



Love growing strong on Web

By Edward C. Baig, USA TODAY

Care for a date with the suddenly available Brad Pitt or Jennifer Aniston? OK, so maybe that's a little out of reach. How about the next best thing? How about a date with someone who *looks* like Brad or Jen?



Haroot Hakopian and Claire Schuster met on eHarmony.com in 2003. They're getting married in September.

By Tim Dillon, USA TODAY

New technology from Fujifilm will let online-dating customers search for people who (in theory, anyway) resemble film stars, sports icons or former flames. And now a company called Traffix plans to use Fujifilm's technology for a free new site, LookalikeFinder.com. (**Related:** [Romance, and everything else, lurk in cyberspace](#))

That's just the latest sign of the fierce competition among online-dating sites. Internet-tracking firm Hitwise says the number of dating sites it monitors has reached 836, up from 611 in January 2004. All of those companies are seeking new love potions to court subscribers and nudge them toward pricier commitments.

The industry has grown so fast that Hitwise foresees a shakeout. Already, there are signs the bloom is off the rose. In the past year, the average time spent on dating sites fell from 12 minutes, 1 second to 11 minutes, 36 seconds, Hitwise says. JupiterResearch, a technology research and analysis firm, expects online-dating revenue to slow. Says Mark Brooks, who runs the Online Personals Watch industry site: "I think we're moving into the first stages of maturity."

So companies are trying, like the most desperate bachelor in the bar, to stand out. Those who market love on the Internet are increasingly wooing customers by giving personality and compatibility tests, matching lifestyle preferences and even running criminal background checks on would-be partners. Some sites are offering high-tech extras — instant messaging, blogging, video profiles and live video chat.

Internet outfits have been flirting with the lovelorn for about a decade now. And why not? There are more than 90 million unattached adults in the USA. And many of them will go to great lengths — and part with chunks of money — to find true love.

Michelle Hoover, 35, of Chicago had no problem justifying a \$50-a-month tab to hunt for a mate on eHarmony.com: "For one night of the month, I don't go out with my girlfriends. In the overall picture, is it really that expensive when you want to meet someone?"

Success harder to achieve

For the strongest players, the cyberspace dating game remains lucrative. In December, for instance, eHarmony attracted \$110 million from two venture-capital firms. "What kinds of numbers must eHarmony have shown the VCs to get \$110 million?" asks Brooks.

But success is getting harder. Last summer, MatchNet (now Spark Networks), which runs the AmericanSingles.com and JDate.com (for Jewish singles) sites, pulled the plug on an initial public offering. In September, Web site **True** shed 60% of its workforce. And Match.com, owned by Barry Diller's IAC/InterActiveCorp, cut jobs. JupiterResearch says online-dating revenue hit \$473 million in 2004, up from \$396 million in 2003. But Jupiter expects revenue growth to slow by the end of the decade.

Why the slowdown? The reasons vary, experts say.

A survey released exclusively to USA TODAY by Keynote Systems found that customer satisfaction with dating sites is lower than for online venues as a whole. A key reason: **Sixty-one percent of those surveyed said they feared that online daters were misrepresenting themselves (for example, the "bachelor" who's not a bachelor).**

Their fears aren't misplaced. **More than 30% of those playing the field online admit to being married or living with significant others, Keynote reports. No wonder 45% of respondents express a desire for background checks of other members. (Keynote surveyed 2,000 customers and 2,000 prospective customers of 10 dating sites.)**

Mindful that such skepticism could sink their business, the purveyors of online romance are trying to stand out. Here's how:

•Truth or dare. Keynote's results suggest why there's interest in criminal background checks offered by True and other dating sites. The idea: to ensure that people are who they say they are — marital status included. True has pushed legislation in some states that would force online-dating providers to make clear whether they, too, run such checks.

"That's a solution looking for a problem," complains Jim Safka, the new CEO of rival Match.com. But some competitors grudgingly admire the marketing strategy. "It was brilliant," says Nelson Rodriguez, CEO of LifeAccess.com. "You try to legislate into law your business model."

Married people shunned

True's CEO Herb Vest warns: "If a person is married or a criminal, they best go somewhere else." True says it intends to prosecute married people who masquerade as singles.

• Matchmaker, matchmaker, make me a match. "We don't think of ourselves as an online-dating service," says Greg Forgatch, CEO of eHarmony. "We're all about helping people get married and get married well." Forgatch is the son-in-law of founder Neil Clark Warren.

Members pay that \$50-a-month fee (most sites charge \$25 to \$30 for monthly subscriptions, though some are free) and spend nearly an hour filling out a 400-item-plus personality questionnaire. People list qualities they must have in a partner and those they can't stand. eHarmony has identified 29 areas of compatibility that it says will determine the success of a long-term relationship. Examples: sexual passion and conflict-resolution skills.

Unlike sites that let users contact people they find appealing, eHarmony itself digs out prospects it thinks are compatible.

