



w&h NEW DIRECTIONS

Wedding BELLES!

Three women tell Stephanie van der Plank how they've made it their business to ensure that couples tying the knot have the perfect day



THE MARRIAGE OFFICER

'I make a living conducting weddings!'

FIONA BRIGGS, 53, is married to Rod, 61. They are both registered marriage officers, and live together in Ballito.

THE IDEA When my daughter was getting married a few years ago, she struggled to find a marriage officer who'd give her the light-hearted, but meaningful, and not overtly religious ceremony she was after. Many of the people she contacted wouldn't marry her and her fiancé unless they were members of a specific church, or agreed to attend weeks of premarital counselling. Eventually, she found a lady to marry them, but the difficulty made me realise there was huge gap in the market. I'd worked as a spiritual counsellor for 14 years, and many couples I'd counselled had asked if I could marry them. With this as a vote of confidence, I decided to look into registering as a marriage officer myself.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT The Department of Home Affairs handles the registration, but I discovered that you must have the backing of your church or religious group for your application to go through; even if you aim to eventually offer the choice of less-religious services as well. You also have to be a member of the church who's sponsoring your application for at least six months. When I applied, I hadn't been a member of my church for the required period, so it was an 18-month wait to get registered – if you've been a member for



START-UP BREAKDOWN

Website: R8 500

Advertising: R8 000

longer, the process is shorter. While I waited, I fleshed out my business plan. I felt it would be a good idea to offer more than one service to make the start-up viable. I decided to include christenings, baby-naming ceremonies, and funeral services, although this would mean I'd need help, so Rod decided to become a registered marriage officer as well. We'd run the business – called Hatches, Matches & Dispatches – together, with our core focus being on wedding ceremonies to meet the needs of all couples, whether they wanted a Christian, non-religious, or interfaith service. I couldn't take bookings until I was officially registered, and as many couples book their weddings up to a year in advance, I was forced to turn some away. Eventually, I took my first booking for 13 December 2011 and my registration came through on the 10th! I gave up my job as a spiritual counsellor and used my savings to fund the start-up, while Rod still kept his lecturing job to bring in a steady income. When we first started, we advertised in several local bridal magazines and in newspapers, and we paid for online ads. I went to the Rain Farm Bridal Fair, and NWJ Bridal and Events Show, to network and gain exposure. Enquiries gradually increased, but word of mouth was our strongest tool – the more weddings we did, the more bookings we secured.

BREAKTHROUGH MOMENT A couple who I'd married contacted me a few years later to ask if I'd christen their new baby. Up until that point, I'd only officiated weddings. It

was our first christening, and it was very rewarding to be a part of their child's life too. It also cemented our business model in providing more services.

WHERE I AM NOW Of the 230 marriages our company conducted last year, I personally officiated 190 of them. It seems like a large number, but our packages range from 10-minute registrations held in our private offices, to full-scale wedding ceremonies at various venues. Our services include officiating the ceremony and filing the legal paperwork. Because you can't legally charge for the official signing of a marriage, our fee covers the time it takes to create a bespoke ceremony, the leg-work involved with handling the documents, as well as any travel costs. Joining two people in marriage is the

greatest job I could imagine. It takes a certain kind of person to stand up in front of a crowd and take command. All eyes are on you and, sometimes, the conditions make it quite difficult. I've held ceremonies in high winds on the beach, watching the tide creep closer and closer – I once even had my briefcase taken out to sea!

GLITCHES I always stress to couples that the paperwork needs to be in order, so we can register their marriages. But they have so much going on that they often forget to supply the correct documents. To make things simpler, we've created a comprehensive list on our website, detailing which documents, photos and forms need to be handed to us before we can perform the wedding. And I always ask for the paperwork to be provided at least one week before the wedding, so that we can issue the official marriage certificate on the day. We want to be able to oversee the legal side of things, so that the pair has one less thing to worry about on their special day.

TIP Word of mouth is powerful, so always keep in mind that you represent your brand, and must maintain its integrity.

BUSINESS IN FIGURES

Launched: 2011

Turnover: 40% increase in the last year

Start-up costs: R16 500

Website: marriageofficersa.co.za >>