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'Sexed-Out' Digital Daters are Turning to Matchmakers for the Real (Expensive) Deal

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By Alice Robb



Photo via Flickr user [Kevin Dooley](#)

It's 9 AM on a Saturday, and I'm feeling out of place. I'm surrounded by people who are alarmingly chipper, apparently unfazed by the early hour. Plus, I'm not wearing a red dress. I'm not wearing a heart-shaped pendant, and there isn't a single heart on my business card. I don't say things like, "I just love love." Most glaringly, I am not a professional matchmaker.

I'm at the annual conference of the Matchmaking Institute, held, fittingly, at a Greenwich Village space usually rented for wedding receptions. The guests had travelled from as

far as China and Norway, and forked over up to \$1,250 to spend the weekend networking and listening to lectures on business, marketing, and pop psychology.

Billed as the world's only school for matchmakers, the Institute was founded in 2003 by Lisa Clampitt, a matchmaker and former assistant of Bravo's "Millionaire Matchmaker" Patti Stanger. It offers a year-round certification course, where aspiring matchmakers learn how to set up shop, but its flagship event is the annual conference.

The conference draws a mix of seasoned matchmakers—founders and employees of established agencies with thousands of clients—and amateurs just trying to break in. A recent graduate of Boston College signed up for the convention after realizing he preferred helping his best friend hash out his dating problems to working at his corporate marketing job. A Maryland realtor told me he wants to add a matchmaking division to his real estate agency; he's noticed that after his clients find their dream home, some are still on the market for a soul mate.

The good matchmakers are always working, constantly scouting women and men to add to their databases of singles. It's hard to avoid the feeling of being sized up. Over the course of the weekend, I fielded a stream of questions about my age, religion, and marital status. Even Helen Fisher, the guest of honor at Thursday night's dinner, got the same treatment. Clampitt introduced the biological anthropologist as "a brilliant academic who has demonstrated scientific evidence of the ways people find love" and "freaking single." "I challenge everyone to think about who could be the love of her life," Clampitt said. Generous matchmakers traded tips on how to find men: get to know divorce lawyers, hang out at the Ritz Carlton in White Plains, frequent steakhouses.

They can get away with being intrusive, because they are an earnest and cheerful bunch. They say things like, "I believe in love" and "I want everybody to be happy." They say these things with a straight face.

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Self-help cliché is the second language here. Attendees are fluent in personality types and Myers-Briggs scores. At dinner, two matchmakers for eHarmony debate whether or not a third's report of an "ENTJ" result is accurate. Francesca Hogi, founder of Made to Measure Matching, says she's "always reading about six different dating books." The room is rapt when life coach Paul Carrick Brunson advises, "Know your truth" and body image expert Tracy Campoli suggests we "make self-care the foundation for success."

Nearly [one third](#) of singles in this country met their last date online. [59 percent](#) of Americans believe online dating is "a good way to meet people." In the age of Internet courtship, matchmaking may seem hopelessly old-fashioned. Yet the business is booming: Clampitt estimates that there are more than [3,000](#) professional matchmakers in the U.S., up from 1,200 in 2005. The online free-for-all may be fuelling a backlash, sending people in search of a dating scene with rules and accountability. People are

less motivated to look for dates in real life, yet they're exhausted from scrolling through countless profiles. "They see hundreds of photos and meet no one," said Radboud Visser, the head of matchmaking agency Mens & Relatie ("People & Relationships") in the Dutch city of Venlo. Faced with a seemingly endless parade of options, people become paralyzed and picky: a recent [Pew survey](#) found that a third of people using Internet dating sites have never actually met up with someone they found online.

Maria Avgitidis, who founded Agape Match six years ago, says the rise of Tinder "oversaturated the market," driving younger clients to her offices. "All of a sudden we had men under 34. They're like, 'I'm sexed out. I can't do this anymore.'"

And while apps that pull information from Facebook offer some measure of accountability, users can still fudge their biographies. People "want to know the person's been vetted," said Hogi, an ex-Survivor contestant who joined Paul Brunson's matchmaking agency after connecting with him on Twitter. "The more online dating horror stories there are, the more it helps the industry. People are getting fed up."

With more apps suggesting matches based on users' social media networks, bumping into colleagues or employers is a growing problem. Avgitidis says her clients, 80 percent of whom are "Goldman guys," don't want to risk running into their bosses online. Despite its prevalence, online dating hasn't entirely lost its stigma; [21 percent](#) of Americans still believe people who use online dating sites are "desperate."

Yet they offer enough anonymity that people have little incentive to act polite or even conform to basic social norms. Matchmakers, meanwhile, hold their clients accountable. Some, like Patti Stanger, will kick them out if they hear they've tried to sleep with a new partner too soon. Many agencies have clients and their dates fill out "feedback forms" after the first date; only if both are positive does the matchmaker arrange a second meeting.

That may seem unromantic, but apps have already made a lot of headway toward stripping modern dating of any semblance of romance. Matchmaking actually preserves an element of mystery: Most matchmakers don't give their clients much information about their dates in advance. "I don't want them to Google each other," said Hogi. "I don't want them to have preconceived notions." Visser has a more pragmatic reason for keeping dates' names and photos a secret: the more a client knows about a potential match, he says, the more he finds to dislike. "Too much information makes it hard to get them to agree to meet," he's noticed.

Not every matchmaker, of course, sees online dating as the enemy. Some encourage their clients to go online, and even help them draft messages and spiff up their profiles. Others use dating apps to scout matches for their clients. Nor is the distinction between online dating and matchmaking always clear: Some sites, like eHarmony, offer in-person matchmaking services to high-paying customers.

Matchmakers' fees can run into the tens of thousands of dollars for several months of services, which often include dating lessons and image consulting as well as introductions. Just as there are niche dating sites—for [farmers](#), for people with [herpes](#), for [Ayn Rand fans](#)—there are matchmaking businesses catering to specific groups: [Mormons](#), [older professionals](#), [gay men](#).

One demographic many matchmakers don't offer their services to, however, is women. At most agencies, it's men who sign up as clients. Women can apply to date them, but they can't join as paying customers. Their reasoning reflects some unsavory logic. "Women are more likely to be difficult to serve—to demand a refund, to complain online," said Julie Ferman, who runs a matchmaking agency in Los Angeles (and does take on female clients). Rachel Russo, who works for Clampitt, says it's an issue of numbers. In New York, "There are many more women than men," she said. "They're more difficult to match. A lot of matchmakers just don't want to deal with that."

Almost all of the matchmakers were women themselves; many of them came from careers in therapy, social work or communications. They tend to see themselves as "people people." "People always trust me," said Avgitidis. "They tell me their problems. I found a way to monetize that." "I'm a really good listener," said Julie Nguyen, a 23-year-old matchmaker at Modern Love Club in New York. **Trea Tijmens, a Swiss matchmaker, summed up the matchmaker's credo: "You shouldn't be in this business if you don't have a big heart."**