

Is love just a click away?

SUSAN SCHWARTZ
THE GAZETTE

7.8 MILLION CANADIANS HIT THE NET IN SEARCH OF A DATING PARTNER IN SEPTEMBER. SUDDENLY, THE ONLINE PERSONALS ARE NO LONGER THE DOMAIN OF LOSERS

If Isabelle Gauthier, an out-going Montreal human-resources director whose face brings to mind Kim Basinger, had been reluctant to try online dating, it was "because I thought I would meet a bunch of losers."

Still, she agreed to join RéseauContact last December for a two-week trial - at the suggestion of a friend who works for the Quebecor company that manages the site, Netgripes.

The final day of the trial period, Gauthier entered one of the site's chat rooms "and this guy started to talk to me." She checked out his profile - you can click on the profile once you see an online name - and liked that he loved music and sports. They exchanged photos and "when I saw his snuke, I went 'Wow!'"

Over lunch a few days later, "the connection was great," gushed Gauthier, 30. They have been a couple since. In September, they moved in together.

Such stories are becoming increasingly common as online dating takes its place as one of the hottest areas of Internet activity - and, in the process, sheds its image as the exclusive domain of computer geeks and the socially challenged.

More than 7.8 million Canadians visited online personals or dating Web sites in September, according to the Web-tracking service comScore Media Metrix Canada - an increase of 60 per cent since last October. The figure represents 46 per cent of the entire online population, and new sites came on each month.

What happened? Online dating success stories began to circulate, for one. "And word of mouth is a big thing for online dating," said Raymond Reid, director of business development for comScore Media Metrix Canada.

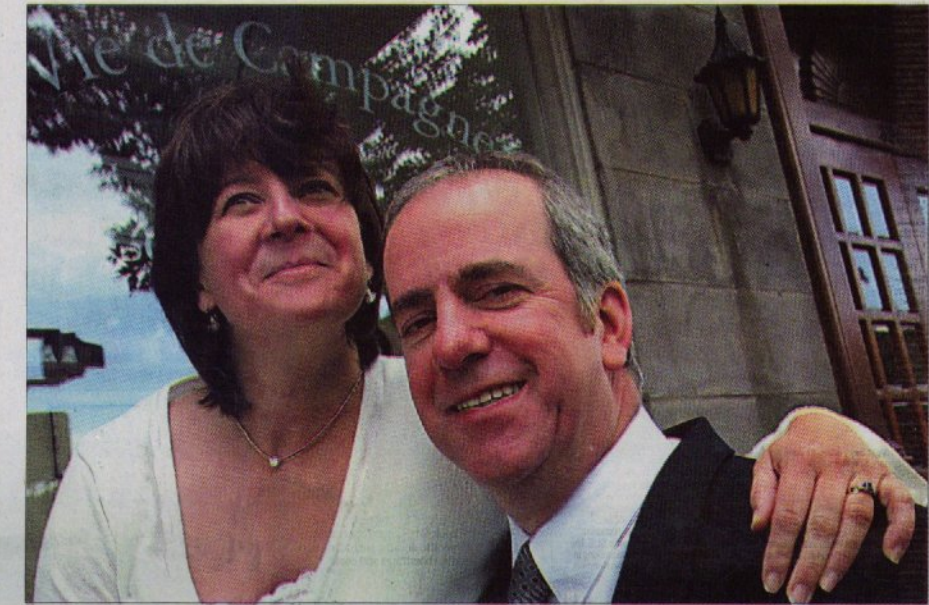
As we've come to rely on the Internet more in our daily lives - we bank online and buy books and make travel plans - going online is no longer considered an "out there" way to meet people, said Steve Messao, a senior vice-president at market researcher Ipsos-Reid.

As Rebecca, a thirty-something former Montrealer whose brother is married to a woman he met online, put it: "I heard to think I'm a nice, normal person. And if I'm on this thing, who is to say there aren't other nice, normal, decent people on it?"

