Startups at SXSW in search of some better mousetraps

March 10 2013, by Robert Macpherson

Banners hang in the atrium of the Austin Convention Center on Thursday, March 7, 2012. App developer Elissa Shevinsky is the driving force behind MakeOut Labs and its "fun, free Jewish dating site" called JSpot. "We've built a site where women get fewer messages that are lower quality so that the great messages stand out and the great guys stand out," she told AFP at the SXSW festival.

Not long after her husband left her "to live in a van down by the river" in

Idaho, as she puts it, Elissa Shevinsky thought it was high time for a better mouse trap. Or rather, a better dating website.

The thirty-something app developer who divides her time between New York and California is the [driving force](#) behind MakeOut Labs and its "fun, free Jewish dating site" called JSpot.

She says she's engineering it to be more female friendly than the current big players in online dating—sites like Match.com and OKCupid.com—by creating "the first [spam filter](#) in online dating."

"We've built a site where women get fewer messages that are lower quality so that the great messages stand out and the great guys stand out," she told AFP at the Startup Village corner of the ongoing South by Southwest (SXSW) festival.

Shevinsky's project is starting out small, but her dreams are big, especially given that online dating has grown into $4 billion industry as [lonely hearts](#) turn to the Internet in their quest for love—or at least a movie and dinner.

Like many other apps being pitched at SXSW, [springboard](#) in past years for such global household names as Foursquare and [Twitter](#), JSpot grew out of Shevinsky's [personal experience](#).

When her husband left her—she insists they're still friends—"I found myself single... I took a look around and I saw that we needed a better Jewish [dating site](#)," she said.

"You need to be a technologist and also really well-connected Jewishly, and I thought I was the person to do that."

Besides putting a lid on excessive proposals from dubious suitors,

Shevinsky said her project will include the novel ability for users to, in effect, create their own dating websites reflecting their individual interests.

"For many users, they might have an interest in dating vegans or dating people who love SXSW, and those demographics are too small to support for a company like Match.com," which was founded 17 years ago, styles itself as the original dating website and operates in 25 countries.

"We're part of this movement towards an open web, where users can create and lead their own communities," Shevinsky said.

Improving upon existing online products, especially mobile apps, was a notable theme during a SXSW Startup Village workshop Saturday attended by dozens of youthful startup entrepreneurs, many in T-shirts with their venture's logos.

They were invited to make 30-second pitches to a trio of hard-nosed technology journalists, who in turn critiqued their ability to get media attention. (One common reaction: How will these bright ideas make money?)

Michael Bergman, founder of Repp, wearing a T-shirt that read "Online, I'm a horny supermodel," said his website enables users to carry out background checks on anyone from potential dates to prospective house sitters.

He explained how the idea came about after a woman he met at a speed-dating event spent hours surfing social media websites to predetermine his credibility. The two now are married.

Tappr is a smartphone app that enables users to order drinks anywhere in

a crowded bar without actually going to the bar and angling for the busy bartenders' attention. Its developers are targeted it at craft beer lovers.

Dealflix does one better than established online box offices like Fandango by offering cut-price movie tickets in cinemas with too many empty seats to fill, and Junkio rides the wave of social responsibility by providing a virtual space for unwanted merchandise to be sold for charity.

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