



Getting Started with Online Dating

By Bryan Coffey

Are you looking for that special someone, but not having the luck you want? Tried, and maybe tired of, the usual singles places, or even the unusual?

The Internet may provide the perfect solution and path to a great date, or even a mate. In fact, online dating has proven to be a very effective method for meeting new people and forming lasting relationships. In our Internet and broadband culture, online dating has become as commonplace as, well, email. And that's why any stigma that might have been there in the early days is simply gone. Online dating is, in fact, considered the norm for most singles.

And perhaps the best part of online dating is that it's easy to do. As Lisa Daily, author of "Stop Getting Dumped!" says, "You can go man-shopping at 3 a.m. in your jammies. And thanks to your most fabulous date-ready photo, you can do it all looking your best, 24 hours a day."

That said there are still some tips to keep in mind to make your experience successful and safe.

Getting Started

The Web abounds with Internet dating sites. Some even cater to people's special interests and backgrounds such as religious or political affiliations. Take the time to shop around, just as you would for a mate. Make sure to find the site, or sites, that best fit your personality and dating approach.

Most sites work in the same basic way. You register as a member, create a profile about yourself that members see, and then you search others' profiles for people you'd like to meet. Some sites are free to register, but most require you to pay to use their services.

The First Impression

Crafting your profile, many dating experts agree, is your first and best opportunity to ensure a successful online dating experience. Your profile will include personal information such as your physical characteristics, demographics and interests, as well as a short narrative in which you describe yourself and the type of person you would like to meet. Take time on your profile, says April Masini, author of "Think and Date Like a Man" and the website www.AskApril.com.

"I suggest a two-day rule. Spend as much time as you need writing your profile until you love it, then spend two days showing it to your most trusted friends and advisors to see what they think before it goes live," she advises.

Many sites will also provide pre-set questions for you to answer. Not all of them are required, so

take your time and think about which ones you want to answer, how much information you want to provide, and how it will help you find someone you want or weed out someone you don't.

Another key to writing a winning profile is honesty. Anita Miller, author of "The Online Dating Journal," lives by the motto: "It is easier to remember the truth than it is to remember a lie. If you are realistic when you present yourself you are avoiding the inevitable rejection that will come later if you lie."

However, do keep it positive and don't feel you must disclose everything, says Rachel Begelman, co-founder of econfidant, an online service that provides relationship advice. Strike that perfect balance. "If your Aunt just died or you just gained 15 pounds in the past three months, keep it to yourself," she says.

Remember these tips for your profile:

- Be confident in your profile.
- Emphasize your strong points and things that make you unique.
- Creativity in writing a profile will help you stand out from all the others.
- Use a bold, eye-catching headline and humor in your narrative.
- Keep the profile brief and hit the high points of your personality.

And don't forget that photo. Most people will pass by a profile without a photo, regardless of how fabulous your profile is, Daily says. "Make sure your photo is the best possible picture of you," she says. You might also want to use more than once picture and mix in full-body shots with the headshots, Masini says.

It's a Numbers Game

Online dating is a different animal than conventional dating. It is an open forum, with very liberal rules of access. Anyone who clicks onto a site and registers can join. Because of this, the volume of responses may be overwhelming. Conversely, the chances of rejection are higher as well.

"Do not take it personally when you don't hear back from someone," Begelman says. "Those using an online dating service are speaking to many people at once. What this means is that you should be talking to many people at once as well. Do not just limit yourself to focusing on one guy or girl, since that will increase your chances for disappointment."

Sorting through the candidates and finding someone worthy will take time. Be patient and optimistic.

Stay Safe

As promising as online dating is, you still don't really know who's on the other end of the connection. Here are some common sense tips to help you avoid trouble.

- Many experts advise not giving your real name or other personal contact information in your profile. Most services have ways to blindly relay email messages between members. Once you feel comfortable with someone, then you can move to emailing directly.

- Make clear both in your profile and correspondence the level of intimacy you are looking for. If you're only looking for a dog-walking buddy, you won't be happy if your date has a wedding caterer already picked out.
- When you are ready to meet in person, choose a public place to meet instead of being picked up at your home. Make sure friends know where you are, and bring a cell phone if you have one. Even better, bring a friend with you. Bring married friends and make it a double date.
- Finally, "Trust your gut. If it doesn't feel right, then it probably isn't," Miller says.

There are millions of people online looking to meet someone. Online dating has helped many of them find each other. Now it's your turn. Use these tips to create a winning profile or enhance the one you already have, then log on and find romance!



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