She acknowledges, though, that she was hesitant about putting her profile online - so hesitant that she didn't want to be identified by name for this piece. "I'd heard stories," she said. Stories like the husband of a pregnant friend running off with a woman he met online. A month later, he begged his wife to take him back. She said no.

"To be sure, there are liars online - the New Yorker ran a cartoon of a dog at a computer, captioned: 'On the Net, nobody knows you're a dog'" - along with liars and liars.

Former Montrealer Stephanie Crowley, author of the soon-to-be-published *E-dating Secrets: How to Surf for Your Perfect Love Match* on the Internet, recalls falling in love over some 30



Christian Bélanger was about to give up on his Internet search when he connected with Chantal Boulé on RéseauContact.

RICHARD ARLESS JR., THE GAZETTE

hours worth of phone conversation with a fellow she met online. He flew in for a weekend and confessed his love over dinner - only to blow her off, via e-mail, once he was back home: she'd fed him muffins and a sticky rice dessert, it seems, and he feared such fare would conflict with his wish to be on the Atkins diet.

"And it has been my experience that many men can't measure themselves," Crowley said. "The guy who claims to be 5-11 or 6-foot is usually more like 5-7 in person. 'I'm a tall woman who could learn to love a chert or man - but I can't love a liar.'"

Still, for people who are looking to connect with someone and who have had it with blind dates, the bar scene and set-ups by friends, online dating has its advantages. The Internet has put people in touch with people they'd otherwise not come across because they are not part of their social circle, said Paul Galucci, chief operating officer of Lavalife.com.

Recently, said Anne, a fifty-something divorcee, "I met a compassionate, intelligent and fascinating guy I never would have met if not through this medium."

The dating process, when you think about it is inefficient, said Galucci. "It's time-intensive, it's costly - and you could be at the same party as the girl of your dreams and never meet her."

Indeed, online dating gives shy types an edge. "Friends who

don't look like Tom Cruise have at least been able to put their best foot forward," said Robert Soroka, a professor of marketing and organizational behaviour at McGill and Concordia universities.

"Not only do we save time, energy and money, but there is no other place in the world where you can be introduced to that many potential dates," said Crowley, who likes to say that online dating has introduced her to more than 17,000 men.

People can refine and focus their searches online in ways they never could offline. Profiling and compatibility rating systems have improved vastly since online services were launched in 1996 or 1997 and most have a score or more of criteria, from income to what kind of relationship you're after to whether you have, or want, children.

As well as larger sites like Yahoo! Personals, Lavalife and Match.com, there's a range of niche sites, based on attributes from religion (Date4faith) to sexual orientation (zoocorn).

Online dating provides a measure of security and control other dating doesn't. Users can browse and post profiles free of charge, generally, the meter starts only when they want to begin communicating. And people can stay anonymous for as long as they like. When they met online through Yahoo! Personals, Alan LeBoeuf knew Laura Leckie only as showgirlThaurth.

The 49-year-old civil servant's search for an employed non-smoker in a 129-kilometre radius of her Ottawa-area home within five years of her age turned up LeBoeuf in Massena, N.Y. When, after a week of messaging, they met for breakfast halfway between their homes, he'd washed his car and brought a sheaf of roses for her. "I felt the chemistry right away - and I think he did, too," she recalled. They were married last weekend.

Still, as much as a site can

"The guy who claims to be 5-11 or 6-foot is usually more like 5-7."

Stephanie Crowley

help match people who seem compatible, no computer can divine chemistry. Scottiabank manager Christian Bélanger was intrigued by a woman with whom he exchanged sonnets on RéseauContact, a French language site. But when they met, she had on skimpy clothes and sat way too close for his comfort. Another woman he met online turned out, in person, to have such a deep voice and such broad shoulders that he wondered whether she was not, in fact, a man.

Someone else might have given up. But 49-year-old Bélanger,

a divorced father of two daughters, was philosophical. He knew what he wanted in a partner and believed his initial online experiences were "probably to prepare me to accept discrepancies between my list and what was out there."

