

Match of the day

STORY ANTHONY O'BRIEN

Technology has transformed the way singles search for the perfect partner

THE DATING INDUSTRY has long struggled with a negative image. However, a recent report from researcher IBISWorld shows that over the past five years consumers have become increasingly comfortable with spending their money at online dating services.

In fact, dating services are so in vogue in Australia that IBISWorld predicts the industry will post growth of 4.5%pa in the 10 years from 2011 to 2021. (Australia's gross domestic product is forecast to rise by 2.8%pa.)

Online dating has become the dominant service, IBISWorld says, and significantly improved the industry's reputation. Over the past two decades, services such as RSVP and eHarmony, which enable singles to find potential partners based on similar interests and outlooks, have built large membership bases. But what is the cost of finding love in 2016?

The last time *Money* covered the cost of finding love, in 2004, RSVP was the major player in online dating. It is still big but it doesn't have the online space to itself, as eHarmony has joined the fray with gusto. Most online dating services are free to join, but if you want to get to know a possible match in more detail, you'll need to pay for direct communications. With RSVP you buy stamps (which give you unlimited contact with another member for 30 days), while eHarmony has a variety of plans. In 2004, 24 stamps with RSVP cost \$79.95; now it's \$120.

Online matchmakers also have a range of premium services. When *Money* contacted the big online players about the extra costs associated with premium memberships, only RSVP responded. RSVP senior marketing

manager Lara Delahunty says the online agency's memberships – Standout (\$84 for six months) and Premium (\$120 for six months) – give customers a greater choice of features and access to more bona fide matches. For example, Premium gives you more control over who can contact you, which can save time if you're lucky enough to be swamped by possible suitors. With Premium, your profile will be pushed to the top of Cupid's queue.

Compared with the fees for other dating services, finding a partner online probably won't break the bank. However, it can mean long hours spent editing personal profiles and searching, messaging, getting to know and possibly meeting matches. Time is money, and online dating can consume valuable hours.

There are also privacy and security issues. It's difficult to access membership prices before signing up – and if you read the fine print, you'll discover that you may not own the images and content you post on the dating websites. The websites might also have the capacity to disclose your information to third parties.

Tinder swipes back

Tinder, a free app, is the new player in the online dating business and it's causing quite

Dating at the double

Speed-dating services

- Simply Speed Dating Cost: \$50+ simplyspeeddating.com.au
- Amourlife Cost: \$30 amourlife.com.au
- CitySwoon Cost: \$89 cityswoon.com

Source: Agency websites, December 2015

a stir. Not only has it introduced a younger demographic, it's changing the very nature of the game.

Tinder is designed to be accessed on a smartphone or tablet. It uses Facebook data to create profiles and dispenses with long-winded compatibility or personality tests like those of the more traditional online services. Limiting each profile to a short description and five photos, Tinder matches individuals through three filter options: age, gender and GPS radius.

When opening the Tinder app, a potential suitor will appear. If you "like" the individual, you swipe right; and if you "dislike" them, you swipe left. If there's some mutual chemistry or common interests, Tinder enables you to start communicating.

RSVP's Delahunty says Tinder has had a big impact on the dating industry, making it more competitive. "We don't see this as a bad thing. It's introduced a younger market to online dating, which may not have previously



In the fast lane

If online services don't meet your romantic needs, speed dating events, costing from as little as \$30, may be your answer. A decade ago, when online matchmaking was in its infancy, speed dating was the favoured method for singles to meet up. It has since dropped off the radar somewhat, and the likes of Speed Dater, Fast Impressions and Fast Date are no longer in business. Yet speed dating is still recognised as a fun, social way to mingle with other singles.

It has evolved since its heyday in the noughties. Now companies such as Simply Speed Dating, Amourlife and CitySwoon provide opportunities for singles to engage in larger group activities that have a speed-dating component. CitySwoon, for example, is the current Guinness World Record holder for the biggest blind date, which was held at the Sydney Opera House in 2014. It uses online technology to match people before an event.

Simply Speed Dating has a \$20 discount for first-timers who attend an event, and any clients who don't meet a potential match also get a discount. This is valid for up to six months after the event. "However, we have found that 80% of our clients will receive at least one match at any of our events," says Cristian Pucheta, director of Simply Speed Dating.

Old-school agencies

If online and speed dating don't suit your lifestyle, there are dating agencies that match time-poor professionals, business owners and executives. IBISWorld says matchmaking agencies make up about 10% of the \$116 million dating services market, compared with the 67%

market share of online services. "However, this sector has proved highly resilient to change, particularly due to its significance in various cultures and a growing demand from busy professionals," says Jem Anning, senior analyst at IBISWorld.

To use a dating agency you'll need plenty of spare cash. Some require \$3500 for an entry-level dating package, which includes matchmaking, a written profile, coaching, the filtering of matches, professional photo shoots, personal styling and exercise advice.

Jayne, from Blue Label Life, attributes the difficulties faced by some executives and business owners in finding love to a number of factors. "It could be that their peers are in longer-term relationships, they work in transient employment, are busier and work longer hours," she says. "Yet they still have a fixed set of criteria that a possible partner must meet."

Dating agencies can avoid the confusion online dating sites can create. "We call it the paradox of dating," says Jayne. "There are so many choices that no one is actually doing anything. Dating agencies get rid of the confusion and look towards the end goal and how our clients can achieve a long-term relationship rather than shopping around for it online."

A dating agency isn't a panacea for the lovelorn, however. "We tend to be really strategic with the people we bring on board to make sure they fit our criteria," says Jayne. "We can knock people back and, if we can't help them, we will offer them a recommendation of where to go next." **M**

given it a try, and it has helped make online dating a mainstream way of meeting people, which can only be considered a good thing," she says.

Samantha Jayne, founder of Blue Label Life, a conventional dating service, has reservations. "Tinder is purely based on physical appearances, and if that's the way we are going to date when you first get out there looking for someone, that's OK," she says. "But when you are older, there are more criteria - values, family, when you want to have children and so on."

Tinder has launched a premium product called Tinder Plus. It costs \$24.95, reports IBISWorld, and has a 50% discount for the under-30s.

Tinder Plus lets you send unique messages to special matches and rewind to candidates you lost if you swiped the wrong way. Its Passport facility lets you to communicate with people outside the GPS settings on your phone, which the free Tinder service does not allow.

LOVE AT A PRICE

AGENCY	MEMBERSHIP	COST			
eHarmony eharmony.com.au	Create and browse profiles, personality prof	free			
	Full access on Basic	1 month	6 months	12 months	24 months
		\$64.95pm	\$44.95pm	\$19.95pm	\$13.95pm
RSVP rsvp.com.au	Total Connect	1 month	6 months	12 months	24 months
		\$64.95pm	\$44.95pm	\$19.95pm	\$17.95pm
	Create profile, search, say hi, be contacted	free			
Standout membership	Stamps	3 stamps	6 stamps	12 stamps	24 stamps
		\$45	\$70	\$90	\$120
	Premium membership	1 month	3 months	6 months	
		\$20pm	\$17pm	\$14pm	
		1 month	3 months	6 months	
		\$30pm	\$25pm	\$20pm	

Source: www.choice.com.au, December 2015.