

## Dating sites become mainstream and focus on more niche markets

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Online dating has brought romance to millions of men and women. And now, a new website for Jewish singles, Jewcier.com, operated by Miami Beach-based Avalanche, is geared to help even more people find love through the Internet.

Stop Kvetching - Start [Dating!](#) commands the blog on Jewcier.com, written by Meir Strahlberg, chief executive of Avalanche.

"It's meant to introduce Jewish singles to one another in a casual, stress-free environment," said Strahlberg, sipping tea at a bookstore near his office.

Jewcier, which is now open to the public, joins nearly 20 other general and niche dating sites owned and operated by Avalanche, co-founded by Strahlberg and his Toronto-based business partner Kris Covino in 1997.

Among Avalanche's largest sites are Date.com, launched on [Valentine's Day](#) in 1997; [Matchmaker.com](#), which Avalanche bought in 2005, and Amor.com, a Latin [dating site](#) also launched in 2005, which has more than 20,000 members in Florida alone.

Avalanche's [domain names](#) are words people naturally type into the Internet, so they don't have to spend a lot in marketing, Internet dating experts say.

"They're well respected within the industry for being savvy operators,"

said Mark Brooks, an online dating industry analyst and editor of [onlinepersonalswatch.com](http://onlinepersonalswatch.com).

Within the last six months, Avalanche has added five gay dating sites to its portfolio, which already included [GayDating.com](http://GayDating.com); [GayMen.com](http://GayMen.com); ; [GayMarriage.net](http://GayMarriage.net); [PinkWink.com](http://PinkWink.com), which is oriented toward gay women; [MyPartner.com](http://MyPartner.com); and [Gay.mx](http://Gay.mx), a Mexican site.

Gay sites are "a growing part of our business," Strahlberg said.

Avalanche also owns religion-oriented sites: [ChristianMatchmaker.com](http://ChristianMatchmaker.com) and [CatholicSoulmates.com](http://CatholicSoulmates.com); another Latin market site, [Corazon.com](http://Corazon.com); and a senior and mature market site, [MatureSinglesClick.com](http://MatureSinglesClick.com).

Overall, the company's sites have 10 million members worldwide, and 5 percent to 10 percent of them are paying members, Strahlberg said. You must be 18 to join and you must be a paying subscriber to send an email. The cost ranges from \$10 to \$30 per month, he said.

Online dating "is effective, it's inexpensive, it's very convenient," Strahlberg said. "You can be sitting at home, or in the office, anywhere around the world and you can meet somebody."

Experts agree that the stigma has evaporated.

"Online dating is not just for what I used to call the dating-challenged - the computer geek, the shy boy," said Los Angeles-based online dating expert Julie Spira. "Online dating is for everyone now."

Spira, who coaches singles and runs [cyberdatingexpert.com](http://cyberdatingexpert.com), met her now ex-husband in 1999 on [Matchmaker.com](http://Matchmaker.com).

"Date.com and Matchmaker.com are fabulous brand names," she said.

"They happen to be really great names for dating sites."

Avalanche's sites are among 1,500 worldwide, in a still-growing industry that attracts 122 million visitors per month worldwide and 24 million per month in the United States, which is the largest online dating market, according to Internet data provider comScore.

The top 100 sites - including some of Avalanche's - account for 92 percent of unique visits, Brooks said.

Online dating got its start in 1995, with such sites as Match.com, now the largest dating site with 9.4 million unique monthly users, according to comScore. The 50-plus age group is currently its fastest growing category.

Overall, the industry generated \$2.1 billion last year, and is targeted to grow 7.5 percent this year, according to a study released last month by MarketResearch.com.

Niche sites have proliferated in recent years, with lifestyle-oriented sites like veggiedate.com for vegetarians and datemypet.com for pet lovers.

"For a site to be successful, they have to have critical mass, and how they get there is to have charter members not paying," Spira said. "Eventually that changes to require them to pay."

Strahlberg, 41, who grew up in North Miami Beach and went to the Hebrew Academy in Miami Beach, started Jewcier to compete with the popular Jewish dating site JDate. Single and "looking to meet the right girl," Strahlberg said he had been a JDate user for years.

"Jdate has been around for a long time and has the bulk of the market share for Jewish singles," Spira said. "They are a household brand name

in the Jewish community. But that doesn't mean there isn't room for another site."

To boost traffic, Jewcier posts blogs, allows singles to interact with the site, and is using Facebook and Twitter to get the word out.

"They are doing a great job trying to create brand awareness through social media," Spira said, "and they will probably skew toward a younger demographic, more toward singles in their 20s and 30s."

Strahlberg got his start in online dating after owning telephone dating and chat lines.

He graduated from Baruch College in 1992 with a degree in advertising and marketing, and worked for a large advertising firm in New York. After he was fired for falling asleep on the job (he said he was studying full time and working full time), he got into the telephone dating business, operating in 30 countries.

"I thought the Internet would be the future, so I wanted to transition the chat lines, the dating telephone lines, to the Internet."

So he sold his company and focused his energy online, buying Date.com for \$50,000 in 1997.

"It was a free dating site, struggling and not making money, and we had bigger plans for it," Strahlberg said.

"Online dating was just in its infancy, it wasn't socially acceptable," he said. "It was just something nerds did."

He chose the name Avalanche because he likes mountains and snowboarding. He lived in New York and Toronto until 2004, when he

moved back to Miami.

Today, Avalanche has about 30 employees, including 10 in South Florida, overseeing accounting, finance and marketing. Programming and technology are handled in Toronto, and customer service in the Philippines.

Strahlberg, who owns half the company, declined to disclose Avalanche's revenues, but said it is "highly profitable" and has been since its inception. This year, the company may be looking for outside investors for the first time, he said.

"Meir is one of the sharpest guys in the business," said Marc Lesnick, who runs iDate, an Internet dating industry conference held annually in Miami Beach. "He's a savvy entrepreneur, very savvy about marketing, business models, and investing, a very sharp guy."

## ONLINE DATING TIPS

Julie Spira, online dating expert and bestselling author of "The Perils of Cyber-Dating: Confessions of a Hopeful Romantic Looking for Love Online," offers these suggestions to help you find love in cyberspace:

Have a catchy screen name: Robert12345 won't catch her eye like SailorBoyinMiami.

Photos: Have your bio photo taken professionally or enlist a friend with a digital camera. Post three to five photos, make sure you're smiling to appear approachable, and include a full-length body shot and an activity shot.

Be authentic: Both men and women are frustrated with dates they barely recognize. Post recent photos, or at least include the date they were taken

if they are more than a year old.

**Personalize:** Avoid cliches and be original when sending your introductory email.

**Leave the novel at home:** Keep it simple. Show your varied interests, but don't be long-winded in your profile or emails.

**Be positive:** No one wants to date Debbie or Donnie Downer, nor do they want to hear about your nasty breakup or divorce. Leave conversations about the ex behind, and definitely not in your online dating profile.

**Get organized:** Organize your search so that you can keep track of people you have contacted and view their profile before you meet them or talk on the phone so you won't get mixed up.

## AVALANCHE'S MAIN SITES

Date.com

Matchmaker.com

Jewcier.com

ChristianMatchmaker.com

Amor.com

Corazon.com

MatureSinglesClick.com

Gaydating.com

PinkWink.com

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