

Reinventing Online Love

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Kristin, a 20-something property manager from Tempe, Ariz., isn't sold on online dating just yet. Recently, she posted an ad on Match.com, a leading personal-ad website. "I was just looking for an alternative to the regular singles scene," Kristin says. "In my first 24 hours, I received 150 e-mails and 'winks.' That's a little intimidating."

She's annoyed that some of the responders live outside the U.S., and worried about encountering the bane of online daters - the "weirdo." But her ad is still up, boasting in the headline that she's "exceptional - looking for same."

As they face cutthroat competition and the threat of stagnation, online dating sites are working furiously to convince millions of singles such as Kristin to stick around despite their misgivings. Within the past few months, several top sites have overhauled the online dating experience, and up-and-coming companies are wooing people like the marriage-minded, the security-conscious, and the religious.

All in all, the changes may be turning online dating into a friendlier world. Video and audio links, which have yet to become wildly popular, offer singles the opportunity to see and hear one another before the traditional coffee date. It's easier to reject someone who contacts you through an e-mail or the quick hello known as a wink - sites now helpfully provide canned responses for unimpressed members to send. And complex compatibility surveys aim to match people who have similar outlooks on life and love, not just a shared fascination with Woody Allen or "Desperate Housewives."

At stake is a share of the huge online dating business, whose growth is leveling out. From the beginning of 2001 to the end of 2003, customer spending on the sites rocketed from \$8 million to \$117 million, according to the Online Publishers Association and comScore Networks. But in the second quarter of 2004, the spending was stagnant at \$114 million.

The sites were less complicated back in the go-go days of online dating. The process of matching on dating sites - alerting a customer to other users who might be right for him or her - used to be based simply on factors like who has blue eyes and blond hair, says Rochelle Adams, spokeswoman for Yahoo Personals. "Now, you're talking about temperament and personality through deep relationship 'profiling.' These are all things working to help people get matches that are really going to work for them."

One dating site, eHarmony.com, is pushing the compatibility testing idea to its limit. Users answer a whopping 463 questions about everything from energy level and ambition to sense of humor and spirituality.

"Our whole focus is on putting people together, making compatible matches that have the possibility of the long term," says senior vice president Marylyn Warren. "If you want a date for Saturday night, we probably are just not the place to come."

Perhaps following eHarmony's lead, Yahoo Personals has developed a premium service - it will cost an extra \$15 a month beyond the usual \$19.95 fee - for people interested in more than

casual dating.

Ms. Warren is impressed to hear that companies such as Yahoo are following eHarmony's approach. "We've gotta go deeper," she says.

The most difficult challenge, however, is the same as always: Just as a man in a singles bar might tell a woman he's an astronaut when he's really an accountant, online daters often fudge the truth. "Both sexes complain that the other side is lying," says Michael Kantor, owner of eDateReview.com, which offers advice about online dating.

Enter True.com, a new site that runs background checks on customers. About 5 percent of potential users are banished because they may have criminal records, and about 4 percent get the boot because public records suggest they're married, says spokeswoman Taylor Cole. If they're actually single, they can try again to join the service.

"We're very gratified that we've saved a lot of people from potential physical and emotional hazards," says founder and CEO Herb Vest. The checking "doesn't totally eliminate that hazard, but it does lower the incidence of it."

True.com doesn't launch other kinds of investigations, however. Does "Fun-Loving Romeo" really like long walks on the beach, or does he spend weekends in front of the television? And what about the claim by "Ready for Adventure" that she's a petite athlete? Maybe she's zaftig and hasn't put on a pair of sneakers since high school.

"Most lying isn't about whether someone is a felon, but exaggeration lying, which I don't think [sites] will be able to spot," says Mr. Kantor of eDateReview.com. "When someone lists their weight, unless someone actually comes to their apartment and weighs them, that's going to slip by."

Other problems may be unsolvable, too. "Men mostly complain about having to send out too many e-mails, and nobody responds," Kantor says. "Women complain they get too many e-mails, and they're all from losers."

Perhaps the course of online dating - like true love - will never run smooth.