Chantal Boulé's was the last of four profiles he'd bookmarked as "favourites" from among those he'd checked out. The single mother of two daughters and owner of the Westmount home-decor shop Vie de Campagne, Boulé, 46, was busy with work and not so lucky with love.

She'd gone online to look for someone who, like her, enjoys outdoor life. "But nothing was happening - and I was about to quit," she recalled.

With only days left to her subscription, Bélanger's profile popped up. A golf fanatic, he'd chosen golf as his online name. "I looked at his picture and wondered: 'Is this person going to play a role in my life?'"

She liked his eyes, she recalled, and when they exchanged e-mails, "I loved the way he wrote." In person, she liked that he was serious - yet had a playful side. One dinner led to another - and to a courtship. The couple announced their engagement last Christmas and they were married in July.

That day, RéseauContact got 700 new members.

sschwartz@
thegazette.comwest.com

CANADA'S TOP 10 DATING SITES

1. **Lavalife.com**, with three categories: Dating, relationships and intimate encounters. 2.4 million hits in September.
2. **MeetIC.com**, with subscribers all over the world. 1.9 million hits.
3. **Emode.com**, which includes all kinds of fun quizzes. 1.7 million hits.
4. **Match.com** allows users to post a mini-photo album with up to 25 photos. 936,000 hits.
5. **MatchNet.com** provides access to other sites, including AmericanSingles.com and Jdate.com, a Jewish singles network. 425,000 hits.
6. **Ca.personals.yahoo.com** is the Yahoo! Personals site in Canada. 420,000 hits.
7. **Matchup.com**, like most other sites, features sweet testimonials. 420,000 hits.
8. **Amourme.com** is a French-language site. 389,000 hits.
9. **Friendfinder.com** calls itself the world's largest dating and social network. 385,000 hits.
10. **Webreduction.com** is a French-language site. 372,000 hits.

COMSCORE MEDIA METRIX CANADA



Stephanie Crowley offers advice on her Web site.

OTTAWA CITIZEN

Tips from the 'Hottie on the Hill'

SUSAN SCHWARTZ
THE GAZETTE

Even though Stephanie Crowley was voted Hottie on the Hill by the Hill Times, the sociable and outgoing deputy press secretary to former Alliance leader Stockwell Day couldn't get a date to the annual Parliamentary Press Gallery dinner.

So when an ad for online dating popped up on her computer, she responded. Nearly two years later, Crowley, a thirty-something single mother and former Montrealer, has been introduced to more than 17,000 men, "without going on a blind date, jeopardizing a business connection or cruising bars."

She's currently exploring a relationship with a man she met online this year - who may just be The One.

In studying online dating sites and listening to other people's stories, Crowley has learned a good deal about what she considers the art of e-dating - enough to coach people in person and by phone in selecting a site, narrowing down who and what they're looking for and teaching them to write profiles properly.

She is putting the finishing touches on a how-to book about online dating, *E-dating Secrets*, to be available bound and online through her Web site www.e-datingexperts.com.

Her advice includes:

Know what you are looking for. Define your "must-haves and your can't-possibly-stands." Once you have defined what you're looking for, it gets easier to write off what you don't want. **If you are a woman, practice "need-to-know."** That means there are things you need to know - and men don't - ultimately for reasons of personal safety. (For more on safe online dating, check out the Web site www.safe dating.com.)

Ask lots of questions. The beautiful thing about online dating is that there is implied permission to do this," Crowley said. She has no qualms about hiring a private investigator for

a long distance online connection. Crowley related the story of a woman who married a man she met online, only to find out his ex-wife died under mysterious circumstances.

Allow no more than about 90 days to close the online "net to know each other" deal to a first date in person. "If you drag on with friendly chatting and phone calls and don't get to a first date, one or both of you will lose interest or things will simply get too awkward," she said.

For information about *E-dating Secrets*, or for information about her e-dating university, visit Stephanie Crowley's Web site at www.e-datingexperts.com.