

This group of independent wedding planners set a new standard for small gatherings

Meet the Small Wedding Society, a collaborative showcasing brands and promoting the “microweddings” movement.

BY STEPHANIE CAIN

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GRETCHEN CULVER

Founder
Rocket Science Events & Minne Weddings



In early March 2020, coronavirus restrictions on gatherings halted all-things nuptial. The wedding industry, worth some \$80 billion in the U.S., didn't have a playbook for hosting events that didn't follow a fairly standard timeline. For couples, it seemed as if the options were to wait for a big wedding at an unknown future date or head to the courthouse for a ceremony, sans decor, and, some would

say, stripped of the fun.

That's when five wedding planners in an accountability group decided to promote a new category of wedding. It would emphasize just as much luxury and joy, but cap out with 30 or fewer guests and include only the absolutely necessary parts of a wedding: a couple, a ceremony, a toast, and a photographer to capture it. They'd call it a microwedding.

Gretchen Culver looks like the type of wedding planner your impossibly cool friend would hire. Her platinum-blond hair, infectious smile, and affinity for colorful, modern weddings has made her company, [Rocket Science Events](#), a hit where she lives in Minneapolis. Nothing is off the table when it comes to creating a unique wedding experience. She wants guests to feel goose bumps when they walk into one of her rooms. She once hosted a Minnesota State Fair–inspired wedding at a boxing gym with a photo booth staged in the back of a vintage [Volkswagen](#) bus. Even if that wasn't your wedding style, you definitely wanted to be a guest eating fried Oreos at cocktail hour.

**This season,
the wedding
industry is all
about
intimate
events—
gatherings of
10 or fewer
that feel
elevated,
celebratory,
and a worthy
substitute for
the “big
dream
wedding.”**

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Her company was admired by many in the industry. But the coronavirus didn't have

mercy on professionals like Culver who had created iconic wedding brands or had dozens of couples on the books for 2020. When large gatherings were dubbed the

ultimate no-no for fear of transmitting the virus, all [wedding businesses took a hit](#). It seemed weddings, in general, were banned.

Culver logged on to her weekly accountability group.

The Internet was aflutter with opinions on coronavirus lockdown restrictions. For weeks, wedding vendors screamed #SaveEvents from the rooftops, [petitioning government officials](#) to allow live events to continue. There was some success: Local governments, including New York City's, reopened their marriage bureaus with virtual appointments to issue marriage certificates. After all, you could say "I do" at home with the couple and an officiant via a video-streaming service.

The accountability group had a lot to discuss. To start, though, calling it an accountability group would be almost a misnomer. That's how they refer to themselves, but really they are much more. They are a handful of wedding planners who all live in different parts of the country. They met taking an online business sales course, where they had to form a study group for the duration of the class. It all happened organically. Valerie Gernhauser, owner of [Sapphire Events](#) in New Orleans, knew Beth Bernstein, who runs [SQN Events](#) in Chicago. They decided to partner for the project, and Bernstein pulled in Culver. Since they also knew of Amy Nichols, who oversees her [namesake planning company](#) in San Francisco, they asked her to be a part of it. Then Wendy Kay, of [Birds of a Feather](#) in Dallas, and the two founders behind [Invision Events](#) joined. After the course ended, the group didn't. Five years later, they are just as much friends and colleagues as they are task managers for one another.

While many vendors in the industry seemed to dwell on the negatives of the situation, these women aren't the type to throw a pity party. Gernhauser, a Yale-trained attorney turned event planner, is a go-getter who already runs two wildly successful planning companies and teaches profitability courses to hundreds of other vendors. She means way more business than her charming Southern accent lets on. Bernstein, evoking shades of a bubbly Sarah Jessica Parker, left advertising to plan parties after she tapped into the creative side of her brain—and never wanted to leave. That was in 2009. Kay became one of the top wedding planners nationwide after producing live television for a decade, and it's easy to see how the skill set for those two careers are connected. Nichols said goodbye to a New York City finance career to move home to California, where she'd grown up on an idyllic-

City, finance career to move home to California, where she'd grown up on an organic-sounding avocado and lemon farm. She realized that creating spreadsheets for events celebrating life's biggest moments just might be more fulfilling.

Needless to say, none of these women were going to sit around and watch their businesses suffer. They asked, How can we pivot? There had to be something they could do.

The very nature of a wedding involves hugging and kissing dozens of people, drinking and toasting together, and sweating it out on a dance floor—all things we can't imagine doing now.