"The greatest thing is that they do some of the prescreening for you," says Haroot Hakopian, 36, a Maryland teacher who was growing frustrated and considering letting his membership lapse before he was introduced to Claire Schuster, 31, in 2003; she, too, was about to walk away. The couple plan to marry in September.

"Claire jokes that if a man is willing to answer 500 questions just to get a date, that's worth something right there," Hakopian says. (They won eHarmony's annual Dream Date Contest, for which they were flown to Los Angeles for a tour of company headquarters.)

EHarmony is flooding TV and radio with ads boasting of married couples who met through the service; it takes credit for more than 10,000 unions since 2001. (EHarmony also provides USA TODAY's online-dating service.)

But the eHarmony approach leaves some cold. Molly Hoot, 37, a San Diego lawyer, says, "I would rather choose who I communicate with rather than base it on my contrived responses to certain questions." Hoot prefers perusing pictures and profiles at Yahoo Personals and has begun appearing in ads for it.

Yahoo upgrades

Seemingly in response to eHarmony, Yahoo has launched Personals Premier, a \$35-a-month service with more advanced searching and matchmaking tools than the standard \$20-a-month Yahoo Personals service. It, too, offers an engaging personality test. Example: Various traits (such as organized, bashful, sensitive) fly on the screen, and you're asked to click on as many words as fit your personality.

Yahoo Personals overall is still the No. 1 dating site, Hitwise says.

"I think (Premier) will separate the serious relationship seekers from casual daters," says Gloria Kreitzberg, 50, a businesswoman from Rochester, N.Y. "I don't have time to be corresponding with people who are not in the same dating cycle I am."

One of Yahoo's advantages: Most of those who seek love online begin at a search engine, the Keynote survey found. That raises the possibility that Google, which owns the Orkut social-networking site, will enter the online-dating fray. (Google says it has no current interest.)

• **Dating on the fly.** You're walking around town when a text message pops up on your phone, along with a photo of a rather attractive stranger. The prospective companion is nearby and would *love* to meet for a drink.

Seem far-fetched? Members of Dodgeball.com can choose up to five "crushes" online and receive alerts when they're within 10 blocks of their location. The free "opt-in" service is available in 22 cities; Dodgeballers sign in by telling the company their location.

As the telecom industry unveils more advanced cell phones and networks, Match.com and Webdate are also having dalliances with mobile technologies.

Eventually, location-based services (LBS), in which people could be tracked through their phones via satellite and other methods, might also be used to get singles together. But privacy rights would have to be respected.

MatchMobile subscribers pay \$4.95 a month to browse profiles and peek at pictures via cell phones. Those at Webdate pay \$2.99 for a similar service.

Webdate, among other sites, lets members engage in live video chats. Match.com's Safka, though, says video "is not plug-and-play for the consumer today, but three to five years from now it will be an important part of our business."

Brad Hogg, president of Relationship Exchange, a network of personals sites, cautions, "You don't have romantic candlelight dinners over Web chat."

• **You gotta have a gimmick.** Want to meet a fox? A dog or cat might be more like it. DateMyPet.com is about pairing up animal lovers — and if all goes well, maybe even their four-legged friends, too.

How about finding Mr. or Ms. Right through your penmanship? IMatchup.com, owned by the same company that's behind LookalikeFinder.com, Traffix, has unveiled a handwriting-analysis feature.

But Traffix Vice President Dan Levine concedes it's more about entertainment than science: "We're not claiming that because of the way you loop your Y's, you are limiting yourself to a certain segment of the population."

Niche sites proliferate

While most major dating sites will romance anyone who asks, some businesses focus on like-minded groups or people in a particular area. "I'm not promoting Cupid.com anymore; I'm pitching DesMoines.Cupid.com," says Cupid.com CEO Eric Strauss.

The FriendFinder Network runs 17 niche sites. Example: Amigos.com, for those seeking a Hispanic partner. FriendFinder also reaches across the spiritual spectrum. There's the multidenominational BigChurch.com, where member Slik101 is quoted on the home page: "I met Christopher on BigChurch.com and knew God was in our relationship."

• **Putting your best face forward.** Dating sites are forever seeking value-added services for which they can charge a premium. SinglesClick, which supplies services to dating sites, offers SinglesTel: Cautious singles can chat by phone without revealing their numbers. "You get more emotional bandwidth with the human voice," says SinglesClick CEO Fred Davis.

SinglesClick also has a partnership with Kodak to connect people with professional photographers who can show off online images in the best possible light.

Consumers can visit LookBetterOnline.com and arrange a photo shoot with a pro. The cost: \$129 for a dozen downloadable photos.

Spark Networks is teaming with E-Cyrano.com, a company founded by writer Evan Katz. For \$49, E-Cyrano will critique your profile and suggest ways to punch it up. For \$129, it will write two personalized essays.

Katz likens profiles to résumés. "How does your résumé sound compared to every other candidate vying for the same job?"

Some note that, as businesses, dating sites have a built-in flaw they can't really escape: Their goal is to lose the very people joining their ranks.

Once customers fall in love, after all, there's no reason for them to stick around.