

Internet Week

Online Dating Sites Quarrel Over Background Checks

By Antone Gonsalves, InternetWeek

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True.com has taken on the rest of the online dating industry in pushing state legislators to require matchmaking sites to conduct criminal background checks on members or post a warning that no such screening has been done.

The Irving, Texas, company, which checks subscribers for criminal records and marital status through an exclusive arrangement with Rapsheets.com, says it's the responsibility of online matchmakers to do whatever they can to ensure the safety of daters. But far larger and older competitors, such as Match.com and Yahoo Inc., however, oppose such regulations, **saying they would make dating even more dangerous for subscribers by giving them a false sense of security.**

True.com believes sites that do not conduct background checks should at least be required to clearly post a warning saying its members have not been screened. In addition, dating sites should be required to have a section dedicated to helping first-time daters minimize risks, such as by meeting in a public place, taking a cellular phone, telling friends where they're going and taking their own car.

States where online-dating safety bills are pending include California, Florida, Michigan, Ohio, Texas and Virginia.

"We believe this legislation would save lives and prevent rapes, robberies and assaults," Herb Vest, chief executive for True.com, said Thursday. "I believe this raises the bar on the industry and it would bring many more single people, currently not using online-dating services, into our industry, once it's perceived as safe."

To the rest of the industry, however, True.com is seen **as trying to legislate its business model.** The site is one of very few, if any, that checks members for criminal records and marital status.

"It's special-interest legislation whereby you are taking a market differentiator of a particular company, and, through legislation, enforcing it on the rest of us," said Kristin Kelly, senior director of public relations for Match.com, which is among the largest and oldest online dating services.

Privately held True.com, which claims to have 2.8 million members, but only charges men for its services, did not offer any studies showing online dating as more dangerous than dating in general. The company, however, has sponsored research that shows 77

percent of voters would support state legislation requiring background checks, Vest said. That number jumps to 82 percent for female voters.

In addition, Vest claims that 89 percent of women would be more likely to use a dating site, if it performed background checks.

But Dallas-based Match.com, which has more than a million paying subscribers and 15 million active members, **says its own customer surveys have shown that the additional security layer is neither wanted nor needed.**

"This legislation is a poor solution **in search of a problem,**" Kelly said. "No one, yet, has shown Match.com that this is something that is needed."

Indeed, Kelly claimed that background checks would not necessarily show a person's criminal record, and also wouldn't matter in cases where a person used fake identification. Yet, the process would lead people to letting down their guard, by making them feel safer.

"You're creating a false sense of security that doesn't exist," she said.

Both sides are also wide apart on the cost of background checks. Vest insists the cost is "negligible," while **Kelly says it would cost from \$15 to \$30 per member each time the process was done.**

"It's crazy," she said.

Nevertheless, True.com insists it will push on with its campaign, expecting some states to sign some type of regulation by the summer. **The rest of the industry, however, also plans to keep on fighting, with Match.com leading the charge with the support of Yahoo, America Online Inc., Google Inc. and many others, Kelly said.**

True,
But that's not all!

The story also appears in the following publications:

Regulation of Online Dating Services Sparks Controversy
CMR BUYER 3/4/05

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