

Money can't buy you love,
sang the Beatles. But at the very
least, it can buy you a date

LOVE for sale

BY JESSICA WERB ILLUSTRATION BY MONIKA MELNYCHUK

In a discreet, unmarked office in downtown Vancouver, a man is photographed, his driver's licence photocopied and personal references taken. He is asked to complete numerous forms, including a Myers-Briggs personality test, and his vital statistics are entered into a computer database. This information will be circulated among a select group of people who will scrutinize his appearance, education, mental stability and career. Is he part of a new crackdown on terrorism? Enlisting in the Armed Forces? Joining CSIS? None of the above. He's just trying to land a date.

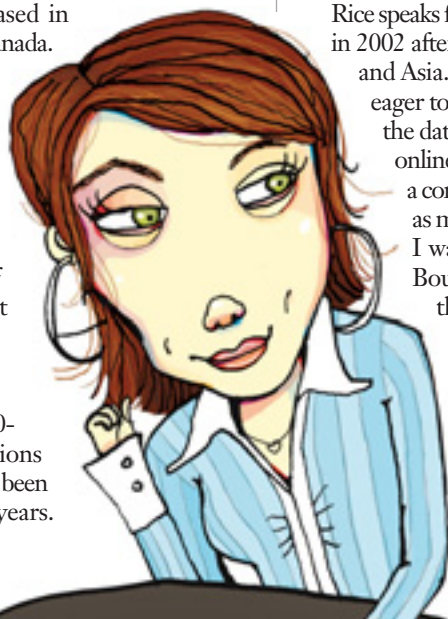


This lonely heart has signed himself up with Executive Search Dating, one of the many new dating services that have opened doors in B.C. in the past few years. Once his personal details are registered, his profile will be sent out to potential mates who have likewise undergone the same rigorous screening process. If a woman likes what she sees, they'll agree to a meeting. And if all goes according to plan, what began rather unromantically will end in love, marriage and possibly even a baby carriage.

The matchmaking industry in B.C. is on fire. Thanks to operators of social clubs, date-headhunters and boutique introduction services, singles are being recognized as a market with enormous potential for revenue. The Yellow Pages now lists 30 entries under Introduction Services, about a quarter of which appeared in the last five years or less. At last count in 2004, B.C. was home to 1,019,507 never-married adults. Five years ago there were only 920,918, which represents a 10-per-cent jump in four years (the total population growth in B.C. over the same time period was four per cent). Not only are there more singles, there are also fewer opportunities for them to meet one another. According to the 2005 *Small Business Profile*, an annual joint publication by BC Stats, the Ministry of Small Business and Revenue, Small Business BC and Western Economic Diversification Canada, 40 per cent of small businesses in the province consist of self-employed individuals. With small businesses making up 57 per cent of the private workforce, that means close to a quarter of all private-sector jobs are held by the self-employed. It's not a scenario that favours singles, given the lack of jobs in generously populated offices where workers rub shoulders all day long in the coffee room, elevator or hallway.

Consider those numbers along with the results of the *National Work-Life Conflict Study* released in 2001 by the Public Health Agency of Canada. That report found that while one in 10 respondents in 1991 worked 50 or more hours per week, one in four does so now. What you end up with is a large singles population working long hours in solitary conditions with less time to socialize than ever. So it makes sense that some folk, when confronted with the bleak reality of their non-existent dating lives, decide it might be time to hire help.

esther (not her real name), a 50-year-old crisis communications management professional, has been divorced for more than 20 years.



After a series of disastrous dates (she once listened to a lawyer expound on the virtues of brushing your tongue – for an hour) she decided to enlist with ESD last June. Three months later she was matched with 56-year-old executive coach Jack (not his real name, either) and they agreed to a date. The two are now in a committed relationship, with all signs pointing to a solid future together.

