

"Virtual Bridesmaid" by Alexandra Samuel  
for Todradio, "Ceremony"  
Broadcast on CBC Radio One, June 5, 2001

Imagine asking your best friend to be your bridesmaid. And then imagine discovering she's selling Amway during your reception. That's exactly how I felt. My bridesmaid let me down.

I'm Alexandra Samuel in Vancouver, a newlywed, a nuptial survivor. When I chose my bridesmaid, I turned to one of my most faithful companions, the Internet.

Like any dependable girl friend, the Net stood by me all the way up to my engagement. Technically, my husband and I met online - through an office intranet. Our first kiss took place while we were searching the Net for domain names. And I decided to pop the question very shortly after my now-husband finally joined me in the ranks of Mac users.

So I expected that the Net would play a central role in our wedding, too. But we rapidly discarded the most obvious options: getting married online - too impersonal (I think your sound suggestions may be too subtle; we may want to use a gong...or something like that?) ; or webcasting the ceremony - too tacky (gong)); or writing our vows in computer-ese - too confusing for our guests (gong).

Pretty soon, the Net's role had been scaled back - from guardian angel to bridesmaid. And like any bride, I expected my bridesmaid to help with the major hurdles: finding a dress, organizing the reception, and planning the ceremony. Since this bridesmaid was not going to be forced into a peach polyester dress, I counted on full cooperation.

It started off well. Dress shopping is every bridesmaid's favorite activity, and the Net was no different. I was deluged with online options: from wedding portals like the Knot, with its gallery of designs, to dress discounters, with guaranteed shipping dates. Of course, there's something to be said for real-life try-ons - but it's easy to try on dresses in the real world, and then buy your favourite at a better price online.

Then it came time for party planning. Once again, the Net showered me with ideas. Where to find musicians. How to arrange the seating to accommodate my divorced parents. Where to find a karaoke dj whose idea of style did not include a blue tuxedo.

With my style and social dilemmas resolved, I was prepared to take my virtual bridesmaid into my emotional confidence. I sat down at my keyboard, and

tentatively typed my question in Net-speak: "wedding." "jewish." "inter-faith."  
"vows."

The only relevant hit was a book for sale on Amazon.com, if I didn't mind waiting six weeks. But by this point the wedding was only two weeks away. I scaled back my demands; get some general advice, I figured, and we can wing it.

I dropped the word "vows" from my search, and up popped a bunch of sites: I could shop online for a huppah, a Jewish wedding canopy. I could buy a prayer shawl for my husband. I could book a Kosher caterer.

But I couldn't help noticing that none of these potential purchases would solve our desperate need for meaningful, interfaith wedding vows. The clock was ticking. I needed wedding vows, I needed some Jewish flavoring, and I needed to get on a plane to our wedding in Toronto. In other words, I needed immediate spiritual guidance.

And that's when I discovered my bridesmaid's secret: even without the organza dress, the Net was all fluff. Surfing madly between wedding sites, I found etiquette tips galore. I found dresses, makeup advice, and books for sale. But honest, expert, heart-felt advice? Everything my virtual bridesmaid offered came with a price tag or a commercial tie-in. It was a betrayal. My virtual bridesmaid gave me no spiritual insight, did nothing to calm my nerves in my hour of need.

Yet I still included my bridesmaid in our wedding. We used a photograph of a Palm Pilot as the graphic for our wedding invitations. We bought our own domain and encouraged guests to RSVP by e-mail. Our wedding favours were CDs that we burned ourselves, and I'm constructing our wedding album as an interactive web site.

Do I sound forgiving? Well here's all the revenge I need in three words: peach organza I-mac.

For Todradio-dot-com, this is Alexandra Samuel in Vancouver.