

Match-seeking singles are plentiful online, but watch the details to avoid possible pitfalls



Spinning the dating Web

DO'S AND DON'TS FOR ONLINE DATING

- ◆ Do make calls with a cell phone that won't be identified on caller ID.
- ◆ Do ask lots of questions. Look for consistency in responses.
- ◆ Do meet in a public place for at least the first few meetings.
- ◆ Do let someone know whom you're meeting and where.
- ◆ Do take a cell phone with you and have someone call to check that you're OK.
- ◆ Don't reveal too much personal information. Make sure e-mails can't be traced and don't reveal a signature line.
- ◆ Don't invest too much in one person; correspond with several people to save time.

BY ROSALIND CUMMINGS-YEATES

Internet dating has become a staple of modern life. But while many singles understand why it's almost a must — after all, how else to meet a mate when your daily routine is a blur of bus-gym-work-dinner-home — there's still an emotional block.

What will people think? Will I meet a bunch of losers? And, most fundamentally, is it safe?

"It's not as scary as it seems," says Kathryn B. Lord, a couples therapist and cyber-romance coach who met her husband online in 1998. "Online dating can be safe if done with precautions."

While many singles fear meeting married liars or stalkers-in-the-making, sheer numbers often become the greatest pitfall.

"Online dating turns the tables on traditional dating," Lord says. "Rather than this attitude of scarcity, people quickly find that

there are lots of people out there. The problem is sorting through them."

During December 2003, 14 percent of the active American online population, or 21 million unique users, visited an personals/dating destination, according to Nielsen/NetRatings. At sites including Match.com, Yahoo Personals, Matchmaker or eHarmony users compose a personal ad or fill out a questionnaire that describes them and the type of people they'd like to meet. Fees range from \$24.95 a month on Match.com to \$49.95 a month on eHarmony, with paid sites offering screening, special-interest communities and often a better-educated clientele. Profiles, usually with photos, then appear on the site,

allowing interested singles to reply.

That's when the real work begins — filtering through the responses and taking precautions as you get to know the people who interest you.

"The whole online dating courtship is really tortuous," says Mark Richman, 36, of Logan Square, who met his fiancée through an online dating service. He joined in February 2000 as he planned to relocate from Phoenix to Chicago. "All the e-mailing and phone calling can get really overwhelming."

His fiancée, Claudia Sohn, 34, had dated 20 guys she met online, with only one second date, before meeting Richman. "Online dating is so controlled, you have time to



Kathryn B. Lord
Couples therapist

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edit," says Sohn. "You can make yourself sound really good or ignore what you don't want to answer. You can be really funny and you're not really funny in person."

Paying attention to online inconsistencies helps avoid disappointment down the road, Lord says. "You have to have your antenna up. Look for consistency; print out e-mails and look at what they say. It's a record. Focus on what they write, what they don't write and how they write. Learn as much about the person as possible."

Summur Roberts, 25, also of Logan Square, remembers her naive foray into Internet dating about five years ago. "I met this guy online, and we e-mailed each other for a few days, and then we talked on the phone for two weeks. He put off meeting me for the entire two weeks," she says.

Still, Roberts thought nothing of driving to the man's house when they did arrange their first meeting. "He had me waiting outside his house, and when he finally unlocked the door, he ran [back] in like he didn't want me to see him. He didn't look anything like his photo. I asked him how old the photo was, and he said it was from



Claudia Sohn had dated 20 guys she met online before finding Mark Richman, now her fiance.

seven years ago, when he was in high school. I was so upset. I felt bamboozled."

Roberts learned crucial lessons from that situation. "I decided that I would only meet at a neutral location," she says. "I started asking more questions, like how recent is the photo, do you really look like that, have you changed anything?"

Despite the dicey first experience, Roberts continued to use various services and met her current boyfriend, Tarik Stokes, online three months ago. "Overall, I've met a lot of interesting people," she says. "I think you come out better putting up your own data and deciding who you want to meet."

For Sohn and Richman, the online efforts were worth it. "We had easy conversations, similar upbringings and interests. We knew we had a lot in common," she says. After nearly four years of dating, the two will marry next month.

"I think the most important thing is attitude," says Lord, who coaches singles on such Internet dating necessities as composing an appealing ad, locating a compatible mate among thousands of possibilities and developing a lasting relationship.

"When people say there are no good men what do they find? No good men. If they believe everybody lies, they meet people who lie. Be open. I'm a fervent believer that when someone is really ready, someone shows up."

Rosalind Cummings-Yeates is a local free-lancer.