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## the internet

The Best Way to...

## ...FIND LOVE

If there's one person out there for you, can the Internet really be the matchmaker?

By MEGAN DOSCHER

**Y**OU'VE FOUND YOUR soul-mate—slim, slender, a social drinker who doesn't smoke, has no children but wants some someday, is between 5 feet 4 inches and 5 feet tall, and seems smart, funny and sensitive. Now you just have to meet him or her. It may sound strange, but that's a very common scenario for the millions of people who've used the Internet to try to find that special someone. And why not? The Internet opens up an exponentially larger pool of eligible bachelors and bachelorettes. It's like walking into "a football stadium full of single people of the gender of your choice," says Trish McDermott, online-dating ex-

PERT FOR MATCH.COM, A POPULAR SAN FRANCISCO online-dating site owned by Ticketmaster Online-CitySearch Inc., a Pasadena, Calif., online provider of ticketing services, city guides and maps.

Of course, on the Internet you can't see any of those bachelors and bachelorettes. And because of that, executives at Match.com say, encountering someone online can actually be a more meaningful way to meet. Ms. McDermott says people who connect online before meeting in the real world have the chance to base their relationship not on purely physical attributes, but on deeper qualities such as personality, intelligence and sense of humor.

"Down the road, it's not height or hair color that gets you through the hard times," she says. But that philosophy can be tested when Internet expectations meet real-world realities, particularly because in the online world, people can deceive others—or themselves—about anything and everything. Members of Match.com and other Net dating services have to run the risk that the slim, 5-foot-tall woman who's a nonsmoker may actually be none of the above. And online photos can lie, too: Some Match.com members complain of photos that are 10

years or 20 pounds out of date. (Ms. McDermott estimates that about 20% of members post a picture with their profiles.) Those drawbacks of the Net are unavoidable, but Match.com has taken steps aimed at ensuring that its members don't fall victim to true Net horror stories, such as online chatters who turn out to be cyberstalkers or chat rooms dominated by smutty talk. Such steps include safeguarding members' real e-mail addresses, building a community that will help police itself and, above all, encouraging its members, particularly women, to use a healthy dose of common sense when they decide to cross the divide between the online world and the real world.

For many, it's a chance well worth taking. "Online dating allows people to take some risks in an anonymous capacity," says Ms. McDermott. "When older people look back at their lives, it's the risks that they didn't take that they most regret."

### Toward Gender Equality

When Match.com was launched in April 1995, it had a ratio of about 30 men to 20 women. That doesn't sound desirable, but at the time, it was actually pretty good for the male-dominated Internet. Ms. McDermott recalls that most dating Web sites were populated by about 55 men for every two women.

For Match.com to become a success, the site had to even out the numbers further. The changing demographics of the Net helped: According to Jupiter Communications Inc., a New York technology market-research firm, women now account for 49% of the online population, up from 38% in 1995. Those changes also have helped Match.com's rivals: America Online Inc. and portals such as Yahoo! Inc. offer free personal ads, while others looking for love have turned to pay sites such as JDate.com (JDate.com) or Lovelink.com.

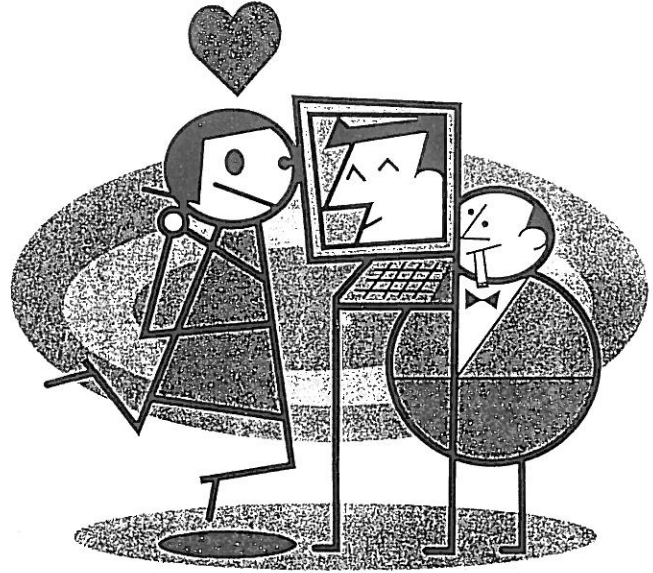
Match.com now has 42 women for every 53 men. But demographics alone weren't responsible for its success: The site also made efforts to ensure that women would feel safe online. "We know if the women are there and they're comfortable, the men will be there," Ms. McDermott says.

On Match.com, members list a number of characteristics in a profile that gets posted on the company's Web site. That makes it easier to search for dates according to ethnicity, body type, height, religion, smoking and drinking habits, and plans for children. Members choose a "handle" that becomes their secret identity. E-mail messages sent to their handles are then forwarded to the members' real-world e-mail boxes. When members respond to those messages, the responses show up bearing the Match.com handle and stripped of e-mail "headers" that could give the person's identity away. It's up to the members to put any personal information in the body of their correspondence.

Match.com is free for the first week. After that, members who opt to stay pay \$16.95 a month, or they can sign up for up to a one-year subscription for \$99.95. Signing up for a year, Ms. McDermott says, shouldn't be interpreted as a lack of optimism: "Dating is definitely a process of falling your way to success."

