

For online daters, love not always true

12:28 PM CDT on Thursday, August 4, 2005

By JANELLE STECKLEIN / DallasNews.com

For the past 15 years, Richard Rhodes has found dates online. And in searching for a companion, he has learned that many women aren't completely honest.

Case in point: The woman with whom Rhodes communicated by e-mail. He described her as "the most beautiful woman I had ever seen in my life."

"I showed up and she was older than I was," said Rhodes, 73, who allowed that he comes from a very small Northeast Texas town. "She had a picture on there that was at least 35 years old."

Rhodes, who acknowledged that he actually lost 15 pounds before meeting her to make a good impression, did not pursue a second date. Instead, he wrote the president of Match.com stating his dismay at the ease in which people can post misleading photos.

"You ought to have some way to check up on that," Rhodes said he wrote.

Freelance writer Terri Rimmer's experience was worse. She found that men, too, post deceptive photos. But she once ended up meeting a man who was married with two children.

"People have a tendency to lie," said the 39-year-old Fort Worth resident, who now dates a man she met offline.

As dating moves from clicking in bars to clicking a mouse, questions are arising about what online dating services are doing to protect subscribers from deception. Of course, trickery can run the gamut, from the minor issue of hair color to the major problem of an extensive criminal background.

Earlier this year, the Texas Legislature joined several states that were considering legislation to require disclosure of background checks for Internet dating sites. The proposed Texas legislation died at the end of the session.

Markham Erickson, general counsel for the Washington, D.C., lobbying group NetCoalition.com, said he has spoken to state legislatures about the problems of imposing background checks on online dating companies.

“Our concern is that you are creating a system that is woefully ineffective and creates more harms than good,” Erickson said.

Erickson said the databases that background check companies use are generally out of date by up to a year. Some third-party companies hired to run background checks are unable to secure users’ information and have experienced data theft, he said.

And, he said, people with something to hide often use false information, defeating the purpose of the checks.

Erickson also pointed out the difficulty in defining an Internet dating site. He said several bills refer to the Web sites as “social referral sites.” By that definition, Erickson said, online chat rooms, the craigslist classified advertising site and eBay all would be required to undertake background checks.

However, proponents like Herb Vest, CEO of Irving-based True.com, contend that checks will help weed out unsuitable mates.

True.com’s screenings result in the rejection of about 5 percent of potential daters because of felony criminal records, and another 4 percent who already are married. Members who discover dishonesty in someone’s profile are encouraged to notify the company, Vest said, but most subscribers already try to adhere to the spirit of the site.

“It’s not foolproof, but I think it’s very effective,” Vest said. “We’re very serious about enforcing these rules.”

Match.com and Yahoo! Personals do not check backgrounds. Representatives of the sites said they rely on subscribers to alert them to dishonest members.

Match.com is concerned with protecting its members’ privacy, so it has argued against potential legislation requiring background checks. “In order to protect privacy, we put a lot of power into the hands of the user,” said Kristin Kelly, a Match.com spokeswoman.

She also noted that third-party security problems and incomplete criminal background databases render the checks “not ready for prime-time.”

“You’ve created a false sense of security,” Kelly said.

Match.com is testing a program in Dallas called Certified Photos, which matches interested users with local photographers who will take their picture, provided they show identification. Match.com then will certify the photos as recent and true. Users pay a one-time fee for a package of their choice. The fee ultimately depends on the length of the photo shoot, how many photographs the user wants to place in the profile and other factors.

But Kelly holds to the belief that dishonest daters surface everywhere, not just online.

“Nothing happens online that doesn’t happen offline,” she said. “Regulating or legislating human behavior is a very difficult thing to do.”

Spokeswoman Rochelle Adams said Yahoo! Personal does not run background checks, but any claims of behavior that violate Yahoo’s online dating user policy are investigated.

“We just have to try to provide the right kind of tools to allow singles to have the right kind of environment,” she said.

Andrea Baker, sociologist and author of *Double Click: Romance and Commitment Among Online Couples*, said the most common forms of deception are marital status and height for men and weight for women.

“It’s easier to deceive people online,” she said. “If people are serious about a relationship, it seems to me that it is in their best interest to be as honest as possible.”

In studying couples who met through dating sites, in chat rooms or via other Internet forums, she observed that their goal seemed to be finding people with compatible interests. And many older people tend to steer away from bars, she said.

“Many more people have either stopped drinking or really don’t enjoy it,” she said. “They really don’t feel the bar scene is going to add something to their life. (The Internet) has been a nice alternative.”

She acknowledged, however, that people at bars still could invent an occupation, remove a wedding ring or offer a fake phone number.

The good news is that online dating can work. Just ask Dallas attorney Holly Lister, 26, who met a number of men on the Internet. She contends she could pick out the liars from their profiles just by the way they seemed to puff up their resumes.

“I always thought it was pretty easy to tell if someone was being honest or not,” she said.

In January, she found her future husband, Rob Draper, 29, who teaches high school choir. She said she knew he was honest and would be a good match from his lengthy profile.

“I think we just sort of complement each other,” Lister said. “We can have other interests that we share together.”