

Despite the recession, more folks looking for love

'In down times, people want to hook up'

By Joanne Chianello, The Ottawa Citizen March 16, 2009



When times are tough, you tend to think about what's important,' says Linda Miller, owner of Misty River Introductions.

Photograph by: Bruno Schlumberger, the Ottawa Citizen, The Ottawa Citizen

People may have given up on their investment portfolios, moving up the corporate ladder and big luxury purchases, but there's one thing they haven't thrown in the towel on during this recession: romance.

As the economy tanks, more people are looking for love, both online and off.

"We had the busiest December we've ever had," says Linda Miller, owner of Misty River Introductions, based in Carleton Place. "Usually we close down in mid-December, but we were selling memberships right up until the 22nd."

Miller says she's had to work the last four out of five weekends -- she usually has to meet with clients only one weekend a month -- and business at the 14-year-old company is up between five and 10 per cent so far this year.

What makes it remarkable is that Misty River isn't a free online dating site - - it's a service that can cost anywhere from \$1,250 for 12 face-to-face dates to \$2,300 for unlimited set-ups.

Miller, a traditional matchmaker who says she has personally met with each of her 10,000 registered members, admits that her service is a "luxury," the equivalent of a mortgage payment in some cases.

The fact Misty River is doing well stems from two factors, according to Miller: Ottawa is somewhat recession-proof, which is why professionals can afford her services; and when the economy goes south, people look for security.

"Obviously, we're not getting people who just lost their jobs," she says, "but I know we have people who are worried about losing their jobs, or have taken salary cuts.

"When times are tough, you tend to think about what's important."

And for many people, what's important is having a long-term relationship, someone to share their lives -- and expenses -- with.

"I do get a lot of women who say, 'I'm tired of having to fix everything myself, or pay the bills myself,'" says Miller. "I get that a lot lately."

An Ottawa lawyer who recently re-joined Misty River says although he's not overly worried about his career, the recession "does have an impact on how you spend."

The 50-year-old, who didn't want to use his name, put a hold on major discretionary spending -- except for joining the matchmaking service, which he paid for with part of his end-of-year bonus.

"When you want to meet people, you want to meet people," he laughs.

And everywhere you look these days, it seems people want to hook up.

Misty River notwithstanding, free online dating sites have seen a huge jump in traffic -- a 55-per-cent increase for November 2008 to January 2009, compared with the same three months a year earlier.

That's not too surprising. As people have less disposable income, they are less likely to want to blow \$40 at a bar where they may or may not meet anyone.

But paid sites, which typically charge from \$20 to \$50 a month, have also seen modest increases in paid sign-ups, according to industry reports.

While she says she can't be certain it's the recession, Liz Wasserman of Montreal-based Mate1.com says that there's been a "prolonged upswing" in her business since October.

She says the recent increase in the online dating sector is a combination of the fact that people are staying home more, affording them less opportunity to meet others, and that they're "feeling vulnerable."

"Sobriety sets in -- they're concerned about the future."

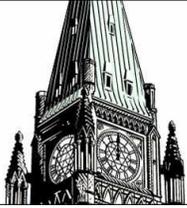
"In down times, people want to hook up, meet other people, share expenses, do things together," says Markus Frind.

The founder of PlentyofFish.com, the Vancouver-based site that bills itself as the world's largest online dating service, says his business is up 30 per cent since December.

"Every time there's a traumatic event -- after the Second World War, after 9/11 -- people want to be with other people.

"It's mostly psychological," he says. "People freak out, they don't know what's coming, they don't want to be alone."

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