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Singled Out

Online services cast a wide net to snare disillusioned daters

By Tracy Swartz

Don't expect to see Steven Santroni on TV gushing about finding a soul mate online. The 23-year-old has been cyber-dating for only three months, yet he's already developed a cynic's attitude about e-matchmaking services.

"I would love to say that I'm getting married to a beautiful and intelligent woman that I met through online dating, but since my sentence started with 'I would love,' it obviously isn't the case," said Santroni, of Elgin. "I honestly haven't even been on a date that was initiated through these kind of Web sites."

Lack of matches, faux profiles and expensive subscription fees are just some of the reasons novice and veteran online daters are growing frustrated with Web dating--already a last resort for many of those seeking love.

A recent study noted a drop in the percentage of online users who reported browsing romance sites, yet they keep sprouting up on the Internet, armed with new offers such as free subscriptions and speedier connections to lure the lovelorn.

Take letsgrabadrink.com, a site launched in March for singles in Chicago, Minneapolis and Houston. The site groups profiles based on the type of drink users prefer: martini, shot, fine wine/champagne, beer, sports drink or coffee/tea. Visitors can browse the site for free but have to pay to message others if there's love at first sight.

"There really should be a Web site where you go out and commit to a drink," site founder John Mamalakis said. "If the chemistry's not there, you're only committed to a drink. ... If things go great, maybe you'll have dinner."

The site has wooed about 500 Chicago users.

What sets letsgrabadrink.com apart from other dating sites, Mamalakis said, is not just the concept of focusing on an introductory drink. There's no lengthy profile screening--such as those found on match.com and eharmony.com--and unsatisfied customers can get their pro-rated subscription fee returned, no questions asked, Mamalakis said.

"I just want it to be a really pleasant experience for everyone," he said.

But "pleasant" isn't how Santroni rated his experience.

After trying his hand at traditional dating, Santroni recently signed up for letsgrabadrink.com but had no luck. He said he didn't really find anyone who matched his interests.

"I get more information about a woman through social and visceral interaction than tapping away at a keyboard," he said.

He's not alone. In January, 10 percent of the 2,200 U.S. online users surveyed said they'd browsed personals ads or profiles on online dating or personals sites, a drop from 21 percent in 2003, according to a report from Internet research firm JupiterResearch.

The percentage of those who posted a personals ad, meanwhile, held steady at 10 percent, according to the report, released in February.

JupiterResearch, which supplies market forecasts to various businesses, warned that the market for fee-based online dating services is reaching its natural limit unless sites begin to offer additional paid services or turn free. The group bases its forecast on consumer surveys and information from online romance companies.

Sam Yagan, co-founder of the free dating site OKCupid, said industry reports and disclosure statements from online dating sites have led him to believe that paid sites are struggling to retain their users. The 3-year-old OKCupid boasts 400,000 active daters, including 46,000 Chicagoans, and Yagan said users "are definitely sticking around [on the site] a lot longer."

JupiterResearch predicts the U.S. online dating market will reach \$932 million in 2011. In 2006, the market was \$649 million. But the firm expects to attribute market growth to the belief that more people will use the Internet--not because these sites will attract a greater percentage of these users.

Personals sites saw a modest 5 percent growth in visitors from March to April, luring 23.5 million visitors, according to comScore, which measures Internet audiences.

But even Yahoo Personals, one of the most popular e-romance sites in April according to comScore, has at least one unsatisfied customer. Elsamarié Mojica said she has been dating online for about a year now, with disappointing results.

"People tend to make fake profiles or just flat out lie on their profiles. You never know who you are really talking to a lot of the times," said Mojica, 26, of West Rogers Park. "I have had some fun times, but also a lot of frustrating times."