"I'm a solo entrepreneur, so I have a really small workplace," she explains. "Even though you get out and meet people and you have clients, that doesn't guarantee that you're going to meet anybody who's suitable and available. So I thought, if I haven't been successful, why don't I give this to somebody else?" Plus, she says, it was an efficient process. "I feel like it took a lot of the stress and strain out of it. At least you know that they're introducing you to someone who meets some basic criteria. You don't have to get 20 minutes into it to realize, 'Oh, you're unemployed? Oh, great. Waiter, cheque please!'"

The one hitch, Esther admits, is confessing to people about how she met her new beau. Her reluctance proved warranted recently when Jack inadvertently spilled the beans at a dinner party with old friends. "It was painful," she recalls, cringing. "They spent the entire evening ragging on me about it." Her friends may now be in on her secret, but Esther has yet to reveal to her mother how she met the man in her life, for fear that her relationship may not be taken seriously. "[Eighteen years ago] a cousin of mine ran an ad in the *Vancouver Sun*. She actually married a guy out of this little adventure and it's been very successful," she explains. "But my mother still sniffs and says, 'Well, you know, she got him out of the *newspaper*.'"

taking credit for Esther and Jack's relationship is 39-year-old Paddi Rice, a graduate of the International Institute for Management Development MBA program in Lausanne, Switzerland. ESD was launched in September 2004, and Rice claims it now has 300-plus members, evenly distributed between men and women. Dressed in a carefully tailored grey suit, pink shirt and blue tie, the six-foot-plus Rice looks more like a senior management professional than a modern-day yenta. And, in fact, his former career in general management, operations and sales and marketing does seem a step removed from the traditionally female-run world of matchmakers. But listening to him describe how he came into his line of work, it's clear that while he insists he hasn't forgotten about romance, his approach to matchmaking is all business.

"For a lot of parts of our lives, we're taking actions to try to improve [our] efficiency," he points out. "What are [personal trainers] other than people who come into your personal time and try to make you more efficient and get to the gym and get results? It seemed to me [that there was] one glaring omission from this, and it was our dating life."

Rice speaks from experience. He returned to his native Vancouver in 2002 after 14 years studying and working abroad in Europe and Asia. A long-term relationship had just ended and he was eager to settle down and raise a family, but he quickly found the dating situation in the city to be abysmal. He tried bars, online dating, telephone chat lines and even signed up with a conventional matchmaking service. "I was not doing this as market research," he insists. "I did it because, dammit, I was 36, I had a great job [in sales and marketing at Boulevard Media] and a fulfilling life, but at the end of the day, it seemed to me that spending two hours online at the end of my week or going to the Yaletown Brewery pub didn't seem to me to be a smart way to meet the girl of my dreams." The crowded, noisy atmosphere of a pub just wasn't conducive to meaningful conversations, while the world of online dating was rife with disappointments. "Someone shows you a picture of them looking

like this, and they probably look the opposite. There's no screening in online dating. Everyone subtracts five years and adds two inches of height."

Rice was also dissatisfied with the agency's attempts to pair him up. "I found that they were matching me just with their database. I'd gone from having all of Vancouver to effectively being put in a really small group." He envisioned a service that not only matched clients against a database of self-selected members, but also actively recruited new members to fit the existing clientele. If the membership base included a preponderance of physicians, then recruiters would be sent to scope out health or science-related events to find suitable dates. If there were a number of classical-music lovers on the books, recruiters would hit opening night at the opera.

And so ESD was born. Modeled on executive recruiting firms, Rice's company not only has a database of members who pay anywhere from \$1,500 to \$10,000 for its services, it also employs six 'matching agents' – four women and two men hired specifically to seek out attractive, matchable singles to send on dates with existing ESD clients. Rice pays his agents an hourly wage plus expenses for their activities, and gives them a commission

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for each new recruit.

These recruits are put through the same rigorous screening process as the rest of the ESD database, but they're offered one free date before being encouraged to join the service.

