

‘Desperate’, unsupported SA wedding industry facing mass closures, job losses

JOHANNESBURG, 15 July 2020 – Sixty-one out of 62 wedding industry professionals have been strongly affected by lockdown and Covid-19, reveals a poll conducted by Crazy Grape Media. As a follow-up to The South African Wedding Industry Report 2020, the survey investigated the impact of Covid-19 on 62 businesses in the wedding industry, which effectively remains closed.

Released on 1 June 2020, in association with The Wedding Expo, The South African Wedding Industry Report 2020 highlighted the massive impact the R20 billion-plus wedding industry sector has on the South African economy. Yet this sector continues to be overlooked by government and tourism authorities. The report suggested, however, that the wedding industry had the potential to help South African tourism – and by extension the economy – recover from the Covid-19 pandemic. Yet as long as it remains neglected, its potential for a full post-Covid recovery will continue to diminish, as this new poll illustrates.

Primarily based in Gauteng and the Western Cape, the survey respondents included wedding planners, venue managers, photographers, make-up artists, florists, decor hire specialists, caterers and bridal boutique companies. The survey, conducted over June 2020, showed that while 44.26% of respondents did not envisage their businesses closing, the remaining respondents projected their businesses would close within one (11.48%), three (21.31%) or six months (22.95%) should the sector remain closed.

‘Desperation’ and ‘devastation’ were words that repeatedly popped up when respondents were asked to share insights on their experiences. Between cancellations, postponements and requests for booking refunds, the industry is undoubtedly suffering.

In order to survive, almost half of respondents said they had temporarily reduced employment or increased their marketing efforts. Over a third had also shifted their business focus or added new products or services to their offerings. Still, more than 96% of respondents expected their 2020 turnover to be impacted by an average of 70%. Almost 80% of respondents said they had yet to receive any form of financial support from government or any other bodies or organisations. With more than 32% of respondents employing up to 20 permanent staff and half employing up to five freelancers, the knock-on economic effect is undeniable.

“The weddings and events industry needs to open by October to allow the majority of companies to survive,” said one survey respondent. “Stress, uncertainty and a lack of governmental support have been major factors in daily life.”

Commenting on the dilemma facing the industry, Western Cape-based wedding planner and director of Trunk Events, Tracy Branford, bemoaned South Africa’s lack of an official wedding association or council to lobby on behalf of the sector. “That’s been quite sad in these times because I feel like there are very few people who are doing anything and being activists for the industry,” she said. That’s why Branford has committed to filling this role.

At the end of April, Branford penned a letter to government and the relevant tourism authorities suggesting a safe way forward for the wedding industry in the time of Covid-19. Having failed to elicit any formal response, Branford is currently drafting another letter, this time under the guidance of legal counsel. She is pushing for the sector to open by September under regulated safety guidelines. Should

she not receive a response, then Branford will be taking the matter to court. "I feel like if we don't make a noise and threaten government to give us a response and save us, we'll just be left behind," she said.

Lifting the effective ban on weddings is only the first step. Reopening provincial borders will further reinvigorate the wedding industry. The opening of international borders is also vital in terms of recovery to maximise South Africa's appeal as a destination wedding location, is the view of Christina Holt, founder and MD of Wedding Concepts, a full-service luxury wedding planning business.

Yet this will not happen without the support of those beyond the industry. According to Holt: "If South Africa is going to put itself back on the map and position itself globally as a top destination wedding location then now, more than ever, the tourism authorities and wedding industry leaders need to come together to communicate unity to the rest of the world and ensure South Africa is positioned positively when we open for business again. We need to walk the walk together and collaborate in new ways."