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Matchmakers find modern fans in the digital age

The founder of Ambiance Matchmaking and her client share what it takes to find success in matchmaking. (Abel Uribe, Chicago Tribune)

By **Alexia Elejalde-Ruiz**,
Chicago Tribune
contact the reporter

The Internet has upended innumerable traditional business models. Travel agents. Retail stores. Newspapers (sigh).

Yet online dating, which has ballooned into a $2.1 billion industry used by almost 40 percent of dating singles, hasn't killed one of the most old-fashioned professions of all: matchmakers.

Some of these professional cupids say they are seeing renewed and expanded interest in their services as disillusioned digital daters trade computer algorithms for human judgment.

A matchmaking school is reporting growing enrollment.

Even online dating behemoths Match.com and eHarmony.com have invested in personal matchmaking services in the past year that charge several thousand dollars for human attention.

Professional setups offer more privacy
by **Alexia Elejalde-Ruiz**

"People have dating (overload) — they're on Tinder, Match, OKCupid," said Talia Goldstein, co-founder and CEO of Three Day Rule, Match.com's "white glove" matchmaking partner. "I think people are getting so confused by all the options that they are looking for someone to help them."

While no data tracks the growth of the human matchmaking trade, Paul Oyer, a Stanford University business school professor, said he wouldn't be surprised if it is on the upswing. As income inequality deepens, there are more well-off people who can afford personalized services, from day care to dog care to date-arranging, he said.

These love emissaries could hurt for business if online dating sites improve their matching algorithms or figure out how to prevent members from lying about their height and age, as the Web will always offer a bigger pool, said Oyer, author of "Everything I Ever Needed to Know about Economics I Learned from Online Dating."

For now, though, matchmakers are banking on people paying a premium for thoughtful romantic curating.

Three Day Rule, which launched in Chicago this year, charges men and women $3,500 for three months of personal matchmaking and $5,000 for a six-month package that includes date coaching, styling and professional photography to help clients present their most attractive selves.

Founded in 2010 in Los Angeles and also serving San Francisco and New York, the company plans to expand to Washington, D.C., and Boston this fall and an additional 20 cities next year, thanks to funding from Match, Goldstein said.

Goldstein, who worked as a segment producer for E! True Hollywood Stories before starting the company, said the service gets 40 to 50 new paying clients each month, and has a database of about 30,000 singles that matchmakers scour to find the best candidates for their clients. (It is free to join the database, which is not viewable to anyone but the matchmakers.)

At first, 70 percent of clients were women, she said, though now it is closer to 50-50.

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"I think women are working really hard and want someone to do the (dating) work for them," Goldstein said of the heavy interest from women. "It's like outsourcing your love life."

Some matchmakers say their clientele is getting younger, a sort of retro backlash against the immediacy of the Tinder era (Tinder, for the uninitiated, is a popular dating app based almost entirely on photos).

Stef Safran, founder of the 5-year-old Chicago matchmaking service Stef and the City, said she has noticed an uptick in 20-something clients who tell her they are tired of the casual nature of many dating websites, wary of misleading photos or overwhelmed by the magnitude of profiles they must pick from and compete with.

"They don't want to go out with three different people a week," Safran said.

These young clients aren't necessarily on the hunt for a spouse, she said, as is the classic purpose of matchmakers, but they do want a better dating experience. She has two price structures to accommodate her disproportionately female clientele. Men pay $2,400 for at least six guaranteed dates, and women pay $50 to $175 per date as matches become available, depending on how picky they are.

Leslie Wardman, co-founder of Ambiance Matchmaking, which is based in Chicago and has offices in Oklahoma, said most of her clients were 40-somethings in transition after divorce when she started the company 14 years ago. But recently more men and women in their 20s and 30s have been signing up to get set up.

"They are more sophisticated and savvy and have less time to focus on themselves," she said.

On a recent afternoon in a 47th-floor downtown conference room with sweeping views of skyscrapers and the lake, Wardman interviewed a 27-year-old real estate agent who lives in Lincoln Park.

"What did your father do? ... How do you spend time on weekends? ... What did you like about your last boyfriend? ... What did you not like about him? ... What's your greatest goal in life?" Wardman asked as she jotted notes on a clipboard.

The client, who declined to be identified for in this article, signed on with Ambiance on the recommendation of one of her real estate clients. While she said she has no trouble meeting men, she struggles to pinpoint the right ones without wasting time or causing heartache, and she likes the idea of getting help from an ally with her best interests in mind.

Wardman, whose standard fee is $3,995 per year — though she gives discounted rates to certain clients — said the company is picky about who it accepts, and is particularly strict about education. Ninety-five percent of her clients have college degrees and 70 percent have advanced degrees, she said.

