

Love at first site

Discos and singles bars are a distant memory for today's lonely hearts. Now, with the internet becoming the meeting place of choice, Louise France finds Cupid alive and well in cyberspace, and meets the singletons who go online for a dot.companion

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Trish McDermott must have one of the world's best job titles. She is Vice President Romance at [Match.com](#) in Dallas. She began working in the dating industry 15 years ago, originally in traditional marriage-guidance bureaux, but now for one of the largest internet dating sites. Match.com started in 1995 and business is really booming: its profits have doubled in two years. 'Now, everyone has heard of someone who has met someone on the web,' McDermott says. She should know. A 41-year-old mother who was happily single for years, Trish met her fiancé through the site last year.

Online personal ads were one of the first niche markets on the web at the beginning of the net revolution. However, it's taken until now for them to lose their sad, geeky reputation. Statistics now suggest that in three years' time more than 50 per cent of singletons will meet a partner online.

Susannah, 36, is typical of the new generation of internet daters. 'I'm less preoccupied with having a full-time relationship. I'm actually happy being single. But I was looking for something in my life that was missing.' Like what? 'Sex. Romance. Flirting.'

She had few requirements when she started online dating. She wasn't bothered whether men posted a picture of themselves or not. She simply disregarded anyone who said they read The Sun or The Daily Mail. What she wanted was brains the size of Birmingham. A debate about anything from the politics in Israel to that sexy French film she saw last night. Her first date was with a gambler who grew industrial quantities of skunk in his cellar.

She organised her dates like military manoeuvres: one night a wannabe stand-up comedian, the next a computer programmer. One guy 'bored me rigid then still had the cheek to ask if I wanted to have sex on a nearby building site'. Another turned into a long-term, on-off relationship. They've broken up now but they're still good friends. Looking back, Susannah credits the net with giving her confidence, getting her flirting again. 'Internet dating isn't for anyone with a silly Cinderella idea of meeting the perfect man. But it can get you out there.'

Certainly, there are no shortage of sites, their names a tribute to all things soft-centred, heart-shaped. There's [wejustclicked.com](#), [loveandfriends.comx](#), [onesaturday.com](#), [woo-who.com](#), [oneandonly.comx](#), [dream-date.com](#), [datingdeluxe](#) and [pearlmatch.co.uk](#) (where the catchline is 'The world is your orchard.')

McDermott says the shift in attitudes is down to our new itinerant lifestyles. 'There are a lot of single people out there but it's getting harder to bump into them. We don't marry our college sweethearts, we delay marriage for our careers, we leave home - which means we abandon all those traditional matchmakers like our relatives or our neighbours.' Couple this with the fact that we work very long hours and have limited time to socialise.

In New York, internet dating has taken off to such an extent that they call it 'man shopping', or 'hyperdating'. People set up 10 online dates every week, sometimes several in one night. Women get together, order in some sushi and sit on the net for a few hours. 'How about MuscleMan?' Too straight. 'Homeboy?' He lives in Wisconsin. 'RedRob' 'Have you seen those teeth?' They may not meet the love of their life on an internet dating site but it beats watching Ally McBeal.

Nowadays there are teenagers who will have cybersex before they have real sex. Where their parents kissed at a Rolling Stones gig, they're just as likely to hook up on a chatroom or an internet site. Or maybe they'll meet at a club and then go home to continue contact on the net. As the generation weaned on the net enters its prime dating years, internet dating is really taking off. And it's not a last resort. It's a recreational activity. It's entertainment.

As a result, internet dating ads - the profiles and pictures you put on your site to sell yourself - are turning into art forms. The words are constantly fine tuned, like advertising pitches. Some people create multiple ads, others change their picture on a weekly basis. (The latest favourite project for student web designers is working on an internet dating site.) Like stockmarket traders in the boom years who refused to stick with a stock that didn't move, users of online personals continue to date safe in the knowledge that they can always head back to the marketplace if tonight's cyberspace set-up doesn't work out.

According to research at Bath University, a third of all net users turn to the web in order to establish some sort of relationship. One 28-year-old interviewee compares surfing the personals to catalogue shopping - 'If it doesn't work out and you don't like the sound of someone, you can always press delete. It's the easiest thing in the world not to reply to an email.'

One wonders what Jane Austen would have made of love on the net. Anecdotally, there's an argument that it has turned traditional men/women stereotypes on their heads. Men no longer play the strong silent Mr Darcy card - they're more likely to send a carefully composed, heartfelt email instead. And women? The Fanny Prices of this world would never approach a stranger in a bar but seem more than able to chat in cyberspace.

Trish McDermott believes the net is having a fundamental effect on the traditional battle of the sexes. With a fondness for a quotable soundbite, she calls the phenomenon - 'falling in love from the inside out'.

'Meeting someone on the internet is less about how someone looks. It's about how he makes you feel. Because men have the anonymity and are less likely to feel shy, they are more keen to open up and show their vulnerabilities. When you meet someone there is already that connection there. And men are less likely to objectify women: "OK, so she may be 5lbs heavier than she said on her email but this woman was there for me last week when I was going through a hard time at work."

Dr Jeff Gavin, who has carried out research on online dating at Bath University, agrees. While internet profiles still adhere to media stereotypes - we're all more likely to add a few inches, take off a few pounds - when we actually meet up, if there's a bond there already, we're likely to overlook any white lies, he says.

Dr Gavin presented his latest research findings at the British Psychological Society earlier this year. 'Rather than being initially attracted by physical appearance, internet daters spend weeks getting to know each other before meeting. It is the reverse of traditional meetings because it starts off with the intimate stuff, then people find out more mundane things and finally meet in person. There is an argument that these meetings may be more successful. Because the first conversation is anonymous, they feel more able to be honest and open in their emotions.'

