

Mismatched.com

About two million Americans met their spouses online. Now the divorces are starting. How dating Web sites are scrambling to make sure forever really is forever

By Ellen Gamerman
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In 1995, Matt Frassica, tired of singles bars and set-ups by friends, tried his hand at dating online. There he met, and later married, a woman who also liked long walks in the rain and homemade lasagna. They were even featured in People magazine as a prototype of successful cyber-romance.

Then the fairy tale ended. Mr. Frassica said he realized he was gay, and the divorce was official last year. "We avoided getting to know the real person," says the 34-year-old corporate recruiter in San Francisco. "All we knew was the profiles of each other." (His ex-wife confirms that.)

TEN WAYS TO FIND YOUR LOVER

- Some of the largest Internet dating sites are seeking new ways to stand out.

More than a decade after the Internet revolutionized dating -- about two million Americans met their spouses online, by one measure -- the sites face a new challenge: keeping these couples together. While most sites started out focusing on dating, they are increasingly using their success in the marriage arena as a marketing tool -- making the stakes higher if these unions start to go south.

While many happily married couples say they may never have found a mate offline, there are already indications that meeting a spouse on the Web comes with its own set of potential pitfalls. Some divorce cases, for example, highlight false claims made in the online profiles that led to the initial attraction. In addition, of course, there are the natural perils that can come with getting to know a person virtually instead of the old-fashioned way.

Now, sites are stepping up their efforts to ensure that matches last. [EHarmony.com](#)¹ is opening a new "relationship lab" this summer where some couples who met through the site will be monitored for at least five years to see how the marriages fare. In an initiative dubbed "Project Moses" internally, [JDate.com](#)², a Jewish singles site, is contracting a dating coach to train customer-service representatives in relationship counseling for couples who call in. [True.com](#)³ pitches a compatibility test (patent pending) that it says follows standards set by the American Psychological Association; one aim is to reduce divorce.

The emphasis on marriage and marriage sustenance is what these sites say they need to do to continue to expand their business. After double- and triple-digit growth in some recent years, spending on online dating rose by just 7% last year, according to a report by the Online Publishers Association, a trade group. The report shows that for the first time since 2002, music and video downloads surpassed online dating as a top revenue-maker on the Web. (Adult entertainment probably trumps

them all, according to some market researchers, though figures are difficult to track.) A recent survey by Jupiter Research says serious daters -- those seeking long-term commitments -- are 63% more likely to pay for online dating than other daters. Such statistics are one reason the sites are taking pains to demonstrate successful track records at the altar.

The quest by dating Web sites to keep passion alive is all the more urgent because demographic statistics would suggest that the first wave of divorces among online daters is just now beginning. The median length of a first marriage that ends in divorce is eight years, according to a Census Bureau survey released last year. Online dating took off in 1995, with [Match.com](#)⁴ celebrating its 150th wedding two years later. By 2002, this style of dating had become firmly entrenched in the cultural mainstream.

Touting marriage results is now a major part of many sites' business strategies. Match boasts "twice as many marriages as any other site in the world" on its home page, a claim based on last year's survey of 4,800 people on [Weddingchannel.com](#)⁵, a Los Angeles-based online-registry and wedding-planning service. Yahoo Personals has a special section devoted to success stories, while eHarmony festoons the hallways of its Pasadena, Calif., headquarters with photos of couples at their weddings, including one with "eHarmony" in icing on a computer-shaped cake.

Though **there is no statistical evidence that the break-up rate among online daters is any different from the national average**, some divorce lawyers point to anecdotal evidence. Eric Spevak, a New Jersey divorce lawyer, says that as many as one in five of his clients now comes from marriages that started on the Internet. "There's no consequences online -- people can promise you anything, so engagements are shorter and people are rushing in," says Mr. Spevak.

New York divorce lawyer Raoul Felder says he is also seeing more Internet daters splitting up in his practice: "It's usually a relationship based on fantasy or desperation, which doesn't bode well."

False claims on online dating profiles are showing up in court as lawyers use the early dating profiles -- with their fibs about wealth and status -- for character attacks later. Robert Hoover, a lawyer in San Jose, Calif., says he was able to wrest child custody from his client's ex-wife based partly on allegations that she had used her younger sister's photograph in her dating profile to trick men, including her future husband, into emailing her. "If she'd misrepresented herself in that regard, maybe she misrepresents herself in the area of custody," says Mr. Hoover. "That was just brought up to attack her credibility."

Marriage counselors and divorce attorneys say they are often struck by how much of what brings people together online ultimately contributes to the undoing of the relationship.

One of the hallmarks of online dating, for example, is the quick intimacy driven by heartfelt profiles that can go on for pages and reveal everything from a person's favorite food to a weakness for tattoos. Focusing on these attributes, some psychologists say, makes potential suitors more likely to overlook someone's downsides. A 2004 Match study said 11% of its married couples were "in love prior to ever meeting face-to-face."

