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Fast or methodical, Cupids hit the target

Speed dating and matchmaking services offer Central Jersey singles chance at romance

By MARY ANN D'URSO
Staff Writer

In the 21st century search for romance, love or commitment, not all roads lead to the Internet.

While advertisements for online dating services proliferate like bunnies, two Central Jersey Cupids offer something that can't be experienced through a personal computer: in-person, face-to-face encounters.

Alex Soast of Bedminster has the new Somerset and Hunterdon counties franchise for 8minuteDating, a national service that offers table-hopping speed dating events in which singles can meet and converse, for eight minutes, with each of several prospects. Participation in the event costs \$35 and includes appetizers. The singles pay for their own drinks.

Afterward, participants -- usually a minimum of eight men and eight women -- decide who strikes their fancy and who strikes out. Only then does the Internet come into play: Singles visit a Web site and indicate whom they would like to meet again for either dating, friendship or business. They get back only the names of people who are interested in meeting them again for the same reason. For example, if Tom wants to date Diane, but she is only interested in him as a friend, they will not be matched up. He will receive only the names of women he wanted to date and who wanted to date him.

Prior to opening his franchise, Soast -- who is feeling some family pressure because he is single while two younger siblings are married -- said he has been disappointed with traditional online dating. "You can spend weeks or months corresponding with someone, and when you meet face to face, you don't have the same chemistry or their picture was not accurate or they misrepresented themselves," he said.

With speed dating, he said, people are "certainly getting an accurate picture and good amount of time to get to know them and not seem like an eternity if you don't click."

For seekers of romance who insist on more personal attention -- and can afford to pay for it -- there is Christie Kelleher's Morristown-based Premier Match, which brings a highly customized and almost scientific approach to traditional matchmaking. With a second office in Manhattan, she has a database of about 1,000 clients in the metropolitan area, including many Central Jersey residents.

The business, which she said grosses more than \$500,000 a year, includes a range of memberships. All agreements are confidential.

"We only accept people that we know we can work with," said Kelleher, who also maintains a satellite office in Philadelphia that represents about 700 clients. "We consider this very much as a headhunting service, where we will take on a particular client and then conduct a search for them for this personal quest."

Kelleher and her small staff meet individually with clients to gain a full sense of who they are and what they are looking for. The interview sessions cover everything from education levels, relationship history and politics to feelings about children and cultural heritage. The typical client is an upscale professional who is savvy, well-educated and interested in finding the right person for a long-term relationship.

"They know that their time is special and precious," she said, "but they're all looking for a relationship that has meaning."

"We have a lot of people that come to us and just feel like there's nobody out there for them," Kelleher said. "A lot of people are very transient, and we're getting away from the small-town network of meeting people. It's a different life now."

The speed daters

Jessica Arnold, 35, of Bedminster attended a recent 8minuteDating event at the Foolish Fox Tavern & Piano Bar in the Whitehouse Station of Readington.

"As a concept, this is a terrific idea," she said. "It's a much better way to meet people."

Arnold said she liked the fact that there was no pressure attached to the initial meeting and no awkward approach as there sometimes is at a bar.

"You know right off that the person you are going out with is potentially meeting other people since it is very likely that he or she matched with more than one person," Arnold said. "Hopefully, people don't look at that in a bad way. After all, it is a numbers game."

The numbers worked. Arnold reported a few weeks after the event that she had matched up with three of the men and had been on dates with each of them.

Describing herself as newly single, Joann Consolino, 41, had tried another speed dating event -- which led to a full date -- and liked the notion enough to do it again. For Consolino, who had been married for 17 years, these kinds of events offer "getting comfortable with people again. I don't come with any preconceived notions. It's a nice way to meet people."

After the event, Consolino said that she had matched with someone and planned on contacting him.

For John Arsenault, 46, of Westampton, the 8minuteDating event was "an ice-breaker. I'm not a serial dater. I date very rarely. I need to know somebody before I go out on a date. I



Staff photo by Ed Pagliarini

Dwayne Calek, left, chats with Jessica Arnold during an 8minuteDating session last week at the Foolish Fox Tavern & Piano Bar in Readington.

Facts:

SKILLS OF A SUCCESSFUL MATCHMAKER

Christie Kelleher, owner of Morristown-based Premier Match, said a successful matchmaker should be:

- Hopelessly romantic
- Filled with high energy
- Detail oriented
- A good listener
- Welcoming so others feel comfortable
- Able to instill excitement about meeting other people

Facts:

IF YOU GO

Upcoming 8minuteDating events:

- u Wednesday: Single professionals, Bridgewater, Green Knoll Grille
- Feb. 21: Single professionals, Whitehouse Station, Foolish Fox Tavern & Piano Bar

Facts:

ON THE WEB

u For more information on 8minuteDating, visit [8minutedating.com](#).

u For information about Premier Match, visit [premiermatchmaking.com](#).

u According to a 2005 study from the Pew Internet & American Life Project, almost one in six Internet users ages 18 to 29 uses online dating services.

