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Dating Games

By Melany Klinck

At 38, Michael C. is very discouraged with the dating process. Although well educated, physically and financially fit, and ready for commitment, he rarely seems to meet interesting, unattached women. His job offers few opportunities to meet new people; he dislikes the club scene; and his weekend-and-evening work schedule make it difficult for him to socialize with the 9-to-5 crowd. If pressed, Michael will admit he shares an affliction common to many aging singles . . . social laziness.

"The truth about finding a good partner is that it takes an investment of time, effort, and energy," says Nina Atwood, a Dallas-based therapist and author of *Be Your Own Dating Service* (Holt, 1996). "It is unrealistic to stay home every night watching television yet complain because you're not meeting anyone. It is unrealistic to go out to bars and expect to meet someone in that atmosphere with whom you can develop a long-term, loving, meaningful relationship."

Instead, singles need to get out and socialize in places where they can meet like-minded people, says Atwood. Finding companionship sounds easy, but for those who work long hours, travel frequently, or have children and other family obligations, organizing a social life can simply take too much time and energy.

So what's the alternative? For many singles, the solution is obvious: Hire it done. An entire matchmaking industry has arisen to offer a host of unique services for singles to meet potential romantic partners or to just make friends.



A circle of friends

In Denver, Colo., for example, Dinner for Six helps busy single professionals widen their social circle by organizing dinner parties at local restaurants. Although the company adamantly states that it is not a "dating service," — "Our purpose is to introduce single professionals with similar interests, who enjoy good food, good conversation, and a good time," says the Dinner for Six Web site -and they are not shy about letting prospective members know that in their first four years of business "we had almost 2 dozen marriages."

The Dinner for Six concept is simple: Singles pay \$595 for a 13-month membership. They then undergo a personal interview and complete a questionnaire, both of which help the company match them with people with similar interests and age-group preferences. With the information, Dinner for Six sets up a group dinner for three men and three women.

A company host meets the participants at the restaurant, makes introductions (first names only), and buys a bottle of wine for the table. The host then leaves the members to enjoy their evening, dutch treat.

Loves You? Loves You Not?

Interested in someone you already know, but afraid to make an overture? A "Mutual Friend" is a high-tech liaison for bashful romantics. This Web-based service lets you register an "Expression of Interest" in someone within its database for \$9.95. Your secret is then locked safely away in a computer somewhere in Seattle . . . unless the person you're interested in registers an Expression of Interest in you. Then, A Mutual Friend notifies you both of the shared attraction.

To improve the odds of making this connection, you'll have to figure out a way to tell your potential sweetheart about A Mutual Friend - an anonymous letter, a note on their desk, or a stealthy phone call might do the trick. And it wouldn't hurt to cross your fingers!

Similar programs are available in other states, too. Satisfied members rave about the low-pressure opportunity to meet people and make new friends.

Power dating

Another unique way singles are meeting prospective romantic partners is through "speed-dating." Organized by the worldwide Jewish community, speed-dating participants cram seven "dates" into one 90-minute evening. Here's how: An equal number of Jewish men and women gather at a cafe filled with tables for two. At the beginning of the evening, a man and woman are paired at each table, where they have seven minutes to talk. After the allotted time, a bell rings, and each participant checks "yes" or "no" on a form asking if they would like to see that person again. The men then move on to the next table for another seven-minute conversation.

If both partners check "yes", organizers let them know which matches have been made and supply the prospective date with the other's phone number. Currently, speed-dating events are held in 17 states and six foreign countries. Speeddating is also a feature of online private chat rooms.

Virtual romance

The Web also provides dozens of sites devoted solely to singles seeking romantic partners. The scope and capabilities of these matchmaking services vary widely: Some merely offer online personals with database matching, while others provide chat rooms, dispense dating advice, and sponsor local events.

Although online services can help you meet other singles, says Atwood, she recommends quickly moving the interactions from the online world to the real world so that you don't have time to build up a lot of unrealistic fantasies about the person.

A dating coach

While dating services make it easier for singles to *meet* possible partners, there are no shortcuts when it comes to building a relationship, explains Atwood. "Nothing takes the place of your own process of dating and screening potential partners," she adds. "You still have to ask those questions; you still have to practice the skills of communicating openly and honestly; and you still have to guard against the temptation to rush into something unwise."

For those who with poor relationship-building skills, Atwood offers a Web-based "coaching" service called SinglesCoach. Through e-mail or by telephone, Atwood responds to relationship questions from dating-challenged singles around the world.

"I tell singles that finding the right partner is like a part-time job," says Atwood. "When they balk at the amount of time, effort and energy it takes, I remind them that it takes roughly the same resources to maintain a good relationship. Whether you are single or part of a couple, you must heavily invest in the part of life called 'personal relationships' if you expect to have the benefits."