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Cover story

No time for dating? You're not alone Courtship is out as today's cupids shift to 'speed dates,' online connections and action plans

By Olivia Barker
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Make a Date More Likely:

Tracy Otto, 34, a single accountant in Lincoln, NE makes a concerted effort to meet men. She dipped into the FastDater world (and met a man she went out with for four months). She tried trolling for love on the Internet, but the first guy she met called 3 times the next day to tell her he loved her.

She heads to local bars to watch her beloved Univ. of Nebraska Cornhuskers play football, though she says her eyes are glued to the TV, not fellow fans. She considered a dating service but balked at the cost: \$2,500 for three attempts. "I thought, 'Oh, my God, and I that desperate?'"

USA Today's Olivia Barker shared Otto's profile with find-a-husband consultant **Rachel Greenwald**, who mapped out a matter-of-fact market plan.

- Lincoln is a college town where the single men are too young and the thirty-something men are too married. Greenwald recommends "Telemarketing:" Make a list of 100+ people you know, your veterinarian, hairstylist and stockbroker, and ask if they know anyone to fix you up with."
- Otto walks her dog, Haley. But she seldom ventures out of her neighborhood, not even to the new dog park (OK, it's about 5 miles away). "Plan your trek to the dog park every Thursday at 6pm," Greenwald says. "Write the appointment in ink on your calendar, as if it is a business meeting. Failing to plan is planning to fail."
- A couple of cafés sit within a mile of Otto's office. Yet she generally eats at her desk or in her company's lunchroom, preferring not to waste a half-hour getting back and forth to a restaurant. "An extra half-hour spent doing anything that improves your chances of meeting someone is an investment in your future," Greenwald says. Eat lunch with someone new at least twice per week: women colleagues, old friends you haven't seen in ages, a new friend at the gym. You are networking to be fixed up on dates or invited to social events."

- After an unsavory experience, Otto has all but ruled out online dating, but Greenwald says she should try again. "Women must have a diversified portfolio of dating activities," Greenwald says. "Online dating is essential, because a large service will have tens of thousands of single people within 100 miles of you."

When it comes to finding that special someone, Steve Lee waxes analytic: In 16 months, the Manhattan hedge-fund manager sped through 2,500 three-minute HurryDates, at about \$1.45 a date, not to mention 100 "real dates" that lasted at least the length of a cup of coffee.

"I take a very practical approach to finding the right person," says Lee, 27, a Wharton business school graduate who likens the dating market to the stock market, tossing around terms such as "liquidity" and "market value." In fact, if he had his druthers, those mini-dates would last a minute, just enough time to gauge someone's personality and whether "they have bad breath."

Last September, 495 days into this, his "second full-time job," Lee found social worker Elyse Hart, 30, "by far the most amazing person I've met in my life." They've made it past date No. 10. The marriage proposal? That's scheduled for "around Feb. 7."

Lee's method, though perhaps systematic to the extreme, illustrates what experts are calling the most significant shift in American dating culture since the mid-1960s. Back then, there existed something called courtship, in which couples came together with the help of college mixers, church socials and meddling parents, and were often engaged before their 21st birthdays.

These days, twenty- and thirtysomething singles who spent their post-college years focused on their careers instead of their love lives don't have such matchmaking resources. Nor do they have the time to look for a mate the old-fashioned way -- or wait for one to stumble into their lives.

So they're shunning the serendipitous, sweaty-palmed aspects of courtship and embracing efficiency in the form of "speed" dating, online dating and 15-step dating action plans.

Speed-dating events take singles through a series of three- to 10-minute mini-dates, often at bars. At the end of the night, suitors designate whom they'd like to see again; if there's a match, the wooing begins. Venues continue to open up in markets throughout the USA, from Dover, Del., to Sioux City, Iowa.

Online personals have all but shed their stigma, evolving from a last resort to, as one Internet dater put it, a first line of defense. Americans spent \$214 million on Internet dating during the first half of 2003. That's up 76% from the same period last year, according to the Online Publishers Association. Meanwhile, a handful of relationship-building books have been published in the past year, and it's no surprise that they're written by MBAs and marketers.

"This is a watershed moment in the long history of courtship," says social historian Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, author of *Why There Are No Good Men Left: The Romantic Plight of the New Single Woman*. Much as the automobile revolutionized dating in the 1920s and the birth control pill transformed mating in the 1960s, the Internet has reshaped the relationships of today, Whitehead says.

To wit: a recent *New Yorker* cartoon in which a scowling cupid mutters, "Fine -- if they all want to meet online, screw them."

"All the romantic mythology of an earlier era came from poets and songwriters," Whitehead says. "Now we're into science and technology and business-efficiency experts."

