



Scam Alert

Online Romance for Love — or Money?

How to avoid a bad match in cyberspace

by: Sid Kirchheimer | from: [AARP Bulletin](#) | February 11, 2011

Not every [Valentine's Day](#) story has a happy ending. Consider the New Jersey man in his 60s who committed suicide after losing his retirement savings to an alleged sweetheart he met on the Internet. Or the woman in her late 50s now in a North Carolina prison, charged with involvement in a check fraud scheme orchestrated by an online love interest.



— Black Toby/Gallery
Stock

Or the thousands of other people who once believed they were struck by Cupid's arrow in cyberspace — only to be wounded in an online romance scam with shame, embarrassment and a financial loss averaging more than \$10,000 per person. Those targeted are often boomer age or older, who may be lonely, rich or just looking for fun.

While the majority of people you can meet online are as sincere as you are, more than a few are [scammers](#) presenting themselves as beautiful Russian models, wealthy businessmen working overseas or just Regular Joes or Josephines.

The sad truth: Your newfound cyber-sweetheart may be part of an organized criminal ring, a young man sitting at a keyboard in a Nigerian or Russian boiler room.

"They work in groups, joining online dating websites and cruising chat rooms, each sending out literally hundreds of e-mails ... all day long to other members. And then they just wait for a response," says Barb Sluppick, who, after falling victim to an online romance scammer several years ago, started [RomanceScams](#), one of several

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support groups for victims of this widespread but under-reported ruse. Since 2005, she says, her Yahoo support group has drawn more than 50,000 members, with a current active list of 17,000.

The dupers often tailor their identities based on information you supply on your profile. If you're a fifty-something woman who declares a love for dogs, you may hear from someone claiming to be a sixty-something executive who volunteers at an animal shelter.

Next: [How scammers reel you in. >>](#)

The inevitable hook

After a few weeks of sweet talk, there comes the inevitable hook: Your friend needs your help.

You may be asked to send money for some personal emergency or a plane ticket to come see you. The scammer may say that he or she is unable to cash a paycheck due to working overseas: Let me send you my check — you can cash it and then wire-transfer the money back to me. The check looks genuine, but in fact it's counterfeit, and you can be liable for funds that you send to your friend — and perhaps arrested for check fraud.

Other scammers will ask you to join in phony business ventures. Romance cons often involve "reshipping" schemes, in which you're sent merchandise purchased with stolen credit cards and told to forward it to an overseas sweetheart.

There's a new twist that Sluppick says is "growing by leaps and bounds" (though firm statistics are few because victims are usually too embarrassed to report it): [Romance scammers are claiming to be soldiers](#) in order to target patriotic women of all ages. "I even heard from the Army about the photograph and identity of an actual retired general being used in an attempt to scam older women," says Sluppick.

Whatever the angle, if you fall for the first come-on, you'll get follow-up pleas until you wise up or run out of money. After that, you'll never hear from your sweetheart again.

Warning signs

So if you're seeking a match in cyberspace, know the warning signs of con-panionship:

- **Scammer Grammar.** Romance scammers often describe themselves as educated American or British businessmen, but since most are in fact nonnative speakers of English, their messages are littered with misspellings and poor grammar.
- **The 23401 ZIP code.** It's sometimes given as part of the scammer's home address in Nigeria, to receive wired funds. In reality, it's the ZIP code for Keller, Va., but scammers provide it in the apparent belief that Americans expect a ZIP code. It's probably no coincidence that 234 is the international telephone dialing code for Nigeria.
- **Eye candy.** Your new friend may be so incredibly good-looking because the photo you're looking at was lifted from an online modeling site. One past favorite for this kind of pilfering has been [focushawaii.com](#).

- A request for your mailing address. You're told it's needed to send you gifts or to come visit. But the true purpose may be to set you up for a reshipping scam or some other variety of con.

Sid Kirchheimer is the author of Scam-Proof Your Life, published by AARP/ Sterling Books. Have a look at our [Scam Alert archive](#) for past warnings about the con artists who too often seek to part Americans from their hard-earned money.