5 Secrets to Make Online Dating Work for You

Make Staying Safe Work for You

First: before you start your online quest for love, it is absolutely essential that you protect your computer from hackers and scammers. There are specific things you can do to minimize your risk of exposure to identity theft, and computer viruses too, while looking for your match on-line:

- Set up a new email account for online dating that is separate from all personal and work accounts.
- Do not include your real name in the email address you use on dating sites.
- Be sure any automatic signatures are disabled.
- Select a strong password that is unique to this email account. (It takes a few hours to hack a 6-8 digit password and many days to hack a 13-15 digit password. Many hackers won't bother with the long ones, so long password = safer.)

These simple precautions will help keep your identity secret and thus prevent someone from harassing you should you decide to end contact. Not only that, but strong passwords and protected personal information keep scammers and hackers at bay. You do not want your personal information in the hands of identity thieves or potential stalkers. Don't make your inbox an outbox for shady characters out there! Most email providers ask you to choose one or two security questions when you set up your email address. These security questions are to help you reset your password if you forget it. This procedure protects your info and inbox as well.

Not to alarm you too much, but according to a recent Huffington Post article, identity theft is the fastest rising reported crime in the United States, by a long mile. Their research indicates the best thing to do is prepare for "the inevitability of victimization." It's a question of when, not if. In

addition to the above precautions, I suggest that you sign up for credit protection from a company such as Equifax and your check credit scores regularly for any red flags.

So, now you have a safe email address. How do you create an online dating profile with safety in mind? (We will cover creating your profile in great detail in the next secret) When you are creating your profile, the key is: do not reveal more information than necessary. You can mention what you do for a living, but don't give the name of your employer. Go ahead and say that you have a kid in college, but don't say where. Feel free to explain your favorite activities, but don't tell the world where you can be found at ten o'clock every Saturday morning. Keep personal details personal. Secondly, never give away your contact information. If someone gives you his or her personal email address or phone number you are not obliged to use it, nor to reciprocate. The rule of thumb is to communicate through the online dating service.

For example, the easiest and cheapest way to communicate in real time is to use online instant messaging and chat services. Most sites have IM, or instant messaging, options for what is essentially texting in real time on your computer. You can also have conversations via your online dating site's "phone call" service. You will need to purchase a microphone and a set of headphones for your computer, but it is worth it for unlimited and safe chat time. Here's the basics: you can log onto Private Phone to get your very own disposable number. When you are signed up online, you select your private number by state (you can pick any state) and record a greeting. When someone calls that number it will go directly to voicemail–it will never ring through to you. An email or text alert will notify you that there is a message, which you can access over the phone or via internet. Just remember that when you return calls, block your number and avoid using your home or work landline.

How do photographs fit into playing it safe with online dating? For one thing, don't post pictures of yourself in front of your house, or with your address showing. That seems obvious, but we often look at pictures to see how great we look and don't even notice our surroundings! Use setting-neutral pictures–with backgrounds that either are unidentifiable or that don't make you identifiable. A restaurant in Chicago is a pretty safe bet, but the store where you shop daily or the office building where you work are best avoided.

As for your potential dates, be suspicious if they have not posted any photos. Also, ask for a series of photos from different times in your online dating partner's life. Not only will that build a

better understanding of who they are, it will also ensure that the photo posted is legitimate! Be wary of someone who claims to have only one photo. Everyone but scammers has old photos! You want to be sure you are talking to a real person with a real life, not a false profile set up for the purpose of hacking, scamming and generally taking advantage. And never give anyone money.

There is one more risk factor to be aware of: the "not so single" online dating prospect. You should be leery if someone can only talk at odd or specified times, talks in hushed tones or cuts conversations short by saying, "Sorry, gotta go". This person might not be as available as you think.

A few warning signs that the person you are talking to is married or non-single are:

- no photo
- very secretive about personal details
- erratic communication
- talks in hushed tones when you call unexpectedly
- available only at certain times or they insist on being the one to call you
- uses free dating sites in order to leave no trail

I don't mean to scare you. Online dating is a wonderful resource for potentially meeting the person of your dreams. Be grateful for the resource, but use it wisely. Keep your heart open, but your personal details locked away, at least at first. At some point, when you meet, start dating, and find you want to pursue a relationship, you will start to feel trust and open yourself. But until then, it is always smart to put safety first.

Physical safety

When you find someone online that you are interested in, take the conversation off line sooner than later. You don't want to waste time, energy and good intentions on someone who is not your ideal match. Although you have already been communicating with someone for a while, you are meeting a complete stranger and should proceed accordingly.

