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A truly scary addition to the online dating scene

By BEN GRABOW Scripps Howard News Service

(SH) - Happiness is just a click away. Along with fraud, identity theft and your very own stalker.

The Internet is a scary place, full of lurkers and perverts and Nigerian dignitaries looking to transfer large sums of money. So most Internet users value safety in any form, from pop-up blockers to spam filters to antivirus software. But there's one risk to the Internet that no one can avoid, a risk that Web surfers take every time they use one of the Net's most popular tools.

There's no guarantee that the guy in that Internet dating ad is really cat-friendly, 6-foot-2 and athletic, let alone single. Until today.

Well, there's still no guarantee that he's not 5-foot-nothing, decidedly rotund and fond of turning cats into beer coozies. **But if you use TRUE.com, you can guarantee that he's single.**

A new evolution in the online dating genre, TRUE makes plain on its home page that it will not tolerate married men or women hoping to find an illicit affair. The site promises a background check for all users, using public records to verify your single-hood.

According to the site, "Saying you are single if you are married constitutes fraud and could subject you to civil and criminal penalties under federal and state law. TRUE reserves the right to report violators to law enforcement authorities and seek prosecution or civil redress to the fullest extent of the law."

Bad boys, bad boys, whatcha gonna do when a WEB SITE comes after you? This is certainly more threatening than the fine print following an age verification. Not that I've ever read the fine print. Not that I've ever visited a site that would ask me to verify that I'm 18. Not that... never mind.

The threats aren't limited to the licentious, either - TRUE completes a criminal background check on its users, and will not allow anyone convicted of a felony to participate.

But this begs the question: Who actually uses online dating sites other than married people and convicted felons? The answer is surprising. Well, it is to me. As it turns out, a lot of people use online dating these days, and it is growing more and more acceptable.

Granted, an online personal ad still bears the stigma of being a personal ad - the ultimate meat marketing of one's photo, height, weight and musical interests (as if anyone cares about your musical interests). But for the newly mobile young people in this country,

finding themselves in unfamiliar new cities and situations, the online dating site can be a welcome refuge from the smoky and anonymous bar-and-club scene.

Security on these Web sites is a big concern, and a face-to-face meeting with an online stranger can be a huge risk. He may type the wittiest e-mail you've ever read, but it's no guarantee he's not a nutter. So TRUE is taking a step in the right direction by offering some online peace of mind.

Still, if some spammer in Tennessee can convince my e-mail account that he is truly an emissary from the National Bank of Nigeria, then a convicted murderer and cat taxidermist can convince a dating Web site that he's squeaky clean.

So remember, no matter how safe it seems, **be as cautious and careful as you would be alone in a bar. Make sure your friends know what you're up to. Try to meet these people in public places.**

And please, leave your pets at home.