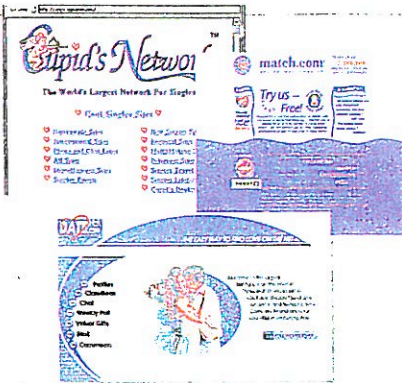


Circuits

You've Got Romance! Seeking Love on Line

Net-Based Services Change the Landscape, If Not the Odds, of Finding the Perfect Mate



Shane Vickrey for The New York Times

TIME FOR A CONFESSION At their wedding in Turner, Ore., Tom Buckley and Terri Muir announced to their guests that they had met through an on-line matchmaking service.

By BONNIE ROTHMAN MORRIS

TOM BUCKLEY didn't have much use for a dating service, or so he thought. "I didn't need to pay a company to help set me up to get a date, a girlfriend, a fiancée, a wife," said Mr. Buckley, 30, a steel broker in Portland, Ore., who plays rugby in his spare time. But after a lonely Thanksgiving dinner where he was the only single adult at the family dinner table, Mr. Buckley signed up for a free week on Match.com. What ensued on the matchmaking service

was an E-mail romance with Terri Muir, a schoolteacher on Vancouver Island in British Columbia. "Anybody who knew us would never have thought we would have gone down that road," Mr. Buckley said in a telephone interview. "My rugby mates would roll in their graves." Reflecting on the couple's instant attraction, he said, "E-mail made it easier to communicate because neither one of us was the type to walk up to someone in the gym or a bar and say, 'You're the fuel to my fire.'" Mr. Buckley said E-mail had enabled him to be more honest because he knew that if he wasn't, he would eventually get caught.

Thirty months after their first feverish exchanges, Mr. Buckley and Ms. Muir led to their family and friends and sneaked away to Vancouver to meet for the first time. At their wedding one year later, at a winery in Oregon, they finally told the tale of how they had met to their 100 guests. More and more single people, used to finding everything else on the Internet, are using it to search for love. More than 2,500 Web sites for adults are now devoted to matchmaking, said Daniel Bender, founder of Cupid's Network (www.cupidnet.com), an Internet portal for personals sites that went on line in 1995 listing only a handful

of sites where many people are staying single longer, busy professionals barely have time to squeeze in workouts and rules about sexual misconduct pose barriers to romance in the workplace, the Internet can be a fast and efficient way for single people to find each other, the creators of these services say. Many singles say they post their ads on a lark, expecting little. They take advantage of free trial memberships, yet concede that despite their doubts, they wonder "what if."

Will Knecht, a lawyer in Kirkland, Wash.,

Continued on Page 7

You've Got Romance! Finding a Soul Mate on Line

THE NEW YORK TIMES, THURSDAY, AUGUST 26, 1999

D7

Continued From Page 1, This Section

who specializes in using traditional dating services for fraud, is optimistic about the potential for the Internet to accomplish successful matchmaking. "The Internet is changing the landscape and process of the personals," Mr. Knecht said. The print personals don't work very well and the expense is very high, he added. "With the Internet, the cost is so much less and the transaction time is shorter."

One thing the Web has to distinguish it from more traditional personal advertisements is the size of the dating pool. John Spottiswoode, president of Match.com (who, incidentally, met his wife in junior high school), said his company registered its two-millionth subscriber in August.

This year, the company was acquired for about \$50 million by Ticketmaster Online-Citysearch, which also purchased the Internet's other largest personals matchmaking service, One and Only (www.oneandonly.com). The two companies will eventually be merged to chase after the 68 million single people in the country today who are not only looking for love, but looking to connect, said Charles Conn, chief executive of Ticketmaster Online-Citysearch.

As people get used to finding lots of things on line, many are going there to search for love.

Another of the Internet's large dating services, American Singles (www.as.com), is a no-fee-for-profile-but-often-to-be-acquired company that has been on line since Valentine's Day 1994. It says it has 125,000 active members.

All these sites and more are also linked through Cupid Network, which Mr. Bender, 38, started in 1995. (He met his wife through a personals page on Prodigy nine years ago, and he also runs American Singles.)

At first, Mr. Bender said, Cupid Network listed only a handful of sites. Today, the 2,500 linked sites are broken down by region, religion, race, sexual preferences and even values, as evidenced by a site called Singles With Scruples (www.singleswithscruples.com), a free service that says it caters to singles with "character, integrity and service to others."

"Single people tell us that their No. 1 challenge is access to finding other single people," said Trish McDermott, the Online Dating Coach for Match.com. She said she spent most days consulting the company's clients through E-mail.

With many services, users fill out questionnaires that combine fill-in-the-blank descriptions with short essays. Mate-seekers not only describe themselves in exacting detail, but also choose—frequently down to



She Knecht for The New York Times

hair color—what features they most desire in a soul mate. Many sites encourage users to submit photographs, and some offer audio samplings.

The services use software to sort and match preferences of the sort commonly expressed in personal ads: for nonsmokers, blonds, lovers of cabernet, for example, or for bald but vigorous men who like parasailing, Wagner and long walks in the country. Those seeking a mate submit their forms with their preferences, then receive a list of matches, which includes brief profiles and anonymous E-mail addresses set up and run through the on-line dating service.

