Washington Post Feature

Breaking the ice: Many couples try games, activities to make reception fun, comfortable

By Associated Press, Updated: Tuesday, October 2, 9:57 AM

At Bernie and Jordan Hajovsky's wedding reception, it was useful to know details about the happy couple: Guests had to answer questions about them before they could join the buffet line.

The newlyweds hoped the trivia game and other activities would make the reception more memorable.

"I really wanted people to walk away feeling they had been involved and that it was the most fun wedding reception they had ever attended," said Jordan Hajovsky, of Austin, Texas.

Games, contests and other icebreakers have become increasingly popular at wedding receptions, said Sarabeth Quattlebaum, spokeswoman for the American Association of Certified Wedding Planners, in Dallas.

"Couples want a party atmosphere and have realized that the more guests mix and mingle, the more relaxed they'll be," said Quattlebaum, owner of Sarabeth Events in Keller, Texas. "This also adds a personal touch to their reception party."

Disc jockey Peter Merry says more and more couples are asking him to help organize reception activities, such as contests to win table centerpieces or asking guests to serenade the bride and groom with songs that include the word love in the lyrics. Other couples are incorporating photo booths, where guests can have their pictures taken in silly hats and holding goofy props.

With guests from different phases of their lives who may not know each other, brides and grooms want to provide opportunities to interact.

"If you can break down any discomfort, guests will stay longer and have more fun on the dance floor," said Merry, of Dallas, author of "The Best Wedding Reception Ever" (Sellers, 2010).

DJ Jimmie Malone, who owns the company Exceptional Receptions in Binghamton, N.Y., encourages couples to include activities to set the tone and help balance the wedding's "pomp and circumstance."

"It keeps guests engaged," Malone said.

Stephanie Goetz of Binghamton said the games at her 2011 wedding "helped break the ice. Between the different families and friends, the majority of people didn't know each other. It was a lot of fun."

Malone sometimes leads guests through an elaborate game in which they must pass a drink, a set of car keys and a dollar bill around the table. He keeps the crowd laughing and guessing about what the items mean. At the end, he announces that the person holding the money is "$1 richer" and that the holder of the drink must serve as the table's bartender for the evening. The person with the car keys? Malone tells them jokingly, "Congratulations you just won a new car."

The centerpiece goes to the "generous person" who donated the $1.

If you can get guests "laughing early in the night, it sets the tone for the rest of the reception," he said.

At other receptions, he has organized a version of "Let's Make a Deal," rewarding guests who can produce an expired driver's license or the oldest penny in the room.

Of course, the games may not work for all the guests.

"It's very easy for people to duck out," Malone said. "If a table chooses not to play," it's not a problem.

Most times, the games help create a sense of camaraderie at the table where guests may not know one another, he said.

Along with trivia, the Hajovskys arranged for an instructor to teach line dances. Jordan Hajovsky loved watching her new friends interact with her college friends and family.

“It got everybody on the dance floor,” she recalled of her March 30 wedding.

Quattlebaum likened the trend to decades-old traditions such as stealing the groom’s shoes at an Indian wedding, or lifting the bride and groom in chairs while dancing at a Jewish wedding.

“These are all examples of wedding guests coming together as strangers and doing something to unite each one of them by working together toward a common goal or game,” she said.

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