For many women, online dating is a place where they can flirt in a far more upfront way than they might do in a club or a bar. Every woman I spoke to talked about feeling liberated by the net, more confident, more dominant. The first advantage is that they can flirt at midnight dressed in their pyjamas with their hair tied back in a scrunchie. For single mothers there's the chance to meet someone without having to pay a babysitter.

'I was flexing muscles I hadn't used in a long time,' said one. 'I feel I have more control. I've stopped online dating now but I find myself being more attractive. I smile at people more. I'm more confident.'

One of Dr Gavin's respondents was more outspoken. There's a sense that women can express their sexuality without fear of 'real world' repercussions: '... these relationships are much more sexual than real-life ones. I guess it's because women can be more daring and upfront when they are anonymous. I think it's to do with the fear of being branded - but when you are anonymous, who cares?'

Mel Morris left school at 16 and saw his future in information technology. By the time he was 20 he was already making money as a management consultant in the Midlands and the northwest. Fifteen years and a stint working in the US later, he came back to Derby, his home town, with a wife, two children and a few thousand pounds in his pocket. He started up several businesses. One was a hardwood flooring company, one a property company in Spain. The last was an old-fashioned dating agency.

'I wasn't particularly convinced by the dating company to begin with,' says Morris. 'Then I realised that I could combine the dating idea and everything I knew about the net to set up an internet dating site.' He scoured the dictionary for four-letter words that could sum up love, sex, friendship and passion. All the obvious ones had been patented already. In 1998, [update.com](#) was launched. The original investment, with the help of local Derby-based backers, was \$8.5 million.

Soon, there were 50,000 regular users. They thought business was doing well when they passed the one million regular users mark. Around \$250,000 was coming in every month and update.com became the 10th largest internet dating site in the world. Then, on Valentine's Day 2001 (who says you can't mix business and pleasure?) they merged with [kiss.com](#). By 2001 they had 10 million members and profits of \$2million. Last year, revenues stood at \$46million, profits at \$16million. It is now the second-largest dating site in the world, behind Match.com.

Daily meetings with the young staff mean that within 24 hours a new idea can be tried out on the website. In the early days they spent \$60,000 just signing up to other people's sites to see what they were up to. Now Morris is looking into launching a text messaging service - you pitch up to a bar wanting to meet someone, and through your phone you can contact five or six people who meet your taste requirements.

They've had so many weddings that they don't go along to them any longer. 'We just send a bunch of flowers,' Morris says.

The course of true love doesn't always run smooth, however. Everyone has a horror story to tell. There's the academic who fell for the tabloid journalist, only to discover that he was claiming undying love while also trying to get back together with his wife and three children. The man who claimed he was in his 40s but turned up for the date with white hair and a walking stick. The woman who spotted her date at the bar and then suffered the embarrassment of watching him turn around and make a run for it.

There's a website - [www.wildxangel.com](#) - dedicated to internet dating disasters. There are men who spend twice their monthly salaries on telephone calls to their new Thai girlfriends. Women who sell up and move continents to be with a man more interested in their current account than a wedding ceremony. The following is typical: 'What do you do when you're an ageing alcoholic who uses and sells recreational drugs, has no ambition and no job, is facing foreclosure and the disconnection of all utilities, owes everybody money, has the title to his car in hock at some auto pawn shop and relies on using people to keep himself afloat? You go online.'

Plainly there are conmen and women on internet dating sites who are keen to abuse the fact that people are lonely and desperately want to share their lives with someone. Headlines like 'internet love cheat' abound in the newspapers. But, then again, you could probably find a couple of those down your local pub or across the desk at work, too.

Dr Jeff Gavin believes that as more people use internet dating sites, the less deceit there will be. 'People lie less than they used to. The web is used by so many more people than it was even two years ago. There are more ordinary people using it who don't have a malicious agenda.' And all the experts say you can spot a liar pretty quickly. 'It's hard work to lie all the time' adds Dr Gavin.

The Daily Mail would have us believe that all online daters are conmen and tricksters. But it seems that their theories are based more on prejudice than facts. They remain stubbornly wedded to the idea that the only way to meet someone is either at college (very traditional) or on opposite escalators in Selfridges (very romantic). Heaven forbid that someone - especially a woman - might use their initiative to shop around on the net, meet lots of possible partners and actually have sex while they're at it.

Trish McDermott claims that online dating has become 'legitimised' in the past year. She may be overstating the case. Few people I talked to were willing to 'go public' about their on-line dating - though there was no difficulty at all tracking down people who were logging on.

The most successful online daters seem to be the ones who don't get their hopes up too much, go on as many dates as their salary allows - 'Dating is a number's game,' says McDermott - and remain open minded about who they were going to meet. You might not fancy him, but you might fall in love with his best mate (so-called second-generation online dates). Many said it was better to move swiftly from email to a face-to-face date. 'Otherwise,' explained one woman, 'you can too easily get into a very intense email relationship, begin to build up the person in your mind and then find there simply isn't any attraction when you meet up.' That isn't to say online chemistry doesn't exist - it does. There are even couples who have married who still meet online because that was the way they first fell in love. It's the cyber parallel of re-visiting the bar you met in on your wedding anniversary.

Whether they met their partner or not, no one regretted trying out on-line personals. All agreed that, like the web, they have become a unique part of modern life. As McDermott says: 'Technology has always revolutionised dating. First it gave us the train so we could travel and meet new people. Then it gave us the telephone and the automobile. The internet is the next revolution. The irony is that in the end this technology means you're sat face to face with the person you love. By the time you're walking down the aisle, the internet is but a faint memory.'