

## Hook me up: Engage.com connects daters with matchmakers

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By Elise Ackerman

Engage.com is founded on the premise that online dating needs to be more like offline dating.

Rather than dates, its 200,000-plus members are encouraged to seek out matchmakers who have volunteered to act as digital yentas for single friends and even strangers.

The site's old-fashioned approach to courtship is one answer to the deep disappointment reported by large numbers of online daters.

In 2005, when Engage first launched, a survey by JupiterResearch found that only one in three online daters reported being "somewhat satisfied." Within two years, the research firm reported that the percent of Internet users who said they had browsed an online dating site had fallen by half - from 21 percent to 10 percent.

For some, it was the humiliation of sending dozens of carefully crafted e-mails to prospective partners and getting no reply. For others, particularly younger women, it was the dismay of opening an inbox full of inappropriate overtures from guys they considered too old or too sleazy.

For thousands of gullible lonely hearts, it was the pain of being scammed by con artists who traded tender e-mails for cashiers' checks and then disappeared.

"What we bring is a model that is more in keeping with what works offline," said Joelle Kaufman, vice president of experience at Engage, which is headquartered in San Mateo. "We don't go to bars and scan people's profiles, or take tests and expect someone to land on our doorstep. What we do is we go out with our friends."

People who sign up for Engage, which is free but might charge in the future, can identify themselves as daters, or matchmakers, or both. They are encouraged to invite friends to join and to vouch for them.

That's how Jason Daters, a happily married 35-year-old "sales guy" from San Francisco, ended up as a member of Engage. He invited all his single friends and has successfully found girlfriends for two of them.

Not surprisingly, his wife was more than a bit curious about what her husband was doing on a dating site, but in the end she ended up joining, too. The couple have since discovered that their vision of the perfect woman is decidedly different, Daters added.

Mark Brooks, editor of [Onlinepersonalswatch.com](http://Onlinepersonalswatch.com) and an Internet dating

consultant, said Engage addresses one weakness of the most popular dating sites, Yahoo Personals or Match.com, specifically the ability to involve one's friends in a budding romance.

Brooks said the chance of hooking up with a friend of a friend of a friend is one of the keys to the success of social networking sites like My-Space or Facebook. "The social networks are really the place where it is really happening," Brooks explained. One reason is because people can avoid the awkwardness of actually declaring they are single, but don't want to be.

Engage, on the other hand, allows fewer face-saving excuses. Indeed, some of Engage's features are specifically designed to turn off would-be "players" who populate other sites. For example, Engage encourages its members to rate one another on "responsiveness," "politeness" and whether a person is "true" to his or her profile.

"I love what they are doing, but it's going to take them awhile to be successful," Brooks said.

For singles who have been burned, however, the ratings are one way of making the site safer. Diane Green, a moderator at RomanceScams, a Yahoo group for deceived daters, said only two scammers have been reported operating on Engage, out of 4,000 scam reports in the group's database.

Vineet Buch, 35, a Silicon Valley venture capitalist who is generally not averse to risk, said the additional information and the participation of the matchmakers made the site feel warmer and fuzzier. "The world moves so fast nowadays that even a little shred of shared context goes a long way," he said. Buch said he recently met a woman that he really liked after being set up by a mutual acquaintance who was a matchmaker on the site.

Dimple Sahni, 34, a New York venture capitalist, also recently met someone she likes, through a random matchmaker who came across her profile and decided to introduce Sahni to a handsome 36-year-old technology entrepreneur.

But others who have tried Engage say they have encountered the same black-hole-style brush-off that has driven daters away from other sites.

Mike Murrow, a 33-year-old from Felton, has been chronicling his misadventures in online dating on his blog, "Contrary to Conventional Wisdom."

Murrow said Engage's matchmaker process sounded good but required friends who were extremely committed. "My friends have their own lives; they are not going to scan through the profiles."

Still, they did recommend him to a few women on Engage. The women didn't reply. Murrow believes the reason is that his pictures were crummy.

Murrow is now looking for love in more traditional places. "I keep coming back to women I already know," he said. Like a friend of a friend, who attends the same church.

His conclusion: The best kind of online dating is offline dating. No profiles. No pictures. No Internet connection required.

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