- Drive separately, never let someone pick you up from your residence or workplace

- Meet in a public place with lots of people around
- Tell your family or friends who you are going to meet, where and when, and give them a call after the meeting
- Keep your cell phone with you and turned on
- Limit the time of your meeting to 30 to 60 minutes
- Have a exit strategy

Make the best online dating sites work for you

As you embark on the joyful and optimistic journey towards dating, romance and maybe even true love, you have a lot of decisions to make. There's a certain amount of work to be done before you find yourself getting spiffed up for that first date. It's funny, but also true about so many glorious things in life: you have to do the work first before you reap the rewards.

Knowing what kind of relationship you want and whether you want free to paid service is just the tip of the iceberg. Doing your research, making lists and answering your own questions will help you make the best choice. But don't be daunted. Though there are many factors to consider when choosing an online dating service, today's blog will help walk you through the decision-making process.

The following checklist is designed to clarify some of the issues around selecting the best site for you.

The overview:

- **What do you want?** Specifically—from an on-line dating site. Knowing what kind of relationship you want is crucial. Do you want a long term commitment or are you simply looking for casual dating or companionship? Some sites cater to the more serious-minded seekers who are in the market for true love and a lifetime connection. Others are perfect for you if you are not there yet, and simply want to date for awhile.
- **Who do you want?** Criteria such as age, interests, location and spiritual beliefs can help you narrow your search for a site. There are niche sites for particular geographic regions, certain religious affiliations, and hobbies, and even sites that cater to singles with or without children. Joining a site that is specific to your wants and needs can save you time!

The nitty-gritty:

- **Privacy policies**. It is a good idea to check a dating site's privacy settings before registering. Some sites share your personal information with other companies and you may not be allowed to opt out. If you only want your profile to be visible to selected people, make sure the site has that function. For added security, there are websites that do background checks of all subscribers. They may certify the subscriber's age, background and marital status. Check for security affiliations that protect your personal information. Look for a privacy program that has a trademark.
- **Professionalism in construction and appearance**. If it looks cheesy, it probably is. Look over the dating site to see how it's constructed. Is it consistent, attractive, and cohesive? Does it work, or are there links that, when you click them, go nowhere? If the fonts are crooked or jagged or there are missing graphics, these are red flags. Dating sites that lack attention to detail can also lack organization, follow through and even many basic security features.
- **Cost or no cost?** Most dating sites offer free sign up and then charge you when it's time to actually contact potential matches. Paid sites typically have more options (chat, video, IM, mobile apps) than free sites and are more secure since they verify members' credit card information (and maybe even picture ID). And not surprisingly, people who pay for online service are often more serious about finding someone than free subscribers. Also look out for the free websites that contain "dummy" profiles that send you to links to adult sites in private or instant messages. Free sites may have fewer security features, though this is not an absolute.
- **Be savvy about billing**. If you choose a paid site, educate yourself about the billing and cancellation policies before paying. Most accounts automatically renew unless you specifically disable that function. You may have to mark the automatic renewal date in your calendar and go in and manually opt out of renewing at that time.
- **Does size matter?** Not necessarily, but there are some differences between large and small dating sites. The bigger sites can provide you with more options to choose from when posting your profile and searches. Some offer specific questionnaires to help match you with the most compatible people and a money back guarantee. They are also liable to have a wider range of subscribers for you to choose from. The large sites will probably charge monthly or annual fees. Some of the smaller, niche dating sites don't charge membership fees, and many of them are excellent resources, especially the

ones that serve people of certain backgrounds (based on religion or nationality for example). Still, refer to my admonitions above about security features on free sites.

Choosing the right online dating service takes time and perseverance, but can also be fun. Make time for this. Set aside an evening or two during which you will do your dating site "homework." Using the checklist above, and any other criteria that are important to you, browse various sites with a notepad handy. Enjoy the chance to "shop" without making a commitment. You won't be able to view actual profiles (unless the security features are very poor, which in itself is good information to have), but you can find out how many subscribers the site has, what their rules and guidelines are, and how they handle billing and security.

EXERCISE

Computer and Identity protection

Set up a new email account with a strong password

Name_____

Password_____

Consider signing up for a credit protection

Company_____

Services and cost_____

Consider signing up for a disposable phone number

Company_____

Trust your instincts

Red Flags_____

Physical Safety

Public Locations_____

Notifications to family or friends_____

Exit stragety_____

Dating Sites

What kind of relationship do you want_____

Who/what type are you looking for_____

Sites privacy policies_____

Rate sites construction appearance_____

Cost or no cost_____

Billing_____

Site size_____