And if sex was the precious commodity withheld by women a couple of generations ago, time is today's analogue, Whitehead says, carefully measured and calculated by men and women alike. If yesterday's message was "Don't squander your virginity on a loser," today's is "Don't waste time on one." Matters of the heart, it seems, have become orchestrated by the clock.

These structured means of meeting singles were initially embraced by young, urban never-marrieds toiling at 60-hour-a-week jobs, miles from the mating networks their hometowns supplied. Now, online and speed dating have hit the heartland, to towns where saying "I do" in your 20s is still the norm and where single thirtysomethings are in short supply.

Efficiency also is being adopted by those over 35, among single parents with no time to linger over dinner-and-a-movie dates and among women with precious years left to have children.

Conduct 'exit interview'

No wonder that **Rachel Greenwald's** book, *Find a Husband After 35 Using What I Learned at Harvard Business School: A Simple 15-Step Action Program*, proved an instant hit when it came out in September. One of her steps involves the "exit interview": having a third person question doomed dates to determine why sparks fizzled.

Greenwald dismisses critics of her clinical approach. "I don't think romance is dead," says Greenwald. "It comes after you've found the wonderful man, not necessarily in the search process." Dating, she says, is simply the most recent realm to absorb business practices, like health care, education and the non-profit worlds before it.

When *Dress for Success* arrived in 1975, naysayers accused John Molloy of squeezing "the romance out of clothing," Molloy says. The reaction to his latest book, *Why Men Marry Some Women and Not Others: The Fascinating Research That Can Land You the Husband of Your Dreams*, "has been identical." Malloy says that heeding his do's and

don'ts increases your chances of marrying by 60%. One of his "statistical realities": "Men make up their minds about a girl in three minutes."

He's got evidence in the form of Peter Ji, a research psychologist who prefers speed dating to the online variety.

"You have to wait and wait and wait" for a response via Match.com and the like, whereas with FastDater, his speed-dating service of choice, "you get immediate feedback." During one three-minute encounter, a woman sat down and handed out a veritable resume, says Ji, 33, who lives in Elmhurst, Ill. "This is what I do; these are my activities."

"I thought it was clever," Ji says. He indicated that he wanted to see the woman again; alas, she didn't choose him.

Nonetheless, the new ways work, at least according to their champions. 8minuteDating estimates that it has sparked around 100 engagements and marriages out of about 104,600 users -- and those are only the known stories. Twenty engaged pairs and one married couple have e-mailed HurryDate to share their good news. More than 89,000 members told Match.com last year that they "found the person they were seeking," according to the site's Kathleen Roldan.

Kerry Wargo Clough of Easton, Md., has Match.com to thank for finding her husband, Dennis. (They tied the knot in September.) Only a few years ago, Clough, 31, a fundraising consultant, turned up her nose at Internet personals. "I thought, 'There is no way. I should be able to meet my husband naturally,' " such as through her cycling hobby. Clough's advice when it comes to cyber love connections? "Give up the snobbery."

But Eric Walker burns at least a small candle for the fantasy of "two star-crossed lovers running through a field of poppies." With online dating, "I felt like I was ordering a sweater from J. Crew," says Walker, 32, a Manhattan teacher. "You look at the picture, you look at the description and you find the right size. There was no magic to it, no inspiration."

Filling a dating 'quota'?

Sasha Cagen doesn't have much of a problem with online dating; it's speed dating that makes her "a little sick." Cagen is the author of the forthcoming *Quirkyalone: A Manifesto for Uncompromising Romantics*, a book that celebrates the state of being unattached as a healthy, positive lifestyle choice.

"It would be nice if we could encourage the idea of people spending time with other people because they genuinely like them, not to fill a quota," says Cagen, 30, a singleton living in San Francisco.

If nothing else, the travails of the modern mate-seeker entertain their friends. One night, Linda Nelson scheduled three phone appointments with men she met through online

personals. Her notes ready, their profiles printed out, she nonetheless got "a little flustered" by the time she chatted with Bachelor No. 3, so much so that she clammed up during a subsequent face-to-face date with Bachelor No. 2 because she wasn't sure which one he was.

The numbers can get so dizzying that some serial daters take a strategic approach to organizing their meet-and-greets. Lee used one of his favorite financial tools: the spreadsheet, charting his soul-mate searches according to such subjects as topics discussed (rent control or silver BMW 325xis with black interior) and outfits worn (his blue-and-white Thomas Pink shirt or red Turnbull & Asser).

"It's a procedure now," says Nelson, 35, an executive assistant in San Diego. "You start with a few e-mail exchanges. That progresses to the guy giving out his phone number. Then you meet for coffee, always coffee." And then maybe, if things go according to the grand plan, the date segues to dinner and a walk on the beach.

"It's very time-consuming, this dating business," Nelson says.

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