

Looking for love in unusual places

RELATIONSHIPS | Matchmaking firms and Internet sites for lovers are thriving

BY YVONNE ZACHARIAS
VANCOUVER SUN

We live in lonely times. In our time-compressed, computer-obsessed, market-driven lives, more and more people are turning to the Internet or private dating services to find Mr. or Ms. Right.

A word of caution: Don't count on a match made in heaven.

Vancouver psychologist Gordon Reid says that while professional matchmakers tend to focus on a person's looks, age, cultural background and other attributes, in the long run, all of these details dwarf in importance against the essential question of what makes a relationship worthwhile.

A meaningful relationship, says Reid, usually begins when one person expresses interest in another person in such a way that the other feels invited to let themselves be known for who they are.

"We treat others quite unconsciously as though they are what we think they are and never give them the room to express really who they are... we are constantly trying to make them something that we think they are," says Reid.

In a good relationship, once two people begin to grow, each will change in a direction that is in keeping with their natural being, rather than in a direction that is forced through the demands of the other.

It is this growth that makes people feel alive, that makes them feel their partner is vital to them.

Reid likes to refer to M. Scott Peck's definition of love as "the will to extend oneself for the purpose of nurturing one's own and another's spiritual growth." It's a subtle quality that's probably not on most dating profile questionnaires.

Psychologist Trisha Hiland and Barbara Mitchell, an associate professor of sociology and gerontology at Simon Fraser University, both frown on matchmaking on the Internet because people might lie about themselves or enter a fantasy world of instant intimacy that has little to do with reality.

Mitchell is skeptical of private matchmaking companies, large-

ly because of the pool of potential mates they draw in. These tend to be people who have not managed to click with people in the usual places — with friends and family, at the workplace, in school, at the rec centre, in the gym or even at the bar.

Nonetheless, private matchmaking firms and Internet sites like Lavalife are doing a booming business.

Jane Carstens moved to the West Coast four years ago to set up a branch of the Toronto-based Hearts Canada. In one year alone, business has tripled.

Carstens argues that once people have exhausted the usual avenues of friends, family and work to find a partner, "they start looking for a more proactive, business-like way of finding a partner," she says. "Sometimes that is no different than developing a marketing plan."

When matching people, she looks at everything from religion to whether they want to start a family.

Of course, there are the intangibles like chemistry and charisma that she can't account for, but she feels she is increasing the odds of a good match by pairing up like-minded people according to their priorities and interests.

Everyone has a slightly different wish list. But sincerity, kindness, intelligence and good family values often figure prominently. If mate seekers can find someone who enjoys doing the things they do, like hiking, cycling or skiing, so much the better.

She asks people questions about religion, whether they are smokers or social drinkers, whether they have ever had a sexually transmitted disease, whether they are regular substance users, whether they have a criminal record, whether they have been treated for mental illness, what kind of music and activities they like and whether they want to start a family.

Rosalyn and Ralph Dietz of Compatible Introductions offer relationship coaching.

She and her husband of 26 years have been in the business for 19 years. "Clients keep telling us it [meeting through conventional means] is like looking for a needle in a haystack."

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Roy Lichtenstein's 'Kiss II' personifies passionate desire. Can private matchmaking companies or Internet sites deliver?

A Cyrano to shape cyberspace

How to sell yourself with the online dating 'profile' — but not to everyone

BY LESLIE JAVORSKI

It's one thing to put your cherished collection of Hot Wheels up for sale on eBay. It's quite another to put yourself up there. Not exactly there, but that's what it can feel like when you sign up for Internet dating. Post a nice picture, a brief product description and wait for a few bids.

At least 20 million people in North America are online looking for a date. But like all dating arenas, there are hazards and one of the biggest is the Profile.

The profile is what every dater posts when they sign up for an online dating service. The photo is important, but isn't enough if followed by dull copy.

The objective of the profile is to attract the right people — not everyone. Think fly-fishing over trawling. One of the biggest complaints from users is that profiles don't contain enough information. The problem isn't volume, it's style. Everybody has some. But profiles are a bitch to write — for everybody. And why wouldn't they be? There are two places where we write about ourselves: In our high school yearbook and on our resume. Say no more.

Here's an example.

JACK (IN THE RAW)

I love playing golf in my spare time on weekends. I spend a lot of time at home weeknights, listening to music, reading and just generally relaxing to recharge my batteries, but also like to go out after work for dinner with friends, or to see concerts or sporting events. The woman of my dreams would be funny, warm, out-



Cyrano de Bergerac is Edmund Rostand's Musketeers-era lover story.

going and my intellectual sparring partner.

Jack, with his prosaic lists of interests, isn't the first to be confounded by the written form. Christian gave the job to Cyrano de Bergerac to win Roxane. It didn't really work out, though, as all three came up empty handed, and one of them dead. And Evan Mark Katz has made a living as a kind of online Cyrano, giving instruction with his primer *I Can't Believe I'm Buying This Book: A Commonsense Guide to Successful Internet Dating*, and offering guidance on his website E-Cyrano.com.

There's a Cyrano in everyone; here are a few tips to get you on the right track.

To begin. You should know right off that good spelling and grammar is the online version of good grooming. And don't open with "Here goes" or "Oh, I hate this part." It's the written equivalent of hovering around the buffet table.

Next, take out the bit about walking on the beach. The whole world likes walking on the beach; you've seen them there: Goths, teachers, pipe fitters, dogs. Ditto for sunsets, snuggling and being with someone special. As for just wanting to have fun — is that folk dancing or the pink patio drinks sort of fun? It's okay to be specific; you're allowed to be exclusionary. This is cyberspace.

