

SECTOR STUDY ECOMMERCE

Saying 'I do' to online bridal services

Couples in Southeast Asia are probably as hooked on the internet as they are on each other. Can the wedding industry keep up with the cyber-savvy brides and grooms? By **Foong Li Mei**

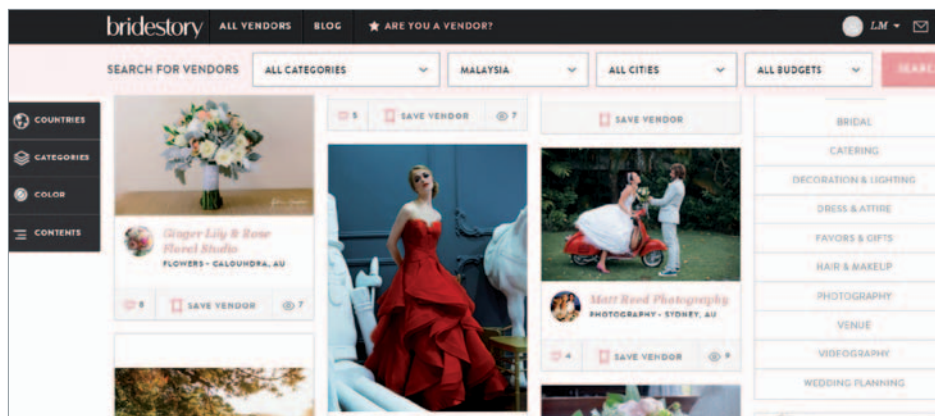
As wedding bells ring in Southeast Asia, so do the cash registers. The region's marital market is estimated to be worth US\$18 billion, thanks to bridal couples — and their parents — using money in place of magic dust to conjure fairy-tale celebrations.

The Malaysian industry alone makes about US\$2.2 billion. Thailand rakes in another US\$1.3 billion, with an annual growth rate of 15 per cent, according to the digital marketing firm OPT SEA.

In Indonesia's US\$7 billion wedding market, lovebirds are not holding back. Bridestory, an online bridal directory based in Indonesia, conducted a survey of its 2,000 members last month. It found 43 per cent of the respondents' bridal budget was in the US\$7,000 to US\$35,000 range — higher than the country's annual income per household in 2012.

Yet despite all the hard cash being waved at its face, the online industry is surprisingly playing hard to get.

Petrina Goh, CEO and co-founder of Malaysian online bridal marketplace Wedding.com.my, estimates that the websites of more than half of the bridal vendors in the country lack ecommerce



Digitally hitched... online services are expanding despite challenges

functions and are updated only sporadically.

Kevin Mintaraga, CEO and founder of Bridestory, also sees the trend with about half the merchants on his directory neglecting their pages for more than a month at a time.

Inactive presence and elusive information on the internet are almost cardinal sins in

a market catering to the digital-dependent consumers in their 20s — the average age that Southeast Asian couples are tying the knot.

This gap is where online wedding marketplaces such as Bridestory and Wedding.com.my see an opportunity to play matchmaker between cyber-savvy consumers and

tech-inept businesses. Brick-and-mortar vendors can display their information on readily-developed webpages, while couples can easily find the services, items and ideas that fit their search criteria.

Wedding.com.my also aims to improve transparency by convincing vendors to publish their packages and pricing. Stacey Lee, COO, admits that many vendors are reluctant, concerned that revealing too much information would benefit their competitors.

To overcome this, Lee explains the firm's localisation strategy where users of the marketplace can only search for vendors operating in the same country. On top of that, couples who book a service on

the website are offered cash-back rebates that they can use for the other categories.

"We don't want to harm the industry. We merely want to transform it," says Lee.

Bridestory, on the other hand, seeks to give the underdog vendors a leg up so that they can compete with the big industry players.

Mintaraga explains that both obscure businesses and famous vendors on Bridestory — over 15,000 in all — can enjoy equal chances for exposure as they appear in the bridal couples' search results. Bridestory's website hit close to 500,000 visitors in August.

Lee says that as of March 2015, Wedding.com.my matched more than 500 couples with vendors, with a quotation value of US\$1.6 million.

It is not only bridal couples who are pulling out their wallets. Investors are as well. Since its launch in 2014, Bridestory has secured funding from the US, Singapore and, most recently, Berlin-based Rocket Internet. Wedding.com.my also netted US\$274,000 in a recent seed-funding round. Both companies are using funds to expand — Wedding.com.my to Singapore and Bridestory to the Philippines and Australia.

INDUSTRY SIZE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Indonesia	\$7 billion
Malaysia	\$2.2 billion
Thailand	\$1.3 billion

Source: OPT SEA

EXPERT OPINION Wedding business still needs the human touch



In my 10 years in the industry, I have watched bridal trends evolve. Recently, I see couples increasingly depend on online research.

Some wonder how wedding planners can compete with the massive amount of tools available online to help couples plan their own wedding. However,

it is precisely this information overload that is driving couples to seek a professional.

Couples are seeking unique experiences. They may amass a huge amount of information online, but they still need help putting together a personalised and classy event. It is also difficult to replicate wedding ideas from overseas, as

local floral choices and venues are more limited.

We find that our most sought-after service is still conceptualisation. Our knowledge of what local vendors can provide makes it possible for us to design a theme that is closest to what the couple's desires while keeping it within their budget. Wedding planners also create an experience of

the five senses — what guests see, hear, smell, taste and touch — under a unified theme that reflects the couple's personalities.

Online resources will not replace wedding planners. Weddings are increasingly personalised, and only a human professional would know what is best for an event that celebrates a very human emotion: love.

Weddings moving online creates a win-win situation — couples who have done their research on the internet have a clearer idea about what they want and what is available, and that makes a wedding planner's job easier.

Michelle Poh is a wedding planner at Hitched Weddings & Parties

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