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# This Ain't Your Daddy's Bachelor Party

By Bert Bodeewes

*Darren Hitz turned his love of life, people and the great outdoors into an amazing memory-making business that honors the husband to be.*



For most people, getting married is a time when two souls come together to share a world filled with hope, happiness and, one day, the pitter-patter of tiny feet running down the hallway. For 30-year-old Darren Hitz, it's an opportunity to step around the raucousness of a traditional bachelor party, and offer the groom a heart full of memories that he can share with his family and friends for years to come.

"Getting inebriated in a smoke-filled bar, along with a lot of other people your group doesn't even know, isn't really what friendship is all about," Hitz says. "It's about friends coming together to honor the groom and tell him how much he means to them."

It all started when he was a boy growing up in suburban Detroit. Behind his house was a modest tract of woods with a winding river that provided young Hitz with a place to interact with and learn about nature. As a young adult, he earned a bachelor of science degree in Environmental Sciences from the University of Notre Dame, and went on to land a job as an environmental scientist

in Florida. But sometimes things aren't always what they seem.

"In college, 2 plus 2 always equaled 4," he says. "But in the business world, 2 plus 2 sometimes equals 5. Or sometimes it doesn't equal anything at all. It was all very frustrating."

Eventually, Hitz found his way back to that little tract of land in Michigan to ponder what to do with his life.

"At that point, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do, but I kind of enjoyed the psychological aspects of marketing because it seemed to apply to everything."

So he set out on a new path, working for a myriad of marketing companies doing everything from direct mail to Web site analytics. He even returned to school and earned an MBA in Marketing at The University of Michigan.

Despite his newfound talents, Hitz still wasn't where he wanted to be.

"I just wanted to be outside doing my own thing and making enough money to survive."

He had all the ingredients – a love of the outdoors, a passion to make a difference in the lives of others, and a knowledge of marketing that would take most

people a lifetime to learn. So in 2004, with nothing more than a small savings account and a big dose of determination, he put it all together in a company he proudly calls Adventure Bachelor Party® ([www.adventurebachelorparty.com](http://www.adventurebachelorparty.com)).

Millionaire Blueprints sat down with Hitz and eagerly listened in as he shared his journey toward entrepreneurship – from his 50-hour work weeks behind the desk of a faceless employer – to his new "office" in the seat of a raft flying down a river somewhere in the wild of West Virginia.

#### **Do you consider yourself an entrepreneur?**

I don't know that it was an entrepreneurial thing to start my company. Neither of my parents are entrepreneurs. My mom is a teacher, and my dad worked in the auto industry. A lot of the drive to start my company came from the fact that I was frustrated with the alternative. As a matter of fact, I strive to be separate from the classic "businessman" role. Everything that drives my company today grows out of my environmental sciences roots.





**Darren Hitz, third from right, in print shorts, with his buddies from Notre Dame are shown here on the first bachelor party excursion he ever planned. This West Virginia white water rafting trip, which honored his friend, Michael Fujii, was so successful that Hitz decided to launch his company and plan bachelor parties for a living.**

***How did you get the idea for Adventure Bachelor Party® (ABP)?***

I was brainstorming with my brother, trying to figure out something I could do on my own. My original idea was to provide some sort of shuttle service between the bars here in Detroit so individuals attending bachelor and bachelorette parties could have a good time without getting a ticket or getting into accidents. Then I remembered reading something in a magazine about different companies that offered theme parties like rafting, sky diving and fishing. It got me thinking about the potential for this type of business.

***Was anyone out there doing anything like this specifically for bachelor parties?***

No, I don't think so. I went out to Google ([www.google.com](http://www.google.com)) and typed

in "bachelor party" to see what I could find. There were the standard rafting companies and sky diving operations, as well as the traditional "stripper" and Las Vegas companies that obviously catered to bachelor parties. But nobody was really putting it all together like I had envisioned my company would.