If the screening process seems a bit extreme, Rice insists it's his way of ensuring that his database is made up of honest, safe and mature people. Taking a copy of someone's driver's licence prevents them from lying about their age; snapping their picture in the office ensures they're represented exactly as they appear; the Myers-Briggs test gives an indication of their personality traits; and calling their references weeds out those who might be up to no good. "Just last week we had [a new client] tell us he was single," recalls Rice. "We called his reference and the reference said, 'No, he's in a relationship.'" Rice navigated the delicate situation by telling the client they'd put his file on hold for six months while he worked out his relationship status.

Rice's senior matching agent is 30-year-old Zach Browman, a disarmingly personable guy who, like his boss, sports a suit and tie to work. Browman's eclectic background may well account for his skills in initiating conversation with just about anyone; he trained as an actor at New York's American Musical and Dramatic Academy and spent four years in a Zen Buddhist monastery in the Catskill Mountains of New York before moving to Vancouver to work with the Vancouver Fringe Festival. Originally recruited by a matching agent himself, Zach turned up for his consultation whereupon Rice immediately offered him a job. (He never did get sent on a date.)

"I have no trouble approaching people," Browman says. He simply walks up to people and introduces himself before engaging them in conversation and asking if they're single. "I just headhunted someone from an airplane," he proudly declares. "I was sitting next to someone who asked me what I did for a living. I told her I was a matchmaker, and she told the woman sitting on the other

side of her, who called us the next day."

Rice sees his service as a compromise between conventional introduction services and high-end New York matchmakers like Janis Spindel, who charges fees starting at US\$20,000 to hunt down the perfect match for a client. ESD offers its members three different plans with a promise of at least two dates per month. The bronze plan costs \$1,500 and is good for six months or 12 dates. For those clients ready to bet the farm on finding The One, the \$10,000 gold plan is good until you walk down the aisle.

Jack, who spent \$3,000 on the silver plan, met Esther on his first date. Esther, meanwhile, opted for the bronze plan and didn't meet Jack until her fourth month. "I sort of think that I would have gotten my money's worth if I'd met a dozen women and then met Esther," jokes Jack. While the couple's investment paid off, Esther does admit to feeling, sometimes, that their story lacks a certain element of kismet. "A couple of times I've said, 'Oh, wasn't it just fate?' And [Jack] will say, 'No, we both joined a dating agency.'"

Not all matchmakers project as business-like an approach as ESD. Jane Carstens is the managing partner of the Vancouver offices of Hearts, a boutique matchmaking service founded 25 years ago in Toronto by Ruth Claramunt. Carstens arrived

in Vancouver three years ago to run the

West Coast side of the business, and likes to differentiate herself from the market by stressing what she says is an intimate and personal approach to pairing people up. The only staff she has is her office assistant, there are no personality questionnaires, reference checks or even photographs shared among clients, and all her matching is done *sans* computer. There is a system, mind you, but she isn't about to reveal what it is.

An attractive, well-groomed blonde who looks much younger than her 48 years, she zips around her tiny Hornby Street office in a black suit and a clingy, sparkly top covered in abstract shapes and bright colours. And this, she insists, is her casual wear, as she's popped into the office on a Saturday. "It's a great thing to be able to spread all that happiness around," she says, without a hint of sarcasm. Surrounding her are red, heart-shaped tchotchkes of all kinds: pillows, sculptures, ornaments. The effect is twee, but stops short of tacky. A comfortable couch occupies one corner of the room, although most clients never get to sit on it as all consultations take place in their homes.

Carstens claims her client lists top 600 in the Lower Mainland and 300 in Victoria.

In the last 12 months, she says, she has been responsible for eight weddings. That may not sound like much, given the size of her database, but she's quick to add that she has several clients 'on hold' – meaning they've called to tell her they're dating someone she found for them exclusively, and won't be needing her services for the time being.