Match.com won't disclose revenue or say how many people stay on after their free trial, but of the 2.7 million people registered to date, the company claims 100,000 are currently "active" members, visiting the site regularly and exchanging e-mail messages.

Members can peruse Mix 'n' Match, the service's online magazine, "Ask Trish" for dating advice and consult sex-therapist Isadora Altman for bedroom tips. Mix 'n' Match also includes a section on profile makeovers—a recent makeover changed the title of a 35-year-old man's profile from



"What DOES a Scotsman wear under his kilt?" to "Rollerblading Engineer in Kilt seeks equally light-hearted companion!"

While Match.com says it is dedicated to "managing the behavior" of its members, it can't control them completely and doesn't patrol its chat rooms. So the service relies on members to help police the site. Match.com requires every member to agree to follow the company's service agreement, which bans "any defamatory, inaccurate, abusive, obscene, profane, offensive sexually oriented, threatening, harassing, racially offensive, or illegal material, or any material that infringes or violates another party's rights." Those who want to engage in sexually explicit chat can meet in an area called the "Back Room," where Match.com's normal rules of conduct don't apply.

Members who are harassed—such as through unsolicited, sexually explicit e-mail messages or statements in a chat room—are encouraged to forward the messages or chat-room conversations to a special address. Once the site verifies that the offender has violated the service agreement, Match.com will throw the offender off the site and block further access.

The site strongly emphasizes safety, offering pages of tips about how to meet people safely online—even before any real-world meeting occurs. Just as in the offline world, the site recommends, let common sense be your guide. Match.com advises its members to guard their anonymity and reminds them that they're never obligated to meet anyone in person.

The site also has some more interpersonal advice. In written communications such as e-mail messages and chat-room discussions, it advises, watch for the frequent use of the words like "would," "could," "should" and "might" and statements written as questions. Such language, Match.com advises, can indicate a lack of commitment.

### Scary Dates

Horror stories about Internet dates are far from uncommon, but of the people who meet online and go on real-world dates, most of the time neither party turns out to be an ax murderer.

Laurie Lindblad, 39 years old, says she met seven or eight men in person during six months with Match.com, but wasn't inter-

ested in any of them. Tired of talking to a parade of men, she decided to "hide" her profile with a click of a box on her profile, taking a break from the dating game. In late 1997, she had been in hiding for a couple of weeks when a friend requested a Match.com demonstration. She reactivated her profile and did a quick search, during which she found a man who sounded "too good to be true." Ms. Lindblad sent off a brisk note, what she didn't know was that the man, 35-year-old Will Hall, had seen her profile in the few minutes it had been available and had sent his own note to her. Their e-mail messages had crossed in cyberspace. The title of his profile, perhaps for once, wasn't accurate: "If timing is ev-

Even without such missteps, the fact remains that the first in-person meeting is often awkward—and, in rare cases, scary. Match.com offers advice for selecting a safe environment for that first meeting: A familiar restaurant or coffee shop is fine, but not at midnight. Avoid hikes, bike rides or drives in remote areas for the first few dates.

When traveling to meet a long-distance love, Match.com recommends that the visitor make his or her own arrangements and keep the hotel name a secret. Most important, always make sure that a friend or family member knows of the plans and has contact information.

For instance, before she found Mr. Hall, Ms. Lindblad agreed to meet one local man at the mall, where he whisked her into a travel agency and began making plans for a vacation for two in Hawaii. She was taken aback by the grand gesture, and then became suspicious when she saw his beat-up car with its trunk tied down with a rope. How could this man afford a trip to Hawaii? Common sense prevailed, she says. She called

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everything, I need a new watch."

Ms. Lindblad and Mr. Hall, who live in Seattle, hit it off online, met in person after only a week and were married in November after a two-year courtship. Granted, such stories aren't the norm, but Match.com does say that it has confirmed more than 700 marriages between people who met through the service.

Still, by no means does Match.com guarantee success. "You probably will meet more people that you don't like than [people] you'll fall madly in love with—this is dating," Ms. McDermott says. But she adds that if both people have been honest in their online communications, they do sometimes end up as friends.

### Photo Opportunities

Being honest and resisting the temptations of cyberspace's anonymity can be difficult for those who are worried about receding hairlines or advancing cellulite—hence the problem of those out-of-date photos. But Ms. McDermott says such tactics ultimately backfire. Besides, she says, if members use recent, everyday photos, they will be less anxious before a real-life meeting because they won't have to worry that their match won't find them physically attractive.

him the next day and said she wasn't interested in pursuing a relationship.

Match.com does offer other real-world ways to meet: In areas with lots of members—such as the San Francisco Bay area, where fully 10% of the site's clientele resides—Match.com promotes socials planned by its members. The company is currently running a sweepstakes in which 50 couples who've met on Match.com and want to meet in person will win a free cruise on Valentine's Day weekend with Gavin MacLeod, Captain Stubing of "Love Boat" fame, and Jim Lange, former host of "The Dating Game." (Separate accommodations will be provided.)

In November, Match.com even co-sponsored its first "dating seminar," at which attendees learned first-date strategies, how to develop a healthy dating mind-set (sample advice: "Don't get trapped by looking for perfection") and the secrets to being charming on a date, such as "discover areas of shared interest and values" and "learn how to relax and enjoy your date." The seminar shows timid daters that being nervous outside of their cyber-shells is completely normal. At some point, Ms. McDermott says, "everybody has broccoli on their teeth when they smile at someone special." ■

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