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That's when Culver brought her idea to the virtual table. She had heard of a planner in Birmingham, Ala., who would book a venue for the day and host multiple weddings, each with their own time slot. It was sort of an elevated version of the Graceland Wedding Chapel in Las Vegas. Culver thought she could make the idea amenable to “pandemic couples,” those whose wedding plans were severely altered owing to the coronavirus outbreak.

At the end of the day, a marriage license and a wedding are independent undertakings that don't have to happen simultaneously. A couple can get married without a party involving 300 people, a live band, and dozens of flower arrangements. Even if a couple wants some celebratory details, such as a wedding cake, it still doesn't mean they need full-bar service, 10 bridesmaids, and their

sunny as ever beaver. What exactly would a couple really want in order to feel as if

puppy as ring bearer. What exactly would a couple really want in order to feel as if they'd had a wedding, without the extra fanfare that was currently restricted?

Turns out, it was easier to determine than they'd thought. The group got together to identify the most meaningful parts of the wedding day versus the fluff. Bernstein likened it to the snapshot moments your parents would want in their wedding album. The answer: the couple, a ceremony, a cake cutting, a Champagne toast, family and/or close friends, and a photographer and videographer to capture the day. Everything else didn't matter as much.

"You literally get your marriage license, wear whatever you want, and invite a few people," Culver says of their idea for a microwedding. "It's that simple."

Five members of the group—Culver, Bernstein, Gernhauser, Nichols, and Kay—jumped on the opportunity to launch companies focused on this concept and proceeded to text, call, or **Zoom** every single day. Gernhauser calls the process "incredibly energizing," and Bernstein says it was "thrilling." As independent planners, dubbed solo-preneurs, they don't often have the opportunity to work with other planners on group projects.

"You're normally so siloed in what you are doing," Bernstein says. "We learned from each other. We stretched creatively. We rethought formulaic events as business owners. It was exciting."

A
screenshot
of a Zoom
meeting
attended
by the five
Small
Wedding
Society
planners.

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OF SMALL
WEDDING
SOCIETY

The concept wasn't tested, but the women, judging from their collective experience in the wedding industry, knew they were on to a service bigger than a pandemic

trend. It was more, says Bernstein, than spinning off a new business entity. She felt it could ultimately change the terminology of the industry, and she led the charge to simultaneously launch the [Small Wedding Society](#), a collective that would promote the idea of microweddings and serve as a model for other vendors. Though the American wedding industry is worth billions, it's largely made up of thousands of small businesses, mom-and-pop shops that design wedding cakes, tailor tuxedos, and arrange flowers. It would be important to codify small weddings and create an educational arm that works in parallel to their individual companies booking clients. Plus, she says, you don't have to be a planner to partake in a microwedding — florists, photographers, DJs, and venues could all find ways to add this to their offerings.

With that, they defined the new wedding terms they heard being thrown about, such as microwedding, elopement, and small wedding. It's all laid out on their [Small Wedding Society website](#), but the difference comes down to the itinerary of the day. A small or mini wedding is a traditional wedding, with all the bells and whistles, but a smaller number of guests (50 or fewer). That means there will still be a formal reception, with entertainment, full meal, and dancing, if allowed by coronavirus restrictions. It will look and feel like the quintessential wedding, just with fewer people in the receiving line.

A microwedding is more in line with an elopement, if an elopement had a dozen or so guests: It's a condensed day with the focus on the ceremony and the couple. Add to that a few small details to celebrate, like a petite cake or a bottle of [Dom Pérignon](#). Some may include a first dance with a portable speaker. It's nowhere near the detailed timeline or number of vendors of a traditional wedding, and that's okay. It's its own kind of event.

Though Culver came to them with the idea, she hardly knew how to execute. They banded together because, after all, lots of hands make for light work. Since previously planned events had stalled, they do admit they each had an equitable amount of time to devote to working on the project, something they would never have had access to prior to the pandemic. They ended up pulling 15-hour workdays full of Zoom calls.

It wasn't explicitly stated, but each member played to her strengths. Kay was influential in determining how to design the day in a way that felt modern and fresh but also didn't impact the workload for the vendor teams. Gernhauser, considered the go-to numbers gal within the group, built spreadsheets on profitability and led

the go-to numbers for the group, but spreadsheets on profitability and financial discussions, something Culver says was one of the highlights. (“It was nice to talk safely about the financial piece, because people do not like to talk about money,” she adds.) Plus, Gernhauser had already created a sister events company, [Ruby & Pearl](#), so she understood how to make the brands feel connected yet maintain their own visions.