JACK (AFTER HIS PROFILE MAKEOVER)

I play as much golf as I can but not before breakfast. Saturday mornings are best at a diner with the newspaper, two eggs over easy and several refills. I like my job. I'm well suited for it and I do it well. I like the people I work with. I also like my family. I moved here to be near them. It's true what my friends say, I am careful, even cautious, but this is a good thing, given my curious nature. The woman I imagine meeting appreciates a somewhat satirical outlook and she would have her own kind of wit, which would make for interesting discussions over breakfast, or if she prefers, later in the day.

And remember: Wading through the sea of Internet profiles on any given site is a lot like being at one of those big, nameless parties. To find the interesting conversation with the Tibetan botanist in the corner, you have to put out. Same thing online. Offer a little something from your core. When your profile has a tiny piece of the way you view life, you have a starting point. Then you have a drink, then maybe a hotel room in Morocco.

Leslie Javorski is a Vancouver writer



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Ralph and Rosalyn Dietz offer relationship coaching for couples.

Is it time to dump old notions of Valentine's Day?

The celebration is empty for a lot of gay people and singles

BY KERRY GOLD
VANCOUVER SUN

Is Valentine's Day an outmoded and archaic holiday that needs a makeover? Considering that the whole point of Valentine's Day almost always involves romantic gestures from male to female, the point is backward on so many fronts it's a wonder the tradition has survived at all.

First there's the age-old idea that romantic love is the domain of the female, whether it be her "big wedding day" or her need to be wooed on her wedding anniversary, or the requirement that she be lavished with chocolates and lingerie on Valentine's Day.

The underlying idea is, that the guy — who's usually represented in popular culture as reluctantly going through the motions to keep himself out of the doghouse — is not in similar need of these encouraging reminders that he too is adored.

It's a girl thing, as old as the idea that a woman needs a pedestal to stand on so that she might feel financially and

emotionally secure in case the dowry falls through.

"I think there's something vaguely silly looking about it," says UBC professor Gisele Baxter, who specializes in literature and popular culture. "I'm not a terribly romantic or sentimental person, I must confess. But I think in a lot of ways it could do with a good shake up in terms of perception. I think in a lot of ways it feeds into this increasingly desperate notion that you have to be involved with somebody. It is in a lot of ways a festivity that refuses to budge."

There's the fact that the promotion of Valentine's Day is geared entirely toward heterosexual culture, thereby omitting the proverbial 10 per cent of the population.

The biggest complication, of course, is that this celebration of coupling omits the majority who haven't coupled. The singles population is no small matter when you consider that about 1.1 million singles live in Vancouver, compared to 822,390 marrieds (those who are not separated), according to the most recent, 2001 census.

Singles are such a growing demographic that in America they've formed a formal association.

Nearly half of all households in the U.S. are headed up by single people, and the American Association for Single People formed in response to what

they say is a growing trend for the single life. According to the site's census report for 2003, 54 per cent of New York households consider themselves single, a statistic that explains the singles-obsessed show that sprung from that city, *Sex and the City*.

We've all seen the proliferation of anti V-Day websites and e-cards and anti V-Day T-shirts about bloody Valentines, upside down hearts, black arm bands, and the like. For some, Valentine's Day isn't the box of chocolates it's billed to be.

It's a holiday best left to children to celebrate with their little doily creations, because let's face it: When adults get involved in proving that they're loved and loving, it gets way too complicated.

The institutions of marriage and family have transformed; few people idealize the nuclear Cleaver family model anymore, and yet Valentine's Day continues to dwell on the male-female romantic love scenario.

"The interesting thing about it is in a lot of ways it's quite exclusionary," says Baxter. "It seems to be really buying into this increasing promotion and idea in contemporary culture that you have to be linked to somebody, you have to be associated with somebody, you have to be in a relationship or else there is something wrong with you."

"And unless you're capable of com-

pletely blanking it out and ignoring it, it can be a difficult time for people who are chronically single or people who've had relationships that have recently broken up.

"And if you look at all aspects of [Valentine's Day] promotion, they are rigidly heterosexual. It is very much about the heterosexual male gaze."

"And I think it still has to do with this double standard notion that women respond to relationships in a more sentimental romantic way."

And when Valentine's Day crosses cultures the results can be disastrous. In Japan, Valentine's Day has turned into a financial nightmare for the office girls who are now obligated to buy chocolates for all the men in their workplaces. The newfound custom is seldom returned, even though Japanese girls are often spending a small fortune to fulfill their chocolate gift-giving duty.

And finally, if a single person does try to attempt a first move on Valentine's Day, forget it. This is one holiday so steeped in seriousness that a first date would be awkward and embarrassing. Although it may look like it's all red satin and lollipops, Valentine's Day gestures are encoded with meaning regarding the nature of a relationship, particularly for adults.

"If it's a first date then you have to be prepared for the other party to take the

gesture very, very seriously — to take it almost as if you're announcing that you're going to go steady. This might be somebody you simply want to have dinner with that night, but they might expect it every weekend, a repeat performance."

In other words, you better mean business if you're going to participate in this holiday.

And then there's the overly commercialized, crass side of Valentine's Day, which can suck the romance dry.

Says Vancouver musician Shane Nelken: "It's probably a good idea to alleviate any added pressure a date on Valentine's Day might bring — such as calling attention to how lame and commercial the whole thing is and how it really means nothing."

But Baxter doesn't want to sound like the grinch who stole Valentine's Day, either. She's hopeful that there might be a cultural shake up that might cause the day to be re-considered in terms of including more members of society.

"I don't want to give the impression that I think Valentine's Day should be completely chucked out the window. I realize that it is this very commodified commercialized thing, like a number of holidays throughout the year. But on the other hand, there's something to be said for a festivity that is colourful and positive and that celebrates affection in these bleak days of winter."