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Dating services expensive but worthwhile for many

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When traditional methods of meeting people to date fail — i.e., bars, work, fix-ups — St. Louis singles are finding alternative means to find the right people.

Being a "family" town, St. Louis' singles complain that meeting someone is a challenge, so they need help in finding a significant other when they are ready for one.

For years people have been meeting online, by way of Instant Messages, chat rooms and Web sites that act as dating facilitators for singles.

The gist of Internet dating is that people log on to a local site, read biographies and look at pictures and then send e-mails to the people they are interested in meeting. There is a membership fee for many of them, but some are free. For safety and privacy, just first names or nicknames are used.

While more and more people are saying they met their significant other online, others have not had as much luck. Susie Birmes, 28, of St. Charles gave up online dating because she wanted to meet people face to face. She is trying speed dating, which gives singles the opportunity to meet a lot of people in person, really fast.

Krisana Simpson is the event organizer for the St. Louis Area 8MinuteDating service, a franchise. Simpson organizes the events and arbitrarily matches singles by age group. Most of the singles who come to her are between 25 and 35. Each participant, for a \$35 fee, meets eight people at one event. Each interlude is timed at eight minutes.

If a participant is interested in someone at the event but does not have a date scheduled with him or her, there are mingling opportunities during the evening.

Many of the events take place at Patrick's at Westport Plaza in Maryland Heights, including the Dec. 4 event Birmes attended.

"I've never sat at a table and not had a

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conversation," Birmes said of her experience with 8MinuteDating. Then again, a few conversations have felt much longer than eight minutes.

"That's just from being incompatible," Birmes said. "You know that right away."

She has attended several 8MinuteDating events.

"I always have a good time, even if I don't meet anyone," Birmes said. "You meet friends, and you can never have enough friends."

Participants fill out a card after each date that denotes who they would like to see again. If both people want to meet, Simpson puts them in touch. Simpson said it is rare for someone to not get a match.

What happens after the set-up is somewhat of a mystery, because not all couples report back. According to the 8MinuteDating Web site, a few local couples met through the service. Though not featured on the Web site, a Journal staffer recently married someone she met through the service.

There are two exclusive dating services in St. Louis that offer strict confidentiality. They are It's Just Lunch and B. Meyer and Associates. Both firms are located in Clayton and are geared to busy professionals.

It's Just Lunch is a franchise that is locally owned by Anne Cross and Donna Zehnder. The company interviews potential clients to find out who they are and the type of person they are looking for, and then play matchmakers.

They do not accept every person who walks in the door, even if he or she can pay the \$1,500 fee. The fee, by the way, guarantees at least 14 introductions. The company makes no promises that any of the introductions will lead to marriage, if that is what a client is expecting.

"We can't promise marriage, but it happens all the time," said Zehnder. "It's about quality introductions; meeting someone you wouldn't have met on your own."

Zehnder said the general profile of It's Just Lunch clients are professionals in their 30s and 40s who don't have the time to date, so they hire the It's Just Lunch matchmakers.

"They're hiring us to be picky for them (and) to take the stress out of dating," Zehnder said.

The company arranges a time for promising couples to meet for lunch, brunch or before dinner drinks. Clients decide when they want to reveal personal information, such as their last names.

Zehnder said the company receives feedback

on a client after each date. That information is used to gauge what other members could be a better match for a client if the previous date or dates do not work out.

Since Oct. 7, seven It's Just Lunch couples have gotten engaged.

B. Meyer and Associates runs similarly to It's Just Lunch but is more exclusive and more expensive. The fee for B. Meyer and Associates is \$2,000 for 12 to 18 months and an additional \$3,000 if a match leads to marriage. When clients come to her, they are expecting marriage. Still, smokers and people who are overweight, financially insecure, or still carrying emotional baggage from previous relationships need not apply.

"The people I get have everything in their lives in place — with careers, friends and social lives — and are ready for someone to share it with," consultant Bernice Meyer said.

Meyer has been playing matchmaker for 20 years. The client profile is as much a way to keep a small folder of clients — up to 150 — as it is to offer a select group of people. Meyer does all the matching herself.

"I love the matchmaking," she said. "That's my favorite part. It's really fun to be involved in their loves." "

Meyer interviews potential clients, and if she decides to take them on, she usually has a few matches in mind before the client leaves her office. On her Web site, Meyer claims a 60 percent success rate. The success rate is measured by how many clients are married or engaged before their contracts expire.

Recently, Meyer received a Christmas card from a couple who met through her service.

"They thanked me for the greatest gift they had ever been given, and there was a picture of them with their kids," she said.

That vision ultimately is the way high fees at some dating services are justified. As Zehnder said, her clients are more than happy to pay the bill knowing they could meet the right person with whom to share their life.

It is important to note these matchmakers do not have degrees in psychology or sociology, nor do they run background checks on their clients. They also don't tell their clients how to polish their dating skills by way of starter conversations, table manners, etc., which can be a reason why some dates fail.

It's Just lunch does, however, offer "The Guide to Dating in St. Louis," a handbook for singles trying to meet people.

"It has do and don'ts and tips on how to put your best foot forward," Zehnder said.


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