After a free weeklong trial, many services charge \$10 to \$20 monthly. Some services are always free.

On Match.com, users can hide their profiles while doing their searching or hang out their personal shingles to attract potential dates. After scanning the list of matches, a date-seeker sends an E-mail message to someone the sender thinks might be a dream date and hopes that the message will be answered with alacrity.

"There's a full world of people on the Internet instead of the few faces you see at work," said Julie Warren, 25, a consultant in Falls Church, Va., who met her fiancé, Scott Mastbrook, on American Singles, after he posted an ad looking for someone to show him around Phoenix when he was traveling through on business. Ms. Warren was working in Phoenix at the time and had met other men through the service.

Ms. Warren said she had felt unencumbered by the usual stigma associated with searching for love in the personals. "I've met a lot of neat people just talking in chat rooms," she said, adding that using the service to find dates seemed natural to her.

Relationships that begin on line may have a better chance of succeeding because they start from the inside, from communication,

and at great personal cost. He had struck up an on-line romance with a Ukrainian woman whom he had met on American Singles. The woman immediately asked him for money to pay the agency she was using to translate and send her romantic E-mails back to him. There are many such agencies in the former Soviet Union, Mr. Spreading said. Next she told Mr. Spreading she wanted to start her own matchmaking agency.

Mr. Spreading, 42, an employee in the development office at Morehead State University in Kentucky, foisted the bill for that, too. After sending her about \$4,000, Mr. Spreading asked her to marry him, via E-mail. She said yes and invited him to Kiev. "When you meet somebody and you think you're in love, you never see any faults," said Mr. Spreading, who said like the couple had made wedding plans when he was visiting. After his return to the United States, Mr. Spreading never heard from her again. He's sworn off finding love through the Internet for now. "If I paid twice as much, it would still be worth what I learned," Mr.

Diana Hathaway Timmons, above, of Los

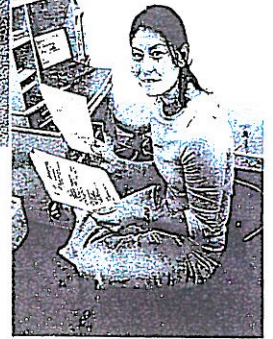
Osos, Calif., holds a scrapbook documenting her E-mail courtship with her husband, Greg. Dr. Marianne Shiozawa, of Manhattan said she had learned on a first date that a man she had found on a matchmaking site had "lied straight out."

work their way out, said Dr. Andrea Baker, an associate professor of sociology at Ohio University-Lancaster who studies successful on-line romances. "For many people, this does seem to work well in the sense of focusing more on the thought processes and common interests before they have appearance to distract them from how they feel about the person," Dr. Baker said.

But a romance cannot continue solely on line forever. And, if a suitor has built an E-mail house of cards, it will tumble. "That's what Dr. Marianne Shiozawa, 26, a chiropractor in Manhattan, discovered when she finally dated a man she had met through an on-line dating service, one of two services that she had signed up with.

"This person lied straight out, he wasn't as tall as he described, he wasn't in as good shape as he claimed to be, he was just padding a picture to impress me," she said. After their date, Dr. Shiozawa sent her date a Dear John E-mail. Still, she continues to meet men from personals on line, she said, because she hates the bar scene and feels safe meeting men in cyberspace.

For Robert Spreading, his eyes of cards fell apart later than the first face-to-face



Andrea Baker for The New York Times

meeting, and at great personal cost. He had struck up an on-line romance with a Ukrainian woman whom he had met on American Singles. The woman immediately asked him for money to pay the agency she was using to translate and send her romantic E-mails back to him. There are many such agencies in the former Soviet Union, Mr. Spreading said. Next she told Mr. Spreading she wanted to start her own matchmaking agency.

Mr. Spreading, 42, an employee in the development office at Morehead State University in Kentucky, foisted the bill for that, too. After sending her about \$4,000, Mr. Spreading asked her to marry him, via E-mail. She said yes and invited him to Kiev. "When you meet somebody and you think you're in love, you never see any faults," said Mr. Spreading, who said like the couple had made wedding plans when he was visiting. After his return to the United States, Mr. Spreading never heard from her again. He's sworn off finding love through the Internet for now. "If I paid twice as much, it would still be worth what I learned," Mr.

work their way out, said Dr. Andrea Baker, an associate professor of sociology at Ohio University-Lancaster who studies successful on-line romances. "For many people, this does seem to work well in the sense of focusing more on the thought processes and common interests before they have appearance to distract them from how they feel about the person," Dr. Baker said.

But a romance cannot continue solely on line forever. And, if a suitor has built an E-mail house of cards, it will tumble. "That's what Dr. Marianne Shiozawa, 26, a chiropractor in Manhattan, discovered when she finally dated a man she had met through an on-line dating service, one of two services that she had signed up with.

"This person lied straight out, he wasn't as tall as he described, he wasn't in as good shape as he claimed to be, he was just padding a picture to impress me," she said. After their date, Dr. Shiozawa sent her date a Dear John E-mail. Still, she continues to meet men from personals on line, she said, because she hates the bar scene and feels safe meeting men in cyberspace.

For Robert Spreading, his eyes of cards fell apart later than the first face-to-face