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Dot.com dating: How to man-up for your online dating profile picture

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The worst kind of online dating profile picture is of the guy who did a hack edit job, scribbling or cropping out his ex-girlfriend from the photo - but leaving behind remnants of her blonde hair.

No, no, wait: It's the online suitor who posts galleries of group photos leaving you to wonder who, exactly, will show up on the date. Actually, the most unfortunate of the "matches" is the guy who snaps a shirtless bathroom selfie and you can see, reflected in the mirror, a bottle of Rogaine in the shower. Delete, delete, delete!

That's the back-and-forth banter that goes on between personal stylists Hunter Wright and Juli Kovats, who, together, launched Doubletake Image (www.doubletake-image.com), a full-service online image consulting agency that works with people venturing into the online dating world. The two J. Hilburn (www.JHilburn.com) personal stylists are based in Boulder, Colo., which has the paradoxical distinction of being one of the fittest cities in America, but was also dubbed by GQ magazine as having one of the worst-dressed populations.

Wright and Kovats offer full-profile packages that include services such as page creation and editing, style consultations and photo shoots with Kovats, a professional photographer.

In this dot.com era of dating, love at first sight, err, page load, starts with a strategically written online profile and a stop-and-look-at-me profile picture.

"The worst kind of profile, actually, is one that has no picture at all," Wright says. "That's the biggest no-no."

Just in time for Valentine's Day, experts in online dating, relationships and first-date etiquette are lending advice to make your best first impression - so, you know, you aren't the guy who just goes on a lot of first dates.

When it comes to taking profile pictures, it starts with the setting. If Kovats is photographing a professional businessman, for example, it makes sense to do so in a downtown area with a dynamic architectural background. An artist might consider a funky alleyway with bricks to add dimension or could be photographed near a rustic door which will add texture. For an outdoor enthusiast, a portrait in the mountains works well, so long as he's the focus and not overshadowed by his bike helmet.

The greatest of photos, Kovats says, are not overly posed. She likes to capture her clients while they're relaxed or laughing to give a true snapshot of who they are.

The Doubletake Image duo also help men pick out clothes for their photos and Wright lends this style advice: A pair of dark-rinse J. Brand jeans are much more appealing than, say, those dated button-fly, light-washed "dad jeans." The right frame of glasses can accentuate a man's eyes. Vertical stripes can add the illusion of extra height, she says, and a well-tailored shirt can show off biceps.

Relationship expert April Masini, who writes the Ask April advice column (www.AskApril.com) and is the author

of "Date Out of Your League," says when it comes to profile pictures, it's your shot at giving off a good first impression.

"Do include more than one photo of yourself," she says. "She wants to see your face, your body and a hint of your lifestyle."

Masini suggests a mixture of casual and business scenarios - if you have a job that requires you to wear a suit, then include photos of you in a suit and if you like sports, include yourself in your bike gear or on the basketball court.

"It's fine to include bathing suit shots as long as they're not gratuitous," she says. "If you surf, you and your surfboard on the beach or actually surfing in the water is great. But, you in a Speedo drinking mojitos with a bunch of spring break honeys at the pool - bad idea. It sends a message that you're more into partying than serious dating."

Some other dating profile "don't's" according to Masini: Don't upload your career head shot, passport photo or driver's license photo - it's impersonal. No suggestive poses. No photos with your mom. And just a single photo that is cropped at the chin will leave her wondering, and probably passing on you.

"Don't be ashamed of a less-than fit physique and don't hide it," Masini says. "It's better to be honest so she doesn't suspect you of being a liar and being out of shape - and you can tell her you're looking for someone to get fit with. That's a much bigger draw than someone who pretends he's fit and isn't."

When it comes to first-date looks, Masini says don't underestimate grooming - a manicure and pedicure can score you extra points and, if you want a chance at a kiss, make sure your lips aren't chapped or cracked.

A quality cashmere sweater that will look great over a dress shirt and with corduroys or jeans is a great investment, Masini says.

"Shoes telegraph more about you than anything else," she says. "Invest in good shoes that fit well so you're comfortable and confident. Leave the sneakers at home - even if you're a college student."

Once you've made reservations for your first date dinner, be sure you know the dress code to save yourself the embarrassment of being out of place.

Daniel Post Senning, the great-great grandson of Emily Post and a co-author of "Emily Post's Etiquette" 18th edition (www.EmilyPost.com), suggests that if you're unsure about the attire, simply call the restaurant ahead of time and ask. If you're going to a top-tier restaurant, a jacket might be required and you don't want to be the guy who has to borrow an ill-fitting one from the coat room, he says.

Senning says it's a good idea to apply some of the same principals of a job interview to a first date. Taking your attire up a notch will help you present your "best self." Maybe that means adding a sweater and tie over a work shirt or adding a blazer.

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