

Flying Solo: Online Dating Services

By Jan Warner and Jan Collins

Question: I'm 52 and was divorced last year after nearly 30 years of marriage and two grown children. I am finally to the point where I think I'd like to start dating again, but it's been so long since I've been on a date! I don't hang out in bars, so I am curious, but wary, about online dating services. I am writing because your columns helped pull me through my divorce.

Answer: While experts tell us that the old-fashioned ways of meeting people – through friends, adult education classes, at church or synagogue, in a singles group – may still be the best, our research indicates that more and more people today seem to be turning to the Internet dating services.

Some say this is because it is easier; others say it is safer. But for whatever the reasons, according to new data from Match.com, the Internet dating service, folks like you – i.e., baby boomers who were born between 1946 and 1964 -- are the fastest-growing segment of Match.com users. A Match.com spokeswoman told us that the number of their boomer subscribers has increased 350 percent since 2000. This increase may be due to the fact that most boomers are very Internet savvy and perhaps more adventurous than their parents.

If you Google “online computer dating,” you'll find many dating services. Some are fairly general, while others are specifically targeted -- such as ethnic dating, gay/lesbian dating, international dating, mail-order bride, (yes, really), religious dating, speed dating, social networking, and swingers dating. There is even a site that purports to rate the “Top 5” online dating services.

With a veritable smorgasbord of Internet opportunities available, here are a few interesting statistics culled from the Match.com data:

- 70 percent of their boomer members are divorced or widowed;
- More than half of the boomers using their site exercise, and their favorite activities are walking, hiking, dancing, swimming, bowling, and golf.
- The boomers like the finer things in life: 39 percent enjoy dining out, 34 percent like to travel, 24 percent go to museums, 20 percent attend performing arts events, and 19 percent attend wine-tastings.
- Boomers say intelligence is the most important personality attribute in potential partners, followed closely by fidelity, confidence, and humor.
- Those boomers who have not retired are most likely to be self-employed entrepreneurs, followed by executives and physicians. Boomers using the site also have higher incomes than the average member (22 percent of the boomers earn \$50,000 to \$100,000 annually).
- 38 percent are empty nesters.
- 47 percent have a bachelor's degree, while 15 percent have a graduate degree.
- Baby boomers' biggest turn-off is sarcasm.

- Boomers are the least likely to believe they have only one soul mate.

Given the state of the world today, we suggest carefully vetting any Internet dating site you might be thinking of trying, and steer clear of those that appear to be of the “fly-by-night” variety. Ask friends in your situation if they have tried computer dating, and if so, which service they recommend. Use an anonymous username and do not give out your real e-mail address until you are comfortable revealing personal contact information. Finally, meet any first-time date from the Internet in a public place, so that you can check him or her out easily -- and safely -- before agreeing to a second date. Judge for yourself, and take your time.