

Buying a Special Occasion Dress? BBB Has Tips for Smooth Shopping!

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Spring brings more than warmer weather – it marks the start of prom nights and wedding celebrations. For many, that also means the search for the perfect dress. While the experience should be exciting, it can quickly become stressful without the right preparation.

Your Better Business Bureau (BBB) has tips to help you avoid unexpected expenses, delayed orders, surprise policies, and unwanted stress before a big event.

- **Start shopping early:** Delivery and alterations can take time, and spring is a busy season for seamstresses. The more time you have, the more you can compare shops and the less rushed and stressed you'll feel.
- **Check BBB:** Research dress shops on BBB.org before making a purchase.
- **Be clear about your budget:** Be upfront so your salesperson shows you dresses in your price range. You don't want to fall in love with a dress only to discover it's over your budget.
- **Research and try different styles:** Consider browsing online or in magazines for inspiration on what styles suit your body type first. Once in the store, you'll be able to narrow down your options.
- **Test out the dress:** Walk, sit, stand, and dance in the dress to test for comfort. You want to make sure that you'll be comfortable in the dress for extended hours. Also consider bringing a pair of shoes to try on with the dress to make sure the height and length are to your desired taste.
- **Factor in alterations:** Dress alterations can be costly, so double-check policies in advance. Some dress shops offer alterations for a flat fee or cap expenses at a certain amount.
- **Don't pay 100% upfront when buying a wedding dress:** Most stores ask for a deposit of around 50% of the dress price for expensive gowns. You should not be pressured into paying the entire cost of a wedding dress up front. A deposit will generally be less of an issue for a prom dress.
- **Check the cancellation policy:** Always check a store's policy for your specific order. Each contract is different, and custom orders may have a strict cancellation policy.
- **Be clear about your schedule:** Brides have complained to BBB that their dresses arrived too late for alterations. Be very clear about schedules and leave extra time to resolve any issues.
- **Take your dress home: Promptly pick up your dress after your alterations are finished.** You can't control what happens at the store where you found a prom dress or wedding dress - it might even go out of business - so the safest place for your dress is at your home or the place where you'll be dressing on the big day.
- **Want to rent? Do your homework:** Renting a dress is an increasingly popular option for proms and other special events. Be sure to start early because popular styles and sizes will sell out. Also, check BBB.org before committing to a specific company.

What should you look for when buying a gown online?

Some online sellers offer gowns that look like designer dresses for a fraction of the price. Buyers expect these dresses to be low-cost replicas, but BBB often hears that the dresses that arrive are ill-fitting and constructed from poor-quality materials. If you've decided to buy a wedding dress or prom dress online, we hope you'll keep the following tips in mind:

- **Beware of counterfeit gowns:** Authorized retailers are the only stores allowed to sell designer gowns. Anyone else claiming to carry them is likely selling counterfeits. Many dress designers do not sell their gowns online at all.
- **Shopping for a deal? Be realistic:** As much as a budget-conscious bride or partygoer may want to find a \$5,000 dress for \$350, it probably won't happen. Many designers don't allow their dresses to be discounted below a certain margin. An in-person sample sale may be a bride's best bet for finding a discounted gown vs an online offering.
- **Double-check delivery promises: Your dress must arrive on time,** so be sure the seller clearly states its typical delivery times.
- **Understand the return policy:** Review the guarantee, return, and refund policies before purchasing. Know if you can return your dress (and how much it will cost) if you are not happy with it. Make sure you can contact the company where you find the prom dress or wedding dress in case of problems. A website without contact information is a big red flag when shopping online.

- **Be wary of overseas sellers:** Buying wedding dresses or prom dresses from an international seller may seem like a good deal. However, U.S. laws and consumer protections will be difficult, if not impossible, to enforce.
- **Read BBB tips for shopping online:** Although a wedding or prom dress may be an extra special purchase, much of the [general advice for shopping online](#) applies here, too.

For more tips, visit [BBB's wedding resource page](#) at BBB.org.

Kelvin Collins is president & CEO of the Better Business Bureau serving the Fall Line Corridor, serving 77 counties in East Alabama, West Georgia, Southwest Georgia, Central Georgia, East Georgia, and Western South Carolina. This tips column is provided through the local BBB and the International Association of Better Business Bureaus (IABBB). The Better Business Bureau sets standards for ethical business behavior, monitors compliance and helps consumers identify trustworthy businesses. Questions or complaints about a specific company or charity should be referred directly to the BBB at Phone: 1-800-763- 4222, Web site: [BBB.org](#) or E-mail: info@centralgeorgia.bbb.org.