

Desperately Seeking Singletons, Then and Now

From telepersonals to Webpersonals, in 15 years
Lavalife's lovelorn market has exploded

Single people have long gotten a bum rap. But, in terms of awful PR, the 1970s did for singles what icebergs did for the Titanic. Sleazy, cheesy and oft times queasy, that '70s scene fouled the dating world with an odour that lingered well into the '90s.

(The "What's your sign?" mantra didn't do much to further the cause of astrology, either.) The advent of the Internet only reinforced the singles

stigma, with online anonymity raising troubling questions. Was that smooth-typing Lothario really the catch he claimed to be or was he reinventing the heel? Factor in that quintessentially '90s risk of duplicitous Romeos masquerading as potential Juliets, and things only get worse. But that was then, and this is now: It's a new decade, and Canadian companies are freshening up the business of selling relationships—and business is good.

Toronto's Interactive Media Group (IMG) began as an entrepreneurial startup 15 years ago, peddling its interactive voice response (IVR) telephone technology to traditional businesses. Seeing the potential of dating applications, the four-person IMG soon refocused its approach, using IVR tech to create its own service:

Telepersonals, a local telephone version of the

traditional "SF seeks SM for friendship, maybe more" newspaper personal ads. It was one of the first such businesses in North America. The service soon spread into 66 additional Canadian, American and Australian markets; IMG was successful from the start and a full-fledged corporation by its fifth birthday. In 1997, IMG expanded online to include Webpersonals.com.

Last year, the company revamped its image, merging its two brands under a single corporate moniker, Lavalife Inc.

It's a sign of the times, says Lloyd MacNeil (single, likes working out at the gym, dislikes loud, aggressive people), Lavalife's director, brand communications. In addition to maximizing its advertising budget (previously, IMG's \$27 million annual advertising budget was spent solely on Telepersonals), the name change was a strategic, funky repositioning in response to an increasingly professional clientele (think Bridget Jones) out in a more sophisticated dating market, where phone and online dating are more acceptable and more people are doing it.

"Our whole society is geared towards coupling," he explains of the new warm-and-fuzzy approach. "We want to say, 'It's OK to be single. And you should enjoy your single life.' Being single is a legitimate state."

The nuts and bolts of Lavalife haven't changed much since its Telepersonals days. The company still pursues a 25 to 40 demographic, but not exclusively. Customers buy phone time or online credits (prices vary by market and there are volume discounts: Toronto time can cost as little as 52 cents a minute or 20 cents a credit). They are then able to access, by phone or Internet, a bank of recorded personal ads. It's

free to browse, but it costs to reply to people who sound interesting.

The obvious changes are largely cosmetic, with Lavalife eschewing cheesy promises of romance or, at least, sex (e.g. photos of half-dressed couples cavorting by crackling fireplaces) in favour of group-fun imagery that looks like outtakes from the set of *Friends*. "Most Web businesses focus on 'romance,' on finding someone to marry," MacNeil explains. "We help singles meet other like-minded people, regardless of what their relationship objective might be."

The company has never wanted for customers—since inception, it has signed up 1.5 million unique phone members and four million new Web members—but an increasing number of new members come from the professional sector. MacNeil characterizes this new breed of singleton as highly confident and sociable, but simply too busy to socialize for any reason outside of a work context. For them, phone or online dating isn't an act of desperation, it's a necessity of scheduling.

"These people are largely single due to career and time pressures," says MacNeil. "And there's a definite decline in workplace romance because the law is more stringent today. So here we have all these singles who have less time, are working harder, and the opportunity to meet someone in the workplace is declining."

Lavalife has grown from four people to 461 employees and, as of Sept. 30, 2001, annual revenues now exceed \$100 million "and continue to grow dramatically." MacNeil says it's hard to say how much growth is directly due to the rebranding, simply because "we're in a growth business," with industry insiders predicting annual sales for technology-based dating services to crack the US\$1.5 billion mark by 2003. Singles and technology, it would seem, are a matchmaker's dream.

"And on most days he received more than thirty letters, all of them alike, stamped from the dough of suffering with a heart-shaped cookie knife."

—Nathanael West, *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933)