Carstens charges anywhere from \$1,000 to \$20,000; for a basic unlimited membership, in which members are set up on monthly dates with one another, she takes a one-time payment of \$1,000 plus a \$15 monthly administrative fee. For clients who are more in a rush to get settled, she'll design a private search. This involves a carefully crafted, large-scale ad placed in any number of publications (the *Globe and Mail*, *Financial Post*, *Vancouver*



magazine) that she and her client feel have the right target audience. Such a venture can cost \$5,000 to \$15,000 or higher, depending on the publication, size and number of ads.

One which appeared in the *Georgia Straight* in September read, in part: "Our company represents a tall, sincere, attractive, active, fit, successful established executive gentleman in his early 30s... He would like to meet an attractive, fit, active, intelligent, independent woman 25 to 32 years old." Carstens meets all the respondents to these ads and assembles a dossier highlighting her picks for her client, who then decides which ones to meet. In fact, this particular ad brought results: the executive is now in an exclusive relationship with a woman who responded to his plea for companionship.

Carstens, like Rice, says her service attracts busy, professional people, primarily in their mid-30s. "I have clients from all walks of life," she insists. "Lawyers, doctors, actresses, actors, politicians."

One 47-year-old stockbroker in Victoria explains that signing up with Hearts meant letting someone else do all the work of finding eligible, attractive women to date. "I'm busy and I don't want to waste my time," he declares. "I'm 47 with three kids. Do I want to go to a bar and meet losers?" As for the cost of joining the agency, he says he found it completely affordable, especially compared with the cost of his previous relationship, which ended 16 months ago. "I was in a marriage that ended after 25 years," he explains. "Everything I do in my life, business-wise, is always very methodical and scientific. I got married based solely on emotions, and it's costing me a fortune now. I thought second time around I should probably employ the same things in meeting people that I do when hiring staff." His \$1,000 gamble paid off; the second woman he met through Hearts resulted in an instant connection. "I actually thought it was too cheap," he says. "Just \$1,000 plus \$15 a month. But then I did the math - [Carstens] got 900 clients, and her overhead's a laptop."

While Carstens' and Rice's companies generate their revenue solely from members' fees, other singles-oriented ventures have taken a broader approach to the market. One successful enterprise is the Campoverde social club, co-founded in 2002 by 33-year-olds Rachel Greenfeld and Kimberley McFarland de Hernandez. A members-only club based in the heart of Vancouver's trendy Kitsilano neighbourhood, Campoverde's only rule is: you're not allowed to ignore anybody. The club's revenue streams include a sign-up charge of \$1,000 and a \$27 monthly fee that each of its 400 members are required to pay. Non-members can come twice as drop-ins for \$10. And the club also operates as a private bar and restaurant.

On one rainy weeknight, a gaggle of middle-aged men sat around the restaurant bar, effusively greeting every person who walked into the dusky interior of gilded gold, red velvet and soft candlelight. Greenfeld, a leggy, exuberant blonde who knows everybody by name, worked the room like a politician. The men lapped up her attention - one admitted he first came to the club because he was so flattered that she approached him and suggested he join - but she was just as charming with female members, easily finding subjects over which to bond with a bit of

girly chat. She encouraged everyone to welcome the club's newest member, who had come in to sign her joining papers. "Hi, Simone!" the group intoned in unison, quickly finding her an empty stool. The tables in the restaurant section surrounding the bar were mostly empty but ready to accommodate diners in groups ranging from two to 10; handy for the Friday night supper clubs, where a four-course \$30 *prix fixe* dinner is served, and singles are encouraged to attend.

Not content to rely solely on her membership for revenue, Greenfeld, a former producer for CNN, Fox and Televisa, has also instigated an associate program for local businesses and services. Organizations pay \$1,500 a year to be referred to Greenfeld's members (the VSO, Yaletown Yoga and Meridien Financial Services are three participants); to appear on the Campoverde website and weekly email list; and to provide members