

Information Suitor Highway goes mobile

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More online-dating businesses are shifting gears to keep up with the latest technological trend in eDating by going mobile.

Turning to mobile devices as a new source of attracting singles on the go, the Information Suitor Highway has made the leap from PCs to cell phones, allowing singles to view profiles and text message others while keeping the same level of anonymity intact.

In fact, for most singles using Match.com Mobile, using the mobile phone to search for dates and flirt via text messaging will make dating more convenient, said Match.com spokeswoman Kathleen Roldan.

The popular online-dating site, with more than 15 million singles worldwide, launched its mobile service back in February 2003, enabling singles to search photo profiles, make condensed profiles and connect with other eligible singles in their area using basic search criteria.

Since its 2003 launch Match.com Mobile has seen more than 5.5 million chat requests, and more than 7 million messages have been sent as of June 2005.

As Roldan says, mobile dating offers a faster and more immediate way of finding other potential matches as well as enabling singles to become more flirtatious with one another; however, the one drawback is cell phones' small screens.

Young single people are more attracted to the service, with 42 percent of

users under age 25 and 81 percent under age 35, according to Roldan.

"More and more people are using the phone; it only makes sense to connect with singles on it now," Roldan said, mentioning that their mobile service was recently launched in Japan.

Eventually, Match.com also hopes to enhance the service with a more enhanced location-based technology, so that mobile users could find matches in close proximity based on the location of their phone, she said.

Some companies are already doing this, like SmallPlanet, whose members can "crowdsurf" by using their Bluetooth radio signal as a "radar" to find friends or other members at best within 100 feet or less but still allow for members to control their privacy.

The popularity of mobile dating is a growing trend in Asia and the United Kingdom, unlike the United States, where the mobile-phone experience has been mostly textual, and as The San Francisco Chronicle reported there are fewer than 6 million users in the U.S. participating in mobile dating, compared to the estimated 40 million who use computer-based online dating services.

Moreover, according to analyst Brent Iadarola of Frost & Sullivan in the Chronicle, "subscription revenue for the mobile dating services are expected to rise from \$31.4 million this year to \$215 million by 2009, which does not include revenue from text-messaging charges, but could double those figures."

Many in the online dating industry believe that the dating-service move from the computer to the cell phone is inevitable.

TheDateZone CEO Paul Geannopulos says that as newer mobile devices

emerge into all-in-one devices with advanced audio, video and Web capabilities, mobile applications of online dating is the next generation.

Recently, TheDateZone.com, an interactive video dating site with 3,000 members that started back in 2004, partnered up with SmartVideo Technologies Inc. enabling members to receive SmartVideo's basic subscription as part of their \$24.95 monthly membership.

Members have the benefit of receiving access to a worldwide database of personal audio and video profiles, free Web camera and headset, live television, and communicating over audio and video conference via Internet and phones.

Geannopulos expects his membership base will increase to 1 million within the next year, noting that people are "sick and tired of phony photos of people misrepresenting themselves."

"They think they are going to go out on a date with someone who looks like Tom Cruise, instead they look like a 700 pound gorilla," he said.

Even young online dating companies are jumping on the mobile-device bandwagon, seeing a great potential for business like eDatingPlanet.com, a relatively young Nashville-based company launched in April.

"I always wanted to give people an online service that they could interact, have fun, and look for others," said eDatingPlanet.com President Erick Shipmon, who likens his service to a "cool, modern nightclub."

With an average of 500 new members per month, the company is moving towards mobile dating by offering its members free InPhonex Voice over Internet Protocol long-distance service within the \$19.99 monthly fee.

As Shipmon says, the broadband long distance would be a good way for people to communicate without the large costs.

"Many eDatingPlanet.com members live in countries outside of North America," Shipmon said. "As a result, people are having fun communicating with friends all over the world. We feel offering free VoIP long-distance to our members will help them continue to build those relationships."

A veteran to the mobile dating scene is wireless communications company SMS.ac Inc., which created its version of a members' interactive service with smsFlirt and smsClubs when the company was launched in December 2001.

SMS.ac, which conducts business with over 400 mobile carriers worldwide, provides a proprietary multimedia messaging service known as MMSBox that enables the exchange of text and multimedia mobile communication across any technology platform and deliverable to any enabled wireless device.

"We were the first ones to do this on a global scale," SMS.ac Executive Vice President and co-founder Greg Wilfahrt said, mentioning that 6 million phones were registered for the service.

"The beauty of our product is the ease of use and (ability) for people to flirt while retaining their anonymity" he said. "It's about instant gratification."

In fact, he never expected to have individuals from Iraq and North Korea become members.

SmsFlirt allows individuals to register under a username, have a profile and search a worldwide database without giving out their phone number,

while smsClubs is an online community based on different issues from religion to sports including one club, "Fans of Vanilla Ice," started in Romania with 20,000 members.

According to Wilfahrt, having a phone that can do everything is the "Holy Grail," and businesses should understand that.

He expects more online dating businesses will be launching mobile services as well as other businesses in general, as mobile technology advances and multimedia expands.

"Our perspective is that if you didn't have a Web site, you'll perish, but now if you don't have a mobile-phone presence, you'll be a dinosaur in the tar pits, you won't be able to compete," Wilfahrt said.

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