Online courtships also take place initially via email, a notably misleading way of communicating that doesn't take into account tone of voice or facial expressions. And experts say online daters as a group tend to be more interested in marriage and therefore more inclined to jump the gun.

It took Carolyn Fellwock and Charlie Watson only 11 months to tie the knot after meeting on Yahoo Personals -- and three years more to call it quits. The couple's shared appreciation for movie nights and homemade Irish stew turned out to be no match for their bickering over how to discipline their kids from previous marriages or the best way to spend the family savings.

"I can't believe it's over," Ms. Watson now says. "I really did think I'd found a soul mate."

A string of failed relationships can mean more subscriptions for an online dating site, of course, but many companies say they are more interested in building a brand name based on success. With several sites mulling plans to branch into services for other family issues, from child-rearing to troublesome in-laws, companies call a good marriage the foundation for customer loyalty. "If they appear to be happy in their marriage for the first couple of years but it doesn't last, that doesn't do anything for us," says Ron Worthy, product manager for member revenue at BlackPlanet Love, an African American singles site. "We want to build families."



Seeking Happily Ever After: After meeting through Yahoo Personals, Carolyn Fellwock and Charlie Watson (left) were married for three years before separating. Plenty still find online love: Newlyweds Anna Murray and Christos Moschovitis met on Match.com.



Marriage-Minded: Sites such as eHarmony and Yahoo Personals highlight success stories.

For those relationships that do fail, dating sites have some built-in protections, primarily in the form of waivers members must agree to with the click of a mouse. Match, in language similar to that of other sites, declares itself not liable "for any damages whatsoever" from emotional distress to bodily injury. Sites with personality tests and quasi-counseling also include waivers saying such services are no substitute for professional help.

Match already has some publicity headaches stemming from a recent lawsuit over "date bait" -- flirtatious emails from phony daters to keep subscribers coming back. Yahoo Personals also is being sued for allegedly posting false profiles. Both companies have denied those claims as fraudulent and are fighting the lawsuits, which seek class-action

status.

Anna Murray, a 39-year-old New York technology executive, knows the pitfalls of online dating. Her solution: She ran her Match suitors by her therapist. "She'd read between the lines as only a good personality profiler can do," says Ms. Murray, now married. When presented with her future husband's profile, she recalls, her therapist delivered the verdict: "She said, 'He's not a creep.'"

While some sites track their marriage rate closely -- eHarmony says 16,500 of its clients tied the knot in the year ending August 2005 -- others say it's too hard to track accurately. According to the Pew Internet & American Life Project, a nonprofit research organization, an estimated two million married Internet users in America met their spouses online -- that is about half the total number of people who married last year.

To maintain its success rate, eHarmony says it has rejected 1.4 million applicants it deems not marriage material -- they are struggling with addiction, for example, or have more than three failed marriages under their belt. Through its relationship lab, the company hopes even unhappy couples can help the cause of lasting matches; by noticing patterns in failed couplings, eHarmony can tweak its "compatibility matching system" to fix the problem. For example, founder and chairman Neil Clark Warren says he has noticed grieving widows and widowers tend to move too quickly in rebound relationships, creating tensions down the road. "We have an enormous interest in all these couples," says Dr. Warren.

Because the industry relies on subscriptions more than advertising, it isn't surprising that dating sites do everything they can to retain their customers. Former retention specialists for Yahoo Personals describe working on "save teams" where they were paid for every lovelorn subscriber they persuaded to stay. "I'd tell them I was just talking to someone earlier who was getting married after using the service," says Donnie Reibert, who last year left his job at West Corporation, contracted by Yahoo to provide customer service. "I'd tell them, 'Just give it time.'" Yahoo Personals says it no longer offers advice when people call to cancel.

New tactics are being employed to reach out to married couples. At eHarmony, newlyweds can now pay \$240 for a 12-session marriage program created by a team of in-house psychologists. JDate encourages couples who met on the site and married to write to its "Mazel Tov" section, but says it doesn't track divorces because it would be logistically difficult.

At Match, a separate success-stories Web site helps the company follow up with daters, and it recently started sending out media tip sheets to encourage newlyweds to tell their stories to the local press. But the company says it has no plans to keep a record of divorces. "A lot of people married, then divorced but remain very good friends. Is it a failure?" says Jim Safka, chief executive of Match. "Looking at divorce rates is a crude and dangerous way to measure things." Mr. Safka adds that the site is for all kinds of relationships, not just marriage.

Says Herb Vest, founder of True.com⁶: "The reason we go to work: to lower the divorce rate." His site requires users to undergo criminal background checks and also analyzes public records to try to ensure that no one on the site is already married and looking for a fling.

Some people who met a spouse online and later divorced aren't losing heart. Some even say they would date online again. Kelly Fleshman, 35, a Web developer from suburban Baltimore, says she doesn't blame the medium for the problems in her marriage. "We got along better than anyone I have ever gotten along with in my life," she says. They ended the marriage last year, and Ms. Fleshman says she's relieved the love notes that started their relationship are nowhere to be found: "I don't have those emails -- that was, like, three or four computers ago."