Bernstein is the best writer of the group, so she led the charge on composing website copy as well as editing and sending press releases to journalists at wedding publications, in hopes they might cover the launch. The group laid out guidelines for how their new microwedding brands would fit under the umbrella of their current brands and developed decks to pitch venues about how their microwedding concept would work. Group members highlighted the challenges of working in their respective locations given cities’ ever-changing coronavirus restrictions. “We were ready to make a splash,” Bernstein says.

By April 17, just four weeks after much of the country went into lockdown, they had launched the Small Wedding Society and their respective mini-wedding brands: Minne Weddings in Minneapolis, Essential I Dos in Chicago, Minimal Matrimony in New Orleans, Tiny Weddings Dallas in Texas, and Intimate I Dos in San Francisco. It was only possible, they say, because they were able to collaborate on building a business model they could apply to their various markets.

Take Culver’s Minne Weddings as an example. Culver books a day with a venue to host five weddings, each 90 minutes long with time in between to clean, sanitize, and regroup. She designs one room with flowers, a seating area, signage, and other decor. She uses one set of vendors, such as an audiovisual technician and rentals company, to help create the space. She pays one officiant for the day as well as one photography team to shoot all the couples. Each couple gets portraits as well as documentation of the day. A bride will be handed a bouquet that matches the flowers in the room.

After the ceremony, the couple are provided a cake that goes with the day’s theme and a bottle of Champagne to share with their select guests, usually immediate family and close friends. There are a few options for add-ons, such as livestreaming and hors d’oeuvres, but they don’t allow for customization, adhering to the style of the event space. The couple are in charge of their own clothes, hair, makeup, and invitations. The only adaptations they can make are to bring their own officiant, such as a rabbi or other ordained individual, and to share personalized vows during the ceremony. Unlike at a Las Vegas chapel or a courthouse, the newlyweds will not

the ceremony. Coming at a Las Vegas chapel or a courthouse, the newlyweds will not run into another couple in the vestibule on their way out.

“What’s shocking to me is how many people just want a small wedding anyway,” Culver says, noting that this market share was never going to opt for a high-touch, high-design planning experience. “I get so many emails from people saying, ‘Thank you. This is the wedding I have always wanted.’ We’re serving an entirely new market.”

A wedding planner measures floor space to ensure seating complies with social distancing rules.

COURTESY OF MINNE WEDDINGS/CADENCE & ELI

The numbers back it up. The Knot and WeddingWire conducted [a study](#) of couples who were set to marry during the most recent months of the pandemic, finding that one-third of those who went forward with their day opted for microweddings. Some of these couples may have even set their wedding date after the pandemic began, since the study looked at couples with wedding plans between December 2020 and April 2021.

Similarly, the *Wedding Report* found that the industry was on track to lose 1.6 million weddings over the course of 2020 through 2021, as couples opted for “the simplest ways to marry” rather than choosing to hold an event with all the fixings. That tracks accordingly, as it’s approximately one-third of the expected 4.8 million weddings that would take place over the two-year period. The report goes on to note that lost funds from those simpler weddings will likely never be recouped. Those couples won’t be throwing a larger celebration in coming years, resulting in a loss to the industry of approximately \$47 billion in sales.

It’s not surprising from a money standpoint for couples. At a time when finances remain in flux, combined with the already unpredictable nature of the average millennial’s bank account, a microwedding with Minne Weddings, for instance, ticks off a major box: It’s much, much cheaper. Even though Culver doesn’t skimp on the

luxurious nature of the decor, there's just less overall: fewer guests; none of the trappings of a formal reception (such as a band, plated dinner, and open bar with premium liquor); a time frame shortened from six hours to under two; the sharing of fixed costs for the venue and decor. Thus, a microwedding costs between \$5,000 and \$6,000. That doesn't include the couple's outfits or the cost of the marriage license (e.g., \$35 in New York City), but it's a huge difference when compared with the average price of a wedding in the U.S.: \$28,000 in 2019, according to the Knot. And for couples who would have booked Rocket Science or any of the other planners' main businesses, that number could have been in the six-figure range. It's an incredible value for the couple.

It's also a much easier process for the planner. Instead of spending time in endless conversations over do-not-play lists for the DJ and the number of orchids in the bouquet, they have relatively free rein on the design. They can be creative and make decisions more quickly. They don't waste time educating the client as to best practices. For booking, there is no lengthy sales conversion process with emails and phone calls. At MinneWeddings.com, a couple can hit a big "Book Now" button on the home page and just sign the contract online. More than once Culver has woken up in the morning to find someone booked her at 12:45 a.m. Millennials are used to buying things online, she says, so why not the wedding too? It's a consumer behavior the wedding industry has long believed that couples wouldn't adopt.