***What was your vision for the company?***

My idea was to make it as seamless as possible for the best man to throw a bachelor party for the groom. At a typical bachelor party, you've got friends from school, the brothers-in-law, the fathers, the business associates and many other people. Getting them all on-board for a party is really difficult because they're usually spread out all over the country. So I thought I could put something together where the guys could

just go to a Web site and buy a seat to "Joe Groom's" bachelor party. Then all they had to do was catch a flight to the party, and I'd take care of the rest including food, lodging, transportation and, of course, immersion into the adventure. It would be cost-effective and all-inclusive. And, because it would be over a weekend, the guys wouldn't have to take time off from their regular responsibilities.

***Did you test the market in any way?***

Actually, I did. I created one of those three-page Web sites that are free from Yahoo Geocities (<http://geocities.yahoo.com>). What I did was make up a few fictitious trips to see if people would request quotes on them. Of course, I wouldn't be able to fulfill the trips but I would at least be able to talk to some of

the people and gauge the level of interest in my idea.

**How did you generate traffic to the Web site?**

I bought some keyword advertising on Google ([www.google.com](http://www.google.com)), Yahoo ([www.yahoo.com](http://www.yahoo.com)) and MSN ([www.msn.com](http://www.msn.com)). I was paying 10 cents a click for keywords like bachelor party, best man and groom. Maybe 10 or 20 people came to the Web site a day, and that's pretty much how it took off.

**What was your first trip?**

It was kind of a coincidence. Right around the time I was putting up the Web site, I was asked to be the best man at my friend, Michael Fujii's, wedding. I didn't know the first thing about party planning. Since I was already putting the pieces together for ABP, I thought I would do a trial run on Michael's party and see if it had potential.

**What type of adventure did you plan?**

We did white water rafting. We had 10 people. Most were friends from college. A lot of them were from New York, Chicago and Florida, so everyone was kind of spread out. I found a rafting company, a good restaurant and a hotel. Then I put it all together and charged them \$300 each. I called it, "Fujii's Last Stand." I videotaped the whole thing and presented Michael with an engraved paddle that everyone had signed. It was just a great time. As a result, I went ahead and launched this company.

**Did you have any kind of a business plan?**

Originally, I didn't. But I knew I would have to write one eventually, just to get my mind around the different variables involved in the company. So I went



**Hitz organized a fishing party weekend in Milwaukee in the summer of 2006 for this group. At far left is the best man, Rick Anteau, enjoying the city's nightlife with friends.**

to the local American Marketing Association ([www.marketingpower.com](http://www.marketingpower.com)), and they were able to provide me with a mentor in business planning. They worked with me on writing a business plan of 20 pages or so.

**Did having a business plan help you?**

Absolutely. It forced me to look at a lot of things from a cost standpoint, for example, the cost of goods sold, the cost of margin, and how much I was going to spend on advertising. It also spelled

out what I would need for my marketing, accounting and legal operations.

**What was your next move?**

I formed an LLC, because I was by myself and I didn't want to have the liability if something went wrong. I talked to lawyers about making sure I had the correct trademark filed for Adventure Bachelor Party®. Then, later on, I found out how to get the correct registration mark for that term. I also bought every domain name associated with the bach-

***"The key is technology. From the very beginning, I was thinking of ways that I could run this company through the Internet."* – Darren Hitz**



el party concept. Then I mapped out a professional, five-page Web site and found a designer to create it for me.

**How did you fund your start-up operations?**

I used \$6,000 of my own money that I had saved from working past jobs. I didn't have angel investors, and I didn't get a bank loan. It was all money I had saved while working a regular job.

**How were you going to make the company work with so little start-up money?**

The key is technology. From the very beginning, I was thinking of ways that I could run this company through the Internet. I knew I might be at Starbucks one day, and on the river in West Virginia the next, so I wanted to make myself as "virtual" as possible. This meant that I would need to be able to access my business from anyone's computer at any time. So I set everything up online – faxing, customer database access, Web site analytics, and my file cabinets. Then I set up my accounting using Quickbooks Online ([www.quickbooksonline.com](http://www.quickbooksonline.com)) to make sure that I was ready to record my profits and losses and any other financial matters associated with having a company. It's great, because today I'm able to fire off a quote as soon as someone visits my Web site. As a matter of fact, since my database is integrated with my cell phone, my Web site triggers my phone and tells me when "Joe Customer from Texas" is looking at one of my trips. Then I can call him before he even leaves my Web site.

