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Video Clips Aim to Steer Cupid's Arrows

By RACHEL KONRAD

After exchanging instant messages and digital photos through an online dating site, Christopher Boykin flew to Houston to meet what he hoped would be a beautiful soul mate. What he found was a flabby misanthrope with an apparent drinking problem.

"She was a total nut case," said the 35-year-old architect from Venice, Fla. "I'm sure at one time she was very pretty but she had really let herself go. I decided right then that I needed more information before I'd go on another date with someone I met online."

Boykin's new policy: He'll only date women who post videos or use Web cameras in virtual chat rooms. Like other "early adopters" of the technology, he insists that videos provide far more information than standard photos, which may be doctored or out of date, snapped before Juliet added another 20 pounds or Romeo lost his hair.

Some of the largest sites -- including Match.com -- reject videos partly because employees can't monitor thousands of hours of amateur footage for pornography, nudity or other behavior deemed inappropriate. Others warn that videos can elevate acting skills over characteristics that make or break a relationship, such as religion and financial compatibility.

But even skeptics agree that videos are gaining popularity among the estimated 20 million Americans who visit online dating sites each month. Nearly one in four U.S. singles have used online dating services, according to Date.com.

Only 10 percent of 2.8 million active users at True.com post videos, but the percentage is rising quickly and online profiles with video get more hits than those without, said Taylor Cole, senior director of marketing at Irving, Texas-based True.com, which launched videos last summer.

"Once people understand the benefit of actually hearing someone's voice and seeing them in a broader perspective than just a static photo, they'll never want to go back to simple pictures and e-mail," Cole said.

Lavalife.com added videos for its 700,000 active members last year, catching up to Yahoo Personals, which began to allow video clips in January 2003.

Lavalife brand manager Lori Miller has been surprised by the kinds of people who use the service. Although 18- to 34-year-olds are the biggest audience at Toronto-based Lavalife, many videos are from people in their 40s, 50s and 60s.

"Their sense of humor comes out," Miller said. "They don't just recreate their profile and say, 'I'm Lori and I'm 35 and looking to meet a guy.' They're really trying to get across another aspect of their personality."

Video clips also provide a window into physical surroundings. Would you prefer to view your prospective mate in a disheveled living room or immaculate kitchen? Biker bar or artsy cafe? High-rise condo or high-altitude campsite?

Fran Compagno, a Palo Alto, Calif.-based dating coach, said videos provide data that photos, questionnaires and instant message banter can't. Does he gesticulate wildly? That might be a turnoff.

"One major problem with online dating is that you generally have to date so many people to find one you really like -- online daters go on a lot of first dates but not many seconds," Compagno said. "More information almost always is better."

But videos aren't for everyone -- and certainly prudish singles should be warned: Videos and Web cam-aided video chats may deliver far more than viewers anticipate, says relationship adviser Eve Eschner Hogan, author of "Virtual Foreplay: Making Your Online Relationship a Real-Life Success."

"I can only begin to imagine how raunchy a chat room with live video could become," she said.

Whether videos can steer Cupid's arrows may depend on whether you're looking for a weekend romp or wedding ring, says Duane Dahl, president and chief executive of Bothel, Wash.-based PerfectMatch.com.

The 1.5 million-member site, which specializes in long-term partnerships and is popular with 30-something professionals, doesn't allow videos.

Nor does EHarmony.com. Founded by a clinical psychologist who began advertising on Christian radio, it didn't accept photos until 2001 and will probably never accept videos, said senior vice president Marilyn Warren.

The Pasadena, Calif.-based site, which courts people seeking a "long-term relationship that leads to marriage," doesn't deny physical attraction, Warren said. But so-called chemistry is merely dimension that eHarmony tracks based on responses to its questionnaire.

"Chemistry fogs your brain a little bit," Warren said. "If you see someone who is drop-dead handsome or beautiful, you might forget that she cheated her way through school or he tells lies or does the kind of things that break up a marriage. We need to get at the true character of a person without emphasis on photos and videos."