

Home news

Why today's singles are logging on in the search for love at first byte; On line dating

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6

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The ease and privacy of online dating has led to a revolution in introduction agencies, reports Ben Hoyle.

TWO THIRDS of the singles looking for love in Britain turned to the internet last year, according to figures released yesterday. Specialist sites offer introductions to smokers, to Roman Catholics, tall people, beautiful people, frequent flyers and vegans. Technology has revolutionised the dating game.

A survey by **Parship.co.uk**, a British subsidiary of Europe's largest dating service with more than 1.5 million members, says that 3.6 million Britons used online dating services last year. That is 65 per cent of the 5.4 million Britons who are looking for a relationship and have used a dating service.

A spokeswoman for Relate, the relationship counsellors, confirmed that a figure of two thirds sounded "about right". "The internet is the way people are looking these days," she said. "The stigma from dating agencies seems to have gone. Doing it online allows people quite a lot of privacy as well, because they can do a bit of quiet research and look around from the comfort of their own home. You don't have to meet a middleman or go to an actual dating agency office, which takes a lot of courage."

There are more than 100 independent online dating agencies in Britain, chasing a market that is valued at about Pounds 12 million and expected to rise to Pounds 47 million by 2008. **Parship** says that 50 per cent of single people believe they will meet a suitable partner through the internet, up from 35 per cent six months ago.

A spokesman said: "Internet dating chatrooms are still seen as slightly seedy - somewhere you might arrange a one-night stand. But online dating agencies are regarded in a much more positive light. As in life offline, there's nothing we can do to stop people who don't own yachts claiming that they do, or people who smoke pretending that they don't. But we do check they are who they say they are when they pay, and the majority of people who use the service are looking to form a serious relationship."

Chris Simpson, commercial director of Telecom Express, which supports several dating sites, including the Encounters service of The Times, said that greater interactivity on the internet had lured singletons online. "If you could pick one single thing that's changed everything, it's the ability to see a picture of the person," he said. "The internet offers a far more visual and interactive experience."

At the top end of the online dating business, companies emulate some of the attention to detail of the old agencies by asking clients to fill out extensive questionnaires. This weeds out half-hearted fling-seekers and improves the chances of finding a good match.

Parship uses detailed psychometric tests similar to the personality profiles that many large companies employ to screen potential employees.

Love and Friends, which has 75,000 British members, asks singletons to spend about an hour completing its form.

Mary Balfour, the founder, also runs the exclusive introductions agency Drawing Down the Moon, where a full "hand-holding" matchmaking service can cost more than Pounds 5,000. She says that the internet has revolutionised the dating industry by raising its profile and placing a new reliance on getting to know a date before meeting.

"It's like a return to old-fashioned love letters," she said. "You don't base your initial judgment on how someone looks but what their profile's like. You e mail or talk before you actually see each other.

"Everybody you know who is single these days has at least had a good look at a dating website, introduction agency or personal ad. They have to, because all the old matchmaking institutions have gone, from the Church, the extended family, local community and factory floor to the ball and party circuits. People work harder, settle down later and live more isolated lives. They're much more likely to end the day with a DVD and a can of beer than by going to a village dance."