**Did you have any inspiration to help you out?**

There's a book called *E-Myth* by Michael E. Gerber ([www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)) that talks about setting up a company as if you were trying to franchise it. I knew that if I was going to grow this company into other channels, I would have to have some kind of process in place that makes them all similar. It's like the franchise idea of McDonald's – you can get the exact same burger the same way at every loca-

tion. This concept was very important to me when I launched the parent company, Hitz Adventures ([www.hitzadventures.com](http://www.hitzadventures.com)), and today as I launch sister companies, Adventure Corporate Events ([www.adventurecorporateevents.com](http://www.adventurecorporateevents.com)), Adventure Church Groups ([www.adventurechurchgroups.com](http://www.adventurechurchgroups.com)), Adventure Bachelorette Party ([www.adventurebacheloretteparty.com](http://www.adventurebacheloretteparty.com)), and Adventure Weekends ([www.adventureweekends.net](http://www.adventureweekends.net)).

**Do you still use the principles of this book today?**

Oh, definitely. Right now, I've got more than 30 locations across the country, and I've got different outfitters and hotels. I'm thinking, how am I going to keep all of this straight in my head? I really needed to get it down to a science as far as where these outfitters were located, how I contacted them, how I paid them and how I dealt with payments from customers. Then I needed to be able to reserve things with outfitters and know when to cancel things so I didn't get burned and so the outfitters didn't get burned. So the book has been a big help in standardizing those processes across the board.

**How many trips did you have in the beginning?**

In 2004, my first year, I ran four trips. In 2005, I ran 16 trips. And in 2006, I ran 35. Each trip had an average of 10 people per trip.

**What trips did you start out with?**

In the beginning, it was just rafting. But I quickly grew into sky diving, wrangling, fishing, motoring, mountaineering, skiing, shooting and golfing. My ABP Web site ([www.adventurebachelorparty.com](http://www.adventurebachelorparty.com)) has links for each of these trips with all the details.

**How did you establish relationships with the companies that you use on your trips?**

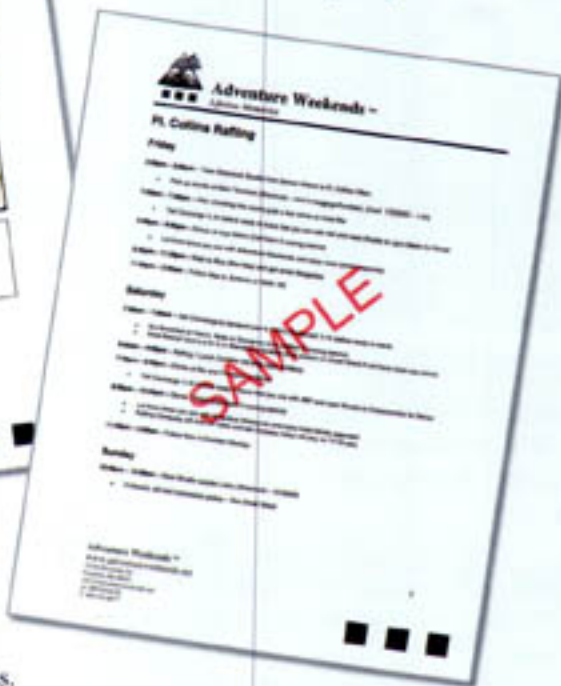
I approached them as a partner with the understanding that they are entrepreneurs and don't like to be told what to

**Hitz's Web site, ([www.adventurebachelorparty.com](http://www.adventurebachelorparty.com)), includes photographs and specific descriptions of the various party packages his company offers.**

***"Because I work 'virtually,' I have very low overhead and little use for hardware, so my cash flow from the busy season gets me through the slower times."* – Darren Hitz**



Hitz provides his clients with detailed maps, itineraries and contact information about their bachelor party destinations.



do. I don't try and bargain for prices. All I wanted to do was tweak their system a little bit so we could all work together as partners in business. What it comes down to is: Who is flexible, and who will work with me? Who is friendly? Who will do groups and allow me to pay different ways? Who will pick my customers up at the hotel? Who can provide a meal at the adventure? Once I have these people in place, I stick with them. I won't use companies that I haven't worked with before because that adds risk and a lack of control.

