got married."

Putting boards across the trickle of water in the creek was considered, says Melissa. "But because it rains so much in Kiama, the grass was all wet and there was mud. If you were wearing high heels, you would have sunk straight into it." As it happened, the four-wheel-drive delivering the bride to the ceremony got bogged and had to be hauled out by the neighbour's truck.

Melissa's peak season runs from September through to April, and if there is a clash of dates she has people she trusts to deputise for her. She still does all the planning and prepares a detailed running sheet. But she hates having to miss a wedding. "I just love them, they are so much fun," she says. "The best thing about my job is that everyone is so happy on the day. The actual wedding is my biggest reward. I work alongside these brides for ages, and I get quite emotional when I see them walk down the aisle."



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: The country wedding of James Skutbork and Felicity Hammond, held in Forbes; wedding planner Melissa Bowman; Melissa holds an umbrella ready to shield bride Kristin Last from inclement weather.