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WEB EXCLUSIVE

A New Look Unveiled

By B. J. Sigesmund
Newsweek, March 10, 2000

For years, the New York Times's weddings section has been notoriously wooden. Besides the hugely popular "Vows" column, which the country's romance-minded cuddle up to over coffee every Sunday morning, the announcements have presented bare-bone facts with utter banality. Readers learned where the bride and groom went to college, what they do professionally and who their parents are—but got virtually no feeling for their personalities and certainly no dishy details about the couple's courtship. "The world of meeting someone, falling for them and getting married has been very under-reported," says Lois Smith Brady, who's been writing a "Vows" story a week for nearly eight years. "I'm always in favor of more information about people's personal lives."



The New York Times's wedding section gets a grooming (Corbis)

Last month, the Times started offering a good deal more in the Weddings section. From now on, up to one-fifth of the regular listings will be longer and offer intimate information about what makes the twosome tick: how they met, what drew them to each other, even who proposed to whom and how. One recent new-style entry read: "Although the bride, 26, and the bridegroom, 27, grew up two streets away from each other on the Upper East Side and had friends in common, they did not meet until they had adjacent seats in their first law school class in September 1995." The accompanying photographs, which in the past have all looked stiff and staged, will also be more casual. Editors have started asking for several images in different settings. The couple mentioned above was pictured with their dog.

While the tweaks are small, their significance seems large. After all, this is the New York Times—the barometer by which much of American culture is measured. "The idea was to loosen up the format," says Trip Gabriel, editor of the paper's Styles section, where the Weddings pages appear. "It's been rigid and formulaic for years. The thought was to borrow some of the subject matter in 'Vows' and insert it in some of the shorter announcements."

Although they're treading on her territory, Brady is all for updating the items. Honest information about couples, she believes, clears up many misconceptions about romance. "There's not a lot of truth out there," she says. "Even your best friends don't tell you everything. People exaggerate. They say, 'It was love at first sight.' In 'Vows,' people come out and bust all those clichés." In her columns, she features couples who've met on subways or on the street and have highs, lows, break-ups and breakdowns before finally deciding to marry. "The columns that are most successful," she says, "[show that love] doesn't have to be this overpowering potion that hits you and makes you dizzy."

Even with more "Vows"-like listings, the number of announcements

in the Times won't increase in the new format, says Gabriel. He also doesn't expect the section's page count to rise. "Weddings aren't the *raison d'être*

of the Styles section," Gabriel says. Still, competition to get listed has always been heated--and will probably get hotter with the section's new accessibility. During the height of wedding season from June to September, the Times gets calls from seven times more couples than can be fit into the pages. "If you really want to get your wedding into the Times," Gabriel says, "get married on Easter Sunday." The new changes also have nothing to do with advertising, Gabriel says. Even though the number of weddings in 2000 is way up and several new bridal magazines have hit newsstands, he says "the marching orders did not come from the advertising department."

What do some of New York's newlyweds think of the section's new breeziness? Melissa Levis, who was featured in "Vows" in 1998, says she enjoys the expanded listings because they demonstrate "how random and serendipitous love is. You never know where you're going to meet someone." Jennifer Lach (a former Newsweek who met her husband because he was then a driver for the magazine's car service) appeared in "Vows" last October. She says she thinks "some of the pictures are a little odd," but liked and laughed at the shots of couples hugging on the beach. Marit McCabe, another 1999 "Vows" alum, isn't in love with the changes. "It's supposed to be more personal but it doesn't feel that way," she said. McCabe dislikes the pacing in the section. "It seems very abrupt to have these succinct old-style ones with ones in the newer style. Also, in a lot of these pieces, it's like, 'He proposed, she cried, they ate leftovers.'" It's more detailed information, but not necessarily information that you need."

General reader reaction has also been mixed, according to Robert Woletz, another Times editor who oversees Weddings. "Some have sent letters telling us how much they enjoy reading about how these unions began," he says. "Others are disappointed to read about the stickier details of how relationships progress." Maybe those people should stick with the A section.

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