#### **How do you choose what cities to base your adventures from?**

A lot of variables go into choosing a city. I look for cities that are big enough to have an airport, but small enough that the guys have probably never been there. I don't like big cities like New York or Las Vegas where it's chaotic, or where a lot of the guys know how to find their way around. The city needs to have a downtown that's centrally located, that is

safe, and that is near the airport. The city also needs to have adventure-oriented activities within half an hour to an hour's drive to avoid the rental car situation.

Let's say I was looking at rafting. Charleston, West Virginia, is a great location to go rafting. It's easy to get to, it's centrally located, and the economy of West Virginia allows me to offer it at a cheaper rate than say, San Diego or Anchorage. It's got some fantastic rafting. All around, it's just a perfect place for a trip.

#### **How much does a trip typically cost?**

It varies because you never know what the guys are going to want. Starting out, I've got three packages: gold, silver and bronze. The gold package includes T-shirts, rafting, the transportation, dinner, the lodging – all those things. From there, the client will usually pick

off pieces to make it a cheaper package. They'll say something like, "I like the gold package, but we don't need this or that." Or, they'll say, "I like the platinum package, but can we include this?" With that information, I'll figure out a price based on hotel availability and the other things they've asked me to do.

#### **Sounds like you're pretty flexible with your adventure packages?**

You have to be to survive. We're in this world of mass customization. That's kind of the key. Although I try and have some control over the cities and the locations where I do these trips, there has to be some degree of customization to work with people because that's kind of expected these days.

#### **Once you book a trip, what process do you go through to secure the sale?**

After the client accepts a quote, I'll have him sign a contract that authorizes me to take a deposit equal to one person's cost of the trip. So if the trip costs \$400 per person, he's going to authorize me to charge \$400 to his credit card with the guarantee that at least three other people are also going to go on the trip. Once the contract is signed, I set up a dedicated shopping cart where everyone can go online and easily pay for the trip.

#### **How long are the trips?**

Most of the trips are three days, starting Friday and going through Sunday. I do it this way so that the guys don't have to juggle their busy schedules during the week. They can just hop on a plane, have a great weekend with their friends, and be back to their regular responsibilities by Monday.

#### **Do you go on any of the trips?**

I've designed the trips to the point where I don't need to send anyone to



Pictured above is groom Dave Morelli's bachelor party group at Constitution Marina in Boston Harbor. Highlights of this trip included a fishing excursion as well as a day at Fenway Park, home of the Boston Red Sox. Below, Hitz displays two trophy bass caught by members of the group.



manage them because that's just a cost that I can't fit into my budget. However, I'll go if it's a new trip and I need to meet the outfitter, check out the hotel, the

night life, the city – those sorts of things. I'll also go if there are special needs involved. For example, if there's a group of more than 15 people and I had to use a different hotel because the one I normally use was booked, I will go. I always want to be sure things run smoothly.

#### ***Is there a point man for the trips?***

Generally, the guy who's in charge of everything is the best man. So a couple of days before the trip, I'll call him and spend about an hour just going over the details with him. I'll also have my outfitters call him the Thursday before just to make sure he doesn't have any questions, and also to form a bit of a bond with him.

#### ***Take us through a typical trip from start to finish.***

The first day involves everyone trying to get into town from various locations. I try to avoid having people rent cars, so I always try to use a hotel that has a shuttle service to and from the airport. Back at

the hotel, the guys meet at the lobby bar and get caught up. After that, everyone heads out to the restaurant.

#### ***Do you have special requirements for the restaurant you go to?***

I always try to find a great restaurant that has local color as opposed to a chain restaurant everyone knows. It also needs to be within walking distance of the hotel, or within the range of the hotel's shuttle service. On the West Virginia rafting trip, we usually go to the Bridge Road Bistro, which is a nice restaurant in Charleston.