Wardman typically matches clients with one another, based on a variety of factors, including how they were raised, the energy they exude, and whether they look good together — although, as a policy, she doesn't share photos before setting up a date.

"We don't promise love and marriage, but we promise that they will have a lot in common with this person," Wardman said.

Business models among matchmakers vary widely.

On the high end, Chicago-based Selective Search, a prominent service founded in 2000 by executive recruiter Barbie Adler, charges rates starting at $25,000. Ninety percent of the clients are men, who are matched with dates who do not pay for the service, though over the past three to five years the company has seen a rise in high-net-worth female clients.

On the other end is Project Fixup, a Chicago-based TechStar startup that charges $20 per setup, using digital tools that have helped bring a human touch to the masses.

Founded two years and bootstrapped with $118,000, Project Fixup employs a human "fixup specialist" who picks through search results after a client questionnaire is run through an algorithm, matching members based on stated deal-breakers, feedback from past dates and an "attractiveness tier." The specialist also arranges all of the details the date – time, location, venue – so no one lifts a finger.

Technology has expanded the toolbox of the modern matchmaker. At Three Day Rule, clients are asked to send photos of their exes, and if it appears the client has a certain physical "type," facial recognition software helps find matches in the database who look similar, Goldstein said.

But the crux of the service is human interaction. Three Day Rule matchmakers do in-person interviews with their clients to learn about them and their preferences, and also meet with each of their clients' potential matches to fully vet them before arranging a date, essentially doing the first-date dirty work for them, Goldstein said. Clients are guaranteed one or two matches a month, the focus being on quality.

The matchmakers crash medical conferences, attend law firm networking events and have infiltrated Comic-Con to recruit new singles to their database.

"If you can't approach a random person at Starbucks, it's not the right job for you," Goldstein said.

The promise of personalized attention appeals to Kelly Barrett, who is experiencing online dating fatigue. Barrett used her lunch break recently to meet at The Lobby bar in the Peninsula Hotel with Catherine Harper, Three Day Rule's Chicago matchmaker, a former nurse.

Barrett, 42, who works in human resources at a public relations firm and lives in River North, has tried Match, eHarmony, OKCupid and ChristianMingle, to no avail.

"The men that are online, in my opinion, sometimes have an inflated idea of whom they should be with," Barrett said. Qualities that are important to her, like having similar senses of humor, are difficult to convey in an online profile.

Barrett decided to join Three Day Rule's free pool of candidates but said the cost was prohibitive to become an official client herself — though, she said, "if I continue not having luck I may scrounge around."

Growing interest in matchmaking has met growing interest in becoming a matchmaker, according one training school for budding cupids.

The Matchmaking Institute in New York enrolled 120 students this year, up from 90 last year and 80 in 2012. Many are lawyers or other professionals who feel trapped in their careers and want more flexibility in their schedules, said co-founder Lisa Clampitt.

About 600 people worldwide have taken the certification course, which costs $3,500 for home study materials and an intensive three-day seminar in New York that covers pertinent business details such as how to build a database of singles, how much to charge and how to tell a client that they have halitosis, Clampitt said.

Clampitt, a former social worker, said she started the certification course to try to introduce some accountability to the unregulated industry.

"I couldn't believe there was no code of ethics, there was no way to create transparency or to track how good people are," said Clampitt, who runs a high-end matchmaking service in New York called VIP Life. If a certified matchmaker gets three complaints, they lose their certification, she said.

Clampitt, who estimates established full-time matchmakers in big cities make a salary of about $100,000 a year, sees the industry favoring smaller specialized companies that cater to niche audiences such as gays and lesbians, baby boomers or certain religious affiliations.

But the big guns of the mainstream dating market are getting in on it, too.

EHarmony in December launched a personal matchmaking service called eH+ that charges clients $5,000 for a year's subscription, said Grant Langston, vice president of brand marketing at eHarmony and general manager of eH+.

EH+ employs five matchmakers, all of them marriage and family therapists or psychologists with Ph.D.s, Langston said. They interview clients by phone, then hand-select matches from eHarmony's pool of potential candidates, catching or discarding matches the algorithm might not.

Several hundred people are using the service, split evenly between men and women with an average age of 49 (the oldest person is 92) and an average income of $150,000, Langston said. Of those, 50 percent are currently dating people they were matched with, which may be greater success than regular eHarmony, he said.

EH+ represents a tiny slice of eHarmony's business, but "three, four, five years from now it will be a significant slice," Langston said.

aelejalderuiz@tribune.com