

Checking on online daters a growing issue

By Rasha Elass
Columbia News Service
Thursday, May 26, 2005

NEW YORK - A **fast-growing online dating service in Texas** says it is offering its users something none of its big competitors can match: a safer date.

True.com, which was founded in Dallas last year, says it now has 3 million active members who agree to have criminal background checks done on themselves and their potential dates.

But Herb Vest, 60, the founder and chief executive of True.com, said that he isn't satisfied with business success alone. He is lobbying state legislators to change the law so that online dating services must inform their clients whether or not they run background checks.

"We believe it's our mission to end the divorce rate in the U.S., so we have to provide a wholesome environment," said Vest, whose lobbying has led to proposed bills in Ohio, Michigan, Virginia, Florida and California.

If the legislation goes through, "you would see companies that offer online dating services would quickly start running background checks," said Ohio state Rep. W. Scott Oelslager, a supporter of the bill. None of the six states has passed the legislation yet.

But critics say that True.com is preying on unsubstantiated fears that online dating is less safe than regular dating, presenting background checks as a panacea even though they are a flawed measure of criminal activity, demonizing the former prisoner population and working to legislate its business model to gain an edge over its competition.

Match.com, a division of the Internet giant InterActiveCorp, which has 18 million online dating members, surveyed its clients and found that 80 percent did not favor the legislation. "We're not in the business of legislating love," said Kristin S. Kelly, a senior director of public relations at Match.com.

Criminal background checks "might give someone a false sense of security," said Gregg McCrary, a retired FBI profiler. "Only the FBI and other law enforcement have access to federal records," McCrary said. "States don't provide complete data."

"I can't imagine anyone in this day and age would go online assuming any level of safety, because it just doesn't exist," said Laura Daniels, an executive recruiter based in Forth Worth, Texas, who regularly runs background checks on her clients for employment purposes. "From my own professional experience, background checks aren't accurate unless you go back 10 years and to different states, and still you can't gather complete information."

But proponents of the legislation say they are not looking for a guarantee of safety.

"The background checks won't be 100 percent effective, but if they're 50 percent effective, then that's better than nothing," said Jayne Hitchcock, the president of Working to Halt Online Abuse, a nonprofit group that monitors online harassment.

WHOA said it works to empower victims and educate online users and law-enforcement personnel.

"This year so far we've received half a dozen complaints of harassment from people who met through an online dating service," Hitchcock said. The highest number of complaints came from people who met through an online bidding service, in which the seller or buyer filed a harassment complaint, Hitchcock said.

According to statistics posted on WHOA's Web site, more than half of self-reported complaints of harassment began either through an e-mail correspondence or from an Internet message board. "We don't have it broken down by online dating," Hitchcock said.

Others argue for some kind of regulation, particularly with regard to sex offenders. "Sexual predators will use any means possible to obtain victims," said McCrary, the retired FBI profiler.

"More than 90 percent of sex offenders we monitor are getting in these online dating services," said Grace Davis, the lead trainer at IPPC, an Internet and computer-monitoring system used by probation, parole and pretrial services.

IPPC monitored computer usage of sex offenders who were under a court order. Davis declined to give the total number of sex offenders monitored through IPPC.

Meanwhile, defenders of an unregulated online dating scene say this is much ado about nothing.

"I would say there are more safety issues when you meet people in bars," said Daniels, who has been a member of Match.com for two years. "Or if I go to a mixer or a church singles group. I just have no expectation that any one group has a safer background than another."

What's more, advocates of ex-convicts' rights say that the proposed legislation surrounding background checks is discriminatory.

"I think that's another form of discrimination," said Jason Bell, 33, who served 9 1/2 years in prison for an attempted murder conviction when he was 20.

Bell now works at Project Rebound, a program at San Francisco State University that helps former convicts attend college.

Bell has gone through the program and expects to graduate with a bachelor's degree in sociology this spring.

"Unfortunately, it's absolutely true" that the legislation "is discriminatory against criminals," said Vest of True.com, whose father was killed during a crime. "But if that hurts their feelings, it doesn't bother me a bit."

Critics also pointed to a glitch. If the law were passed in one state and not another, how would that affect daters? "We have to work out these mechanics," Oelslager said.

Some online startups - such as trustadate.com and safedate.com - are providing customers with the option of running a criminal background check on a potential date for a small fee.

"You can request someone to become a safe dater," said Jeff Collins, 43, the chief executive of Safe Date and Integrated Screening Partners in Austin, Texas, which has provided background checks for employers for 11 years. "'I'd like to meet you but I'm a single mom, so would you go through the process.'"

Some regular users, though, don't like the attention at all - particularly from the government. "Online dating is just a goofy way to meet people," said Daniels, the Match.com user. "And the legislature has no business in my dating life."