#### ***How do you feed such a large group while keeping your costs down?***

I call the manager and work out the menu in advance, so I can control the pricing. I'll say, "OK, I've got allotted \$40 out the door, including tax and tip. Can you put together a menu that includes a salad, appetizers, a choice of meat, poultry or fish?" Then I have them print up little menus using a PC, and leave the menus out on the table for the guys to order. Typically, the food bill will go on a credit card that I have on file with the restaurant. However, alcohol is always put on a separate bill. This is because it's such a variable, and also for legal reasons. I don't want to touch it. So, at the end of the night, I get the bill for the food and the guys get the bill for the alcohol that was consumed.

#### ***How does the first day end?***

Once dinner is over, the guys head back to the downtown area either by walking or through the shuttle service. I have already given them a little map of the city with thumbprints indicating where the hotel, the restaurant, as well as a few bars, are located so they know where everything is. I have also provided them with a "cheat sheet" for their wallets which has the name of the hotel, phone number, confirmation number, hospital, cab companies, the outfitter's name and number, etc. This is just in case they get lost or don't know where they need to be. Then they're on their own for the night.

**How does the "immersion" into the adventure work?**

On the second day, the guys are up early to eat breakfast at the hotel and then they board the outfitter's transportation service, which is usually a bus. Typically, the adventure takes place outside the city, but it is no more than 45 minutes away to make sure there's not a huge gas bill. Each adventure requires that the guys sign a liability disclaimer, and that they take a lesson on how to do the adventure. A big hit with most of the guys is the rafting because it takes them to the edge as far as doing something adventurous. Plus, the guys get the feeling of being back together as old friends, while having the time of their lives fighting a raging river together. The guides will bring lunch, and everyone eats along the water. If there are cliffs and places to swim, they'll get out and jump off the cliffs and swim for a while. When the day is over, everyone goes back to a

client books a trip, they pay online via credit card. During this process, there's a disclaimer that says, "I agree or disagree to the terms and conditions of this purchase." Within the disclaimer, there's some verbiage that talks about the liabilities of the trip. Secondly, when they purchase a trip, they have the option of purchasing insurance through a third-party operator who specializes in adventure insurance. And third, when they get to the event site, they have to sign a waiver releasing the outfitting company from any liability. I also have a \$2 million insurance policy on the company, just in case something happens.

**What kind of marketing do you do today?**

The ABP Web site pretty much sells itself. I get about 2,000 to 3,000 page views a day, and I try and do about 10 quotes a day. For all my companies, I'll get on the Internet and find Web sites

mail, it's a lot tougher to follow those kinds of trends.

**Where have you advertised online?**

In my second year, I focused on advertising in places like The Knot ([www.theknot.com](http://www.theknot.com)), [Brides.com](http://Brides.com), and [WeddingChannel.com](http://WeddingChannel.com). There are a lot of brides on those sites, which is cool because they like the safe bachelor party alternative that I was offering. But I don't know how cost-effective it was. I usually got more out of dealing directly with the guys.

**Have you done anything besides online marketing?**

A couple of years ago, I attended some bridal shows here in Michigan. A company called Bridal Celebrations ([www.cbride.com](http://www.cbride.com)) puts on a big trade show where thousands of brides come to check out anything and everything associated with a wedding. It was tough

**"I find it interesting and not coincidental that the simpler your life is, the happier you seem." – Darren Hitz**

cabin I rented in the woods to get cleaned up and watch the video that was taken of the day's activities while waiting for the pig roast to get ready. It's really a special time for the guys to bond and pay tribute to the groom for all the great times they've shared together over the years.

**And what happens on the third day?**

Everyone gets up, and I've arranged to get them back into town and to the airport.

**Are some of the adventures dangerous?**

The adventures are a lot of fun. But people can get hurt doing these types of recreational adventures. Paying attention to the guides and heeding their advice is very important so that everyone has a fun time and a safe trip.

**How do you protect yourself from any liability issues?**

There are three things I do to protect myself and my company. First, when a

that are bachelor party-related. Then I'll talk to these people and trade links with them, or write an article for them, or build content for them. I also do interviews and articles, and small amounts of print and paid Web site listings.

