

Dating Websites: It's a Jungle Out There

If anyone should know that a lover scorned hath no fury like a rival vexed, the online romance business should. Yet lawyers for industry leader Match.com have subpoenaed nine former employees who defected to True.com, an upstart competitor, to find out whether they breached confidentiality agreements by disclosing secrets about proprietary information. Match.com—which is owned by InterActiveCorp., headed by media mogul Barry Diller—has more than 12 million members and dwarfs True.com (which says it has about 350,000 users). But True.com's

CEO, Herb Vest, a Dallas entrepreneur with gunslinger instincts, isn't cowering. He fired back two weeks ago with full-page ads in the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Dallas Morning News*. The ads reprinted Vest's taunting letter to Diller, in which he denied getting trade secrets from employees and vowed to fight the subpoenas on their behalf. "To get to them," Vest wrote, "you must, first, come through me." Vest told TIME, "It's a fishing expedition, and I'm not going to stand for it."

On CNBC last week, Diller said Match.com needs to make sure its former employees "are not using the intellectual property that belongs to us elsewhere." But at a time when the site is already feeling the heat from insurgents like Yahoo Personals, Friendster and eHarmony, industry sources

are snickering that its tactics may have given a boost to another foe. "True.com really took advantage of this to generate publicity for itself," says Nate Elliott, an analyst at Jupiter Research. Guess it's too late to kiss and make up. —**By Sonja Steptoe**

