

Houston Citynews

LOOKING TO HOUSTON'S FUTURE



John Brown, left, met girlfriend Valerie Germany on an Internet chat line. "I thought he was older," says Valerie.

Love bytes

Land your mate online in the '90s

By Samantha McFarland
Special to Citynews

John Brown likes to meet his dates while surfing.

Only his beach is on the Internet, and the Web he weaves is worldwide.

"Usually a bunch of people will all be talking in a chat room and decide to go to a place to meet each other," he says. "That takes the pressure off of the first meetings."

Lorisa, one of John's coworkers, met her fiancée on the Internet. The first time they met was in a group meeting five years ago.

"We had been talking online for about six months before we met," Lorisa says. "One night, someone on the chat line got hungry and we all decided to meet at a restaurant. I knew it was him when he walked through the door, it was love at first sight! He looked just like he said he did."

Forget the singles bars and personal ads, the way to meet people today is on the Internet.

Dan Bender, President of Cupids Network and Webmaster of American Singles, says there are 716 men and 168 women in Houston that belong to American Singles. "There are thousands of other online dating services to

choose from," Bender says, "If you put them all together, the estimate of people using Internet dating services in Houston is 10,000 easily."

If you're not already familiar with online dating services, they all basically work the same. At American Singles, you fill out a profile about yourself, get an ad and then read other people's ads. You can send e-mail to people who interest you.

"It seems high tech but it's really old fashioned," says B.J., who met his wife through an Internet dating service called Matchmaker. "You get to read all about people... what they like, their hobbies, etc. before you send them a message."

After you talk online for a while, the next step is usually a phone call. Then, if you get along

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on the phone, then you meet in person.

"It's not uncommon for people to talk for months or even years before meeting," says Bender. "After talking with someone for so long before you meet, it's not uncommon for things to intimate rather quickly."

The first time B.J. met his wife was at her apartment. "She was very trusting," he says. "She needed her cast cut off, so I showed up with a garden tool and some beer and she let me in."

It's not a good idea to meet at a private place on the first time though. Although uncommon, people have been violated by people they've met on the Internet.

"Out of 80,000 dates reported, I've only had three cases of really bad incidents," says Bender. "One girl got pregnant and the guy left her, another lady got assaulted and one person got threatened. But those are all things that could happen if you met someone under traditional circumstances. People need to use ordinary precautions

and trust their instincts."

"Special precautions for Internet daters," Bender says, "are be careful about using your full name or work place on your e-mail address."

So, do people describe themselves pretty accurately? Not according to B.J.

"People tend to be a lot better looking, smarter and richer online than in person," he says. "When you're online, it's like you're wearing a mask, you can be whatever you want to be."

To eliminate the curiosity of what someone looks like, you can send a picture through the Internet. But that's not always accurate either.

"There was this one lady that sent a picture of herself on the chat line and everyone said how pretty she was," Lorisa says. "Then when we all got together as a group and got to see her in person, she was twice as heavy and way older. She was forty-five years old and had sent a picture of herself from when she was eighteen."

"Before I met my wife," B.J. says, "I was talking with this girl at 2:00 a.m. She wanted to come over so I said sure. She told me she had above average looks and was ten to

twenty pounds overweight. She was really eighty pounds overweight and had below average looks."

"Nancy" thinks that meeting men on the Internet is better than meeting them any other way.

"You really get to know a person for who they are without worrying about their looks," she says.

"Nancy" met "Stanley" on the Internet and then married him three months later.

They have kept their marriage a secret and they are having a ceremony for their friends and family. They told everyone they met at the mall.

"It's embarrassing to say you met the love of your life on a computer," says "Nancy." "It makes you sound like you were desperate."

Meeting people on the Internet is nothing to be ashamed of though, according to Dan Bender, most people on American Singles are intelligent, degreed professionals that earn an above average income. The average age of people on American Singles in Houston is twenty-five to forty.

"American Singles has been on the Internet since 1995. During this time I've had about 150 marriages

reported and tens of thousands of successful meetings," Bender says. "Not a day goes by without someone telling us they met the person of their dreams through this service."

There are more men using Internet dating services than women, so women get a bigger response than men.

"There are some people who are on there who are just looking for sex," Bender says. "You just have to weed through the bad people."

"This is a numbers game. I try and tell people if they've had a bad experience to try again. I've had people that wanted to give up and I talked them out of it. Then they write me later and tell me they met the person of their dreams."

With an estimated ten thousand plus people in Houston doing it, it's worth trying out. And if it doesn't work, you can always go back to the bars where the conversation is limited to "Hey baby, can I get you number?"

If you aren't really the Internet type, you can still use American Singles. Just send them a picture of yourself and a short personal biography, along with a donation (they are a non-profit agency) and they will post the ad for you and mail you the responses. Write American Singles at 526 W. Aurora Rd. # 350 Sagamore, OH 44067 or <http://www.as.org> 