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## **Is dating-service legislation just another marketing ploy?**

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TALLAHASSEE -- Marketers had it easier decades ago, relying on straightforward TV spots and basic newspaper and magazine ads.

Today, the increasingly diversified array of media sources bombarding American consumers has forced message men and women to find innovative tactics -- "guerrilla" or "buzz" marketing -- to get their brands noticed.

An upstart online-dating site has found a new twist on that approach -- enlisting state legislatures, and the reporters who cover them, in their campaign to attract clients.

True.com, a Dallas-based Internet matchmaking service, has launched a push in Florida and five other states to convince lawmakers that online-dating sites should be required to perform background checks on members or tell customers that they do not.

True.com is one of the only dating sites that performs background checks on customers. They argue that sexual and violent crimes that could result from an Internet dating-site rendezvous make it important that its competitors do the same.

Competitors such as Match.com, one of the nation's largest dating sites, do not require background checks and argue that such legislation is not needed.

They contend that True is attempting to carve out a niche in the increasingly competitive online dating marketplace by falsely scaring consumers into thinking the world of online dating is rife with sexual and violent predators.

Both sides said they know of no reliable statistics documenting crimes stemming from Internet dating services. Each side said they know of only a handful of cases nationwide in which people were stalked or attacked by dates they met on such services.

True has found lawmakers to back the legislation in Florida, Virginia, California, Ohio, Texas and Michigan. Convincing more than a few in each state has proved more difficult: The bills have been defeated or stalled in all but Michigan, where it's moving along slowly.

On Wednesday, the sponsor in the Florida House temporarily pulled it from consideration in a committee hearing after his colleagues made clear it would fail.

Whether the bills pass, though, might be beside the point. Typically, companies seeking

beneficial legislation do so as clandestinely as possible to insulate lawmakers from the perception that they are bowing to special interests. True, however, has not shied from publicity.

At a committee hearing Wednesday, as TV and print reporters looked on, True's senior marketing director spoke in favor of the bill.

For years, politicians with an eye to Election Day have supported attention-getting legislation with little chance of passing.

Kristin Kelly, a spokesperson for Match.com who testified against the effort in the Florida House committee, said it was untoward for a company to do likewise.

"If you have a product you think consumers want, your job is to go out and market that product," she said. "That's the way the marketplace should work, rather than getting lawmakers to legislate one company's business model."

Herb Vest, True's founder, denied that effort was primarily about marketing. But, he said, the publicity has been a plus.

"I'm a businessman. Of course, publicity is good. And we have had quite a bit of publicity, negative too, from this also; I don't know on balance whether we've gained or lost," he said.

Michael Mazis, a marketing professor at American University, praised what he called a "unique" strategy. By linking its effort with the credibility of heavily covered state Legislatures, the company has attracted more attention than it otherwise would.

"I have to defend this company for being innovative. In a crowded media marketplace it's not easy to get attention, and you're writing about it," he said.

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