

# WHAT'S NEXT FOR WEDDINGS: PHONE-FREE MOMENTS AND FAR-FLUNG LOCALES

*Shan-Lyn Ma, the co-founder and chief executive of the online wedding business Zola Inc., discusses the future of proposals, gift-giving and ceremonies*



ILLUSTRATION: MARK WEAVER

## AUTHOR

LEIGH KAMPING-CARDER

## PUBLISHED

JULY 25, 2019 9:57 AM ET

## READING TIME

8 MINUTE READ

It's wedding season. If you're in a certain age bracket, chances are you'll be attending at least one ceremony this summer. The wedding industry is a multi-billion-dollar juggernaut, yet few startups have been able to shake it up.

Zola Inc. is one of a handful of companies to buck the trend. Chief Executive Shan-Lyn Ma co-founded the online wedding registry in 2013. Since then, the site has expanded to offer wedding planning tools, and earlier this year started selling wedding apparel, accessories and decor. The

company, which has raised roughly \$140 million at a valuation of \$600 million, makes money on the registry items they sell. The Wall Street Journal named Zola one of 25 technology companies to watch in 2017.

Up against entrenched competitors like Target Corp. , Walmart Inc. and Amazon.com Inc., as well as the wedding marketplace The Knot, Zola offered couples a way to register for “experiences” and cash funds. Guests can now gift more than 80,000 items from 800 brands, including Spotify gift cards and helicopter tours, plus cash funds for down payments or honeymoons, and traditional items like blenders and high-end china. Zola has partnered with former rivals such as Crate & Barrel to sell their products directly on its marketplace. More than 1 million couples have used the site since launch, according to Ms. Ma. In January, the company opened a six-month pop-up shop in Manhattan that offered visitors the chance to 3D-print custom cake toppers, assemble a wedding playlist and even get hitched. (Three of the salespeople were ordained as Universal Life ministers, though Ms. Ma said that no couples took advantage.)

NEWSLETTER SIGN-UP

Ms. Ma, 42, previously worked at Gilt Groupe, where she founded the flash-sales site’s now-defunct Gilt Taste division. She spoke with The Future of Everything about the effects of the destination-wedding boom, the end of wedding etiquette and the utility of a pop-up shop.

## **First Comes Planning, Then Comes the Proposal**

What has been standard wedding etiquette for a long time is going to go out the window. The age of couples getting married is older and older. The majority of couples today live together before they get married and have both parts of the couple working. They’re living on their mobile devices. Couples today have no time for etiquette do’s and don’ts. Increasingly we’ll see brides proposing to grooms. We already see brides proposing to brides. We’ll see more couples book their wedding venues that they love before they’re even officially engaged. And they’ll start designing their save-the-date before they get engaged. They’ll prefer coordinating their wedding planners and their florists and their honeymoons over a mobile interface that allows them to both chat with these coordinators as well as take action from images of weddings that they see on their phones. They’ll probably be doing this while they’re watching TV or hanging out together. People will send [thank-you notes] whenever they feel like, and not be bound by etiquette there. Today, couples are very pragmatic, they’re very busy, and they want to lock in the venue that they love

on the date that they want to get married. This tradition of, you have to wait until the bended knee is something that people no longer feel is as important.

## **Wedding Dresses Will Give Way to Wedding Wardrobes**

We do see an increasing number of destination weddings. Couples are getting married older, so they tend to be willing to invest more in their wedding and they want to make it a special, memorable experience. The world in which you could potentially get married gets bigger. This also informs the length of the wedding or the number of events that are part of the wedding. More and more, we see the guest list is invited to many more events that used to be just reserved for the wedding party or the immediate family. There is a move away from this single, expensive, fantasy dress towards multiple wedding outfits at more accessible price points. It's unlikely you'll wear the same dress to your rehearsal dinner as well as to the wedding the next day as well as to the brunch the day after that. Also, in the Instagram era, there has been this shift towards being photographed in a different outfit at the different events. More than half the brides we surveyed are considering shopping for multiple wedding outfits.

## **Get Ready for Phone-Free Ceremonies**

Right now we're at peak social media for weddings. Wedding hashtags are like the new domain name for your wedding website. Guests are broadcasting the wedding while at the wedding. This is making the job of the professional wedding photographer harder. They're trying to capture the couple coming down the aisle, and they're also trying to avoid the hundreds of phones sticking up in the air from the crowd. What this will lead to over time is, couples will increasingly ask guests not to be taking videos or photos during certain key moments of the wedding. Potentially, even you could see more and more phone-free weddings.

## **Registering for “Experiences” Won’t Just Be a Millennial Thing**

When we first started Zola, there were still some comments that we would hear from guests wanting to only gift china or crystal. And now I almost never hear that. The overwhelming majority of wedding registries that we see on Zola have a mix of traditional products like the blender or the mixer or the vacuum cleaner, next to modern products like a Sonos speaker or camping gear or experiences like SoulCycle or Airbnb or cash funds or honeymoon funds. It's actually very consistent [across Generation X, millennials and Generation Z]. Everyone wants this mix that really reflects who they are as a couple. If they are a couple that loves to go camping together, you will see a lot of camping gear on their registry. Many couples are into barware and cocktail mixology. You'll see both a mix of crystal glasses along with cool bar carts along with mixology cocktail classes on their registry.

# Online Shopping Will Be Increasingly Personal...

We do have a big push in machine learning within our technology team and platform to be able to understand, based on what couples add to a registry, what brands and products we know they love. We can use technology to surface to them the things we think they would be most interested in. [One of our most popular features is] called Blender, which is like a Tinder for registry gifts. You can swipe right or swipe left on different items you could consider adding to a registry. That brings an element of serendipity into things, which is another thing that we know is important in ecommerce. And then we also have this feature that lets couples pull in any brands or products that they might not see on Zola through an “add to Zola” button, similar to the Pinterest “pin it” button. Through that, we get insight into the things people are registering for through their Zola registries that they don’t currently see on Zola. Let’s use that insight to go and get those brands [which we did with Airbnb and Crate & Barrel].

---

## MORE FORWARD THINKING

---

- Domino's CEO Doesn't Want a Robot Making Your Pizza
  - ESPN President Courts a New Generation of Sports Fans
  - A Researcher's Hunt for Extraterrestrial Intelligence
- 

## ...While Brick-and-Mortar Will Be a Testing Ground

For us it doesn’t make sense to have a retail store 365 days a year because couples tend to want to plan everything to do with their wedding during a certain time of year, namely the period in which a lot of engagements tend to happen. Each time we’ve done a pop-up, we haven’t sold anything in

that store. It’s been an experience where you can set up your registry, you can add products from the store to your registry, you can buy through iPads in the store. The trend here for us is thinking about bricks-and-mortar and pop-ups as more similar to a product or software development process, where each time you’re putting something up, you’ve iterated, you’ve gotten feedback, you’ve tested things. Each time it’s performing better than the previous time because of this constant iteration of the product. We can see how many couples created a wedding registry or designed their wedding websites on Zola in the store or designed their save-the-dates or invitations. We can also see, of the people that came to the store, what did their wedding registries look like versus those that might not have come into the store.

*This interview has been condensed and edited.*

*Forward Thinking is an interview series from The Future of Everything where noteworthy figures from business, culture and technology reveal what lies ahead.*

Copyright © 2019 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <https://www.djreprints.com>.