

Need online e-date help? Call Virtual Dating Assistants! »

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Online dating has opened up a vast world of potential for the growing market of single professionals, but it's also thrown traditional courting procedures completely out of whack. Daters are overwhelmed by quantities of profile pictures that arrive in their inbox via Yahoo and JDate every day. They've learned to live in fear of Match's brutally efficient auto-rejection tool (one click of the "Not Interested" button, and the site sends a bland kiss-off to whomever you dislike).

In this ever-less-forgiving playing field, more and more people are looking for a little help any way they can get it. Hence, the proliferation of niche sites, dating coaches and the most controversial newcomer of all, Virtual Dating Assistants. Founded by Scott Valdez, a former marketing director and enthusiastic online dater, VIDA takes care of all the online dating legwork: It crafts appealing (but accurate, Valdez insists) profiles for its clients; gently retouches profile photos; scouts potential dates; sends witty opening e-mails; and helps the dater "close" (a term yanked out of the salesman's glossary, meaning to take the

relationship offline).

VIDA's founder takes the stance that creating an online profile is similar to creating your brand. First, VIDA tests out clients' photos via OKCupid's 'My Best Face' tool to see which get the best response rate before applying them to the client's profile. Then, account reps recommend which dating sites to join after running "site analysis" by crunching numbers on how many of the site's candidates met a client's criteria, were "attractive enough" and logged in within one week. VIDA even has a handbook titled "Maximizing Your Success With Phone Numbers" for when a "closer" can't get a date but manages to get the phone number (allegedly, this accounts for 30% of closes).

After hearing this, or hearing Valdez glibly say, "When we send e-mails, we break down the message into 19 variables and track it like a direct marketing campaign," a woman's immediate response would usually be something like, "You have taken all the romance and sincerity out of dating and turned it into a cold, disingenuous game of salesmanship. You are Cupid's enemy. And mine!"

But anybody who thinks there's any romance or sincerity left in normal unassisted online dating probably hasn't spent much time doing it. It's a highly superficial and competitive arena where one false step can get you un-liked forever, and most average Joes don't get a "hello" back to 90% of their emails. Finding love becomes a distant pipe dream — just finding a real person is challenge enough.

“Our job is not to build relationships online. We take clients offline so they can build real connections face to face,” says Valdez. And all of VIDA's careful research leads, surprisingly often, back to some intuitive and simple tactics. For online daters who can't afford the pricey service (start-up fees are \$200, plus an additional \$600 a month for profile management), VIDA has offered some helpful hints:

--Don't address potential dates by their profile name. Just use a simple “Hi” or “Hey.”

--If he/she doesn't answer the first e-mail, follow up a week later. Make it short, and not too serious.

--Don't put “I was looking at your page” as your opener. Of course, you were.

--Probably the most important piece of advice is this: Getting responses is all about making people feel something.

According to Valdez, most online daters don't succeed in that last point, leading to a lack of connection. And assuming the point of dating is to meet someone and feel something, a service that helps kick-start real-world connections would seem to be — against all odds — on the side of Cupid.

--Lena Katz

Illustration by Ronald J. Cala II for the Los Angeles Times.