For the team, it certainly required a shift in mindset, despite the obvious perks, and was a challenge they overcame. Culver, Gernhauser, Bernstein, Kay, and Nichols are used to obsessing over foil colors on beverage napkins and discussing ceiling installations for days. It was customization down to every flower stem. It's this idea of "personalization" that's often pushed by wedding media and the vendors. To create something perfect for you as a couple is synonymous with micromanaging every detail, from the shape of the 3D appliqués on the bridal gown to the type of chocolate used in the after-party brownies. The inferred message: If every touch point doesn't speak to your love story, you have failed as a couple to create a truly personal day.

"We saw [weddings] through a different lens," Gernhauser explains. "We have a couple committed to it, and they are committed to each other. And that is all that matters."

The planners are constantly amassing more anecdotal evidence that there is a demand for this sort of wedding, but Culver notes she has seen the search analytics change too. Terms like "cheap wedding venue," "courthouse wedding," and

change too. Some like cheap wedding venues, courthouse wedding, and “elopement” have diminished in favor of “microwedding.” This type of wedding product didn’t exist until now, but once consumers realized it was possible, they have flocked to it. The group agrees the microwedding business has gone “gangbusters”: Minne Weddings, for instance, is sold out monthly through Dec. 21, 2021, and Tiny Weddings Dallas has a wait list for “future seasons.”

Through the Small Wedding Society, Bernstein and Kay are mentoring other wedding vendors in the process of putting on a microwedding. As soon as their blast went out, announcing they had launched the industry group, Bernstein says vendors rushed in to be a part of it and proudly display Small Wedding Society badges on their websites.

The unpredictable nature of restrictions across the country as states see spikes in cases has affected the individual companies. Strict rules in California have prevented Nichols from executing her dates, and in Louisiana and Texas, allowances for larger in-person gatherings mean fewer couples are forced to cut the guest list by such a huge percentage. A lot of “big weddings” are still happening in Texas. But even if they haven’t booked multiple microweddings in a day like Minne, they have utilized the framework. Gernhauser has hosted individual microweddings in which the couple have chosen features outside of standard Minimal Matrimony offerings. Still these couples are adapting to a truncated event, during which appetizers are served at a reception following a modified second-line parade from the church ceremony. The price per person, she explains, is high enough that she still makes a profit.

When the pandemic hit, one of the first major industries greatly affected was the wedding industry, worth some billion in the U.S.

COURTESY OF MINNE WEDDINGS/CADENCE & ELI

It’s proof, the planners say, that this wedding product can be sold in the future. Even today, as a journalist, I am pitched weekly by publicists about hotels and venues, including some in the Caribbean, touting “microwedding packages” that include the

including some in the Caribbean, touting microwedding packages that include the ceremony setup, small meal, cake, and sparkling wine toast. In a [recent story for Brides.com](#), Kay shared the many benefits the concept has for couples, including less stress overall. There's no time invested in searching for and hiring vendors. Couples only have to read one contract versus one for every company they hire. It's almost like the often-maligned all-inclusive wedding package sold by island resorts, but much trendier and more Instagrammable.

All five planners do believe that the big, fat traditional wedding will make a comeback, and none of them are disbanding their main companies to do microweddings alone. In fact, some can't wait to be mulling over the style of place settings again. But they agree microweddings are here to stay; ultimately, they have just created another vertical for their businesses that will continue to add value, even when weddings return to pre-2020 levels.

Gernhauser compared it all to other historical shifts we have seen in our lifetimes. Airport security has never been the same after Sept. 11, 2001. No one applies for a mortgage the way they did before the 2008 credit crisis. Weddings won't look exactly the way they did pre-pandemic, but they will be improved, and that improvement will stay until another major cultural shift occurs. For the accountability group, it has been about embracing a forward-thinking mentality; Bernstein admits they had no time to dwell in the doom and gloom. (Of course, there have been plenty of naysayers and Debbie Downers.)

Through it all, the women have stayed in constant contact, through text, email, social media, and a weekly happy hour via Zoom; they haven't missed a single week since lockdown started. "Because of this pandemic and our consistency, we are way stronger than we have ever been with our relationship in the group," Gernhauser says. "I never expected this to be one of the silver linings, but I'm very glad that it happened. It's very encouraging and supporting to have professional colleagues you can turn to."

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