**What are some of the benefits of online marketing?**

There's a lot more return on your investment (ROI). In the online world, I can track where people are coming from, how long they've been on my site, and determine if they asked for a quote. I can see what my return on a specific ad is. For example, for a while, I was running an ad on [www.theknot.com](http://www.theknot.com). I was able to see how many people were getting referred, how many of those people turned into "fails," and how much I was paying per month for the ad. Turns out, I was paying \$10 for every lead I got. But over in my Google ad words, I was paying a lot less. With trade shows, brochures and direct

because I had to print material for "leave behinds," and I had to make signs for the booth. I'm pretty much Internet-focused, so I really don't do a lot of printing. It's just not the best use of my money.

**You don't think print marketing is an effective means of advertising?**

Print marketing is completely counter-intuitive to my belief in advertising. I'd rather pump as much description into my Web site as possible, and spend the money there, as opposed to some of the traditional tactics of trade shows such as direct mail, brochures, flyers and things like that.

**Do you have any employees?**

I do have three independent sales reps who help me sell trips. If they refer a trip to me, I'll pay them a commission. It's just like an affiliated market program. It's a pretty small operation.



**Hitz relaxes in his the backyard of his childhood home in Detroit. He camped and fished for many years on the land behind his family's home, which, he says, inspired his initial passion for nature.**

#### ***What makes you different from a travel agent?***

A travel agent doesn't really own anything. They're kind of like an independent sales rep selling a product for someone else and earning a commission for it. Once they make the sale, they're done with you. I look at myself as the evolution of a travel agent. You pay me, and then I pay my partners – the hotel, the restaurants, the outfitters – depending on our agreed upon price. I control everything, right down to the T-shirts and videos I give away at the end of the event.

#### ***Do you offer bachelor adventures year-round?***

It depends on the adventure. With sky diving, fishing and the cattle drive, yes, I can do those throughout the year. But rafting is generally May through October because most of the good rafting is done after the snow melts. Of course, most weddings happen in the spring and summer, so that's when most of the trips happen.

#### ***How does your business stay profitable during the off-season?***

Because I work "virtually," I have very low overhead and little use for hard-

ware, so my cash flow from the busy season gets me through the slower times. But I am always looking for ways to limit the slow times by getting into non-bachelor type party events and winter sports.

#### ***Are you working on bachelorette adventures?***

Yes, I'm looking into it. What makes the bachelor parties work well is that the guys don't like to plan things as much. Bachelorettes, on the other hand, enjoy planning events themselves. They are much more detail-oriented. They also spend money on the bridal shower, so there is less left over for the bachelorette party.

#### ***What's on the horizon for ABP?***

I'd like to continue to grow my brand recognition and focus more on building relationships in the corporate world. I'm in the process of introducing affordable corporate events for small groups that are looking for something less than an annual meeting in Hawaii, but more than a happy hour at the local bar. To help promote my corporate side, I just finished a promotion with Delta Air Lines where people were able to use their Delta Sky-Miles to purchase my Adventure Week-ends Packages.

#### ***What valuable lessons have you learned along the way?***

The most valuable lesson I've learned is that the world can be a good world, but it can also be a very cold world. You have to be really careful because, unfortunately, not everyone will do the right thing in life. I always thought business was as simple as working hard and doing the right thing. But I found out quickly that this is not always the case. I find it interesting and not coincidental that the simpler your life is, the happier you seem.

#### ***Any advice for someone trying to start a business like yours?***

Do your research, but don't overdo the research. Do your business plan, but don't overdo the business plan. If you really want to start your own business, you're not going to be happy unless you get out there and do something about it. Don't limit yourself just because you don't have enough income, or because people are telling you that you'll never succeed. Just be true to who you are. If you want it, go for it. You don't want to look back in life and have any regrets.

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*Hitz says that starting his own business was definitely a challenge.*

*"You have to keep on track mentally. You have to keep on doing it because you don't have that 9 to 5 job dragging you out of bed in the morning."*

*He believes the toughest times are combating the constant doubt within oneself.*

*"There are always going to be people telling you that your plan won't work and that you should just give up. Sometimes you may even believe them. You just have to believe in yourself and in the fact that you are smart enough to figure it out, and that you will become a big success," he says.*

*When asked what he enjoys most about his job, Hitz gets a big, happy smile on his face.*

*"When you know you have the ability to provide memories that are going to be with these people forever, and that they're going to share them every time they're together, that's what it's all about. That's what makes it all worthwhile." MB*