Hundreds of popular sites exist, including sites that specialize in particular religions or ethnicities. Some allow the user to create a profile and browse for free, but charge you to contact other members.

u [www.americansingles.com](#)

u [www.date.com](#)

u [www.eharmony.com](#)

u [www.match.com](#)

u [www.matchmaker.com](#)

u [www.true.com](#)

u [www.yahoopersonals.com](#)

More Information

Facts:

THE BUSINESS OF MATCHMAKING

An estimated 1,300 matchmakers, usually one-person operations, are doing business in the United States. This number is up from 1,000 in 2002. Typically, independent matchmaker businesses average about \$250,000 in gross revenue annually, though some of the best can make from \$2 million to \$5 million a year.

Typical dating services average \$555,000 in gross revenue per company, per year, according to the 2002 census update.

The overall dating services sector, which includes both Web-based firms and others, was worth:

- \$905 million in 2002, reflecting a 13 percent growth rate in a year
- \$991 million in 2003, reflecting a 9.5 percent growth rate
- \$1.03 billion in 2004, reflecting a 4.4 percent growth rate
- \$1.06 billion in 2005, reflecting a 2.9 percent growth rate
- It is forecast to be \$1.18 billion in 2008, reflecting an average 3.7 percent growth rate.

In 2005, the \$1.06-billion dating services market included:

- \$490 million from established dating Web sites
 - \$161 million from non- Web-based services such as speed dating
 - \$236 million from independent matchmakers
 - \$178 million from personal ads and radio station date lines
- Source: *Marketdata Enterprises, Tampa, Fla.*

Advertisement

don't want to waste my time, and I don't want to waste her time."

Arsenault, who said he has been married and divorced twice, said he liked the speed dating concept because there isn't a sense of obligation at having to go out with someone, unlike when friends introduce him to their friends and it doesn't work out. Arsenault said he tried the online approach with Match.com and Yahoo! Personals but said, "There's a lot of churning and not a lot of butter coming out in the end."

The matchmaker

For Premier Match clients, Kelleher said, there's a comfort knowing the service has already prescreened the people they will meet. "We want to make sure they're serious about finding someone they can spend time with," Kelleher said.

Kelleher, who met her husband of four years through mutual friends, said her male clients typically receive the woman's phone number and make the first call. Often, she said, first dates tend to be at upscale restaurants. "It's more than a cup of coffee at Starbucks. We've spent time trying to put these two people together."

Kelleher has been in the matchmaking business for about 15 years and said Premier has about an 87 percent success rate, which she attributes to the coaching and mentoring they give clients. After clients meet, they are required to provide feedback. It gives Premier a sense of how on track they are with introductions, as well as what people are like on an actual date, Kelleher said. Sometimes, she said, people on a date sabotage themselves and don't know it. So when the staff hears, for example, that a man only talked about his ex-wife, they can point to it as an example of what's not working.

Or, when someone expresses doubts, Premier is a sounding board. Witness a 38-year-old Flemington pharmacist who was divorced and went out with a 40-year-old man who owned his own distribution business. After the first date, she called Kelleher, relating that the businessman hadn't really had very long relationships. She didn't know if he was capable of a long-term commitment. Kelleher's advice: "Why jump to conclusions. Give him a chance." They are now happily married and expecting a baby, Kelleher reported.

And marriage is not always a measurement of success. Kelleher introduced two clients, a Bernardsville man, 55, who is CEO of a design company, and a 40-year-old Tewksbury woman. Both had been married, but neither had children. They've been dating for about two years and credit Premier for being a big part of their happiness.

"Their passion is travel. They have been everywhere," Kelleher said. "We recently received a postcard from them in London telling us about how they spent Christmas in Africa and New Year's in London."

Pure chemistry What Premier Match has in common with 8minuteDating is the possibility of improving the odds for finding the elusive chemistry that puts two strangers in a relationship.

But fate can still elbow its way into the loop.

Not long after attending an 8minuteDating event, Bobby DePalma, 36, of Woodbridge met friends at the Green Knoll Grille in Bridgewater one night.

He made eye contact with a woman who was there with some girlfriends.

She returned a pleasant smile.

"I went over and introduced myself and the next thing you know, we were talking for a while," DePalma said.

They followed up with a date and hit it off, he said.

Sometimes, it seems, chemistry is enough.

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