Fashion Outlook

Attendant worries

Bridesmaids want versatile dresses

The second-biggest problem with being "always a bridesmaid and never a bride" is buying one of those ditsy and often pricey -- bridesmaids' dresses.

"It always costs more than you think it will," says Karla Bausman, a 30-year-old New York City executive who recently was a bridesmaid for the sixth - and she swears last time. "Of the six dresses, all were custom-made," she says, "One was a pink silk copy of the Princess of Wales' wedding dress and cost about \$350, not including the accessories or shoes. I've never worn any of them again."

Most bridesmaids are too polite to tell the bride they don't like the style of the dress she's chosen for them nor should they. However, if price is a real concern, prospective bridesmaids should let the bride know; she in turn should be understanding if a friend can't be in the bridal party for financial reasons. But behind these etiquette guidellnes, there's always been plenty of whispering and even teeth-clenching.

In recent years, however, manufacturers have offered bridemaids' dresses that are stylish enough to be worn again as party dresses. They are taking their cues from current fashions - most recently, with pours, bubble skirts and floral prints.

Some are even breaking a taboo and offering bridesmaids' dresses in black, the most popular choice for evening dresses, but traditionally shunned for weddings because of its connotation of mourning. "For an evening hotel wedding, black is great why not?" says Vivan Dessy Diamond, vice president and designer at Desay Creations, which has manufactured bridesmaids' dresses for almost 50 years.

One reason for this change is that bridesmalds, like brides, are older and less willing to tolerate Bo Peep styles. While no separate figures exist for bridesmaids, the industry reports that the average bride today is 23 years old - up from only 18 in the 1950s.

"In general, bridesmalds' dresses the last couple of seasons have become much more sophisticated than in the past," observes Michele Piccione, vice president of design for Alfred Angelo, a Pennsylvania-based manufacturer of bridal and bridesmaids' apparel. For instance, she notes, the strapless, bustier look currently popular in evening fashion "has filtered into the bridesmaids' market." While black bridesmalds' dresses remain something of a rarity, black-and-white dresses have become relatively popular.

Seven years ago, Lynn Bonner Pitts and Terry Banta started a company to make bridesmaids' dresses specifically designed to be wearable again outside the wedding chapel. The secret of Currie-Bonner, their Atlantabased company: top-quality fabrics, including many designed for upholstery, such as heavy chintzes and moires. "To keep prices down, on the assumption that the dress probably won't be worn again, many other companies use inexpensive fabrics," Pitts explains.

Despite stylistic breakthroughs, some brides find choosing bridesmaids' dresses to be almost as diffi-

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about what the latter's dresses should look like.

With today's return to traditional, up to 44.) formal weddings, a bride is apt to envision dresses that are festive and sometimes virginal, and complement her own classically styled dress.

plicated by the fact that the dress's mally stand with their backs partially style and color must be flattering to several young women, presumably in-

cult as choosing a husband. The main cluding a range of figures and comreason is that brides and bridesmalds plexions. (Pregnant bridesmalds frequently have different notions aren't unheard of; overweight bridesmalds are so common that last year Alfred Angelo extended its size range

Tradition dictates that bridesmaids' dresses be designed with some

of their most interesting features at The bride's mission is further com- the back, because bridesmaids nortoward the guests in the church. Today's bridesmaid, however, is more

concerned with what the front of her dress looks like.

As with some bridal gowns, removable pieces are sometimes used to make a bridesmaids' dress that is traditional in appearance for the wedding and modern-looking for after. But in the end, says Piccione, a wornan who is too concerned about getting mileage out of her bridesmalds' dress may have no business accepting the honor in the first place.

"The most important thing is still

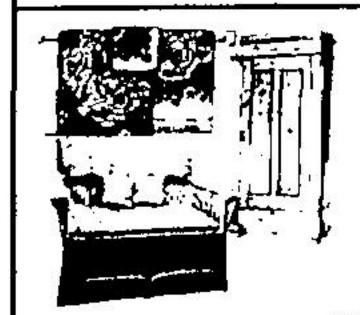
that the bride has the look that she wants for her wedding," says Picclone. "I would hate to think of a bride compromising, and making her wedding more casual than she wanted, just to be practical.

"Part of being a bridesmaid may be buying a dress you may never wear again.

As for Bausman, the six-timebridesmaid, the experience has been educational: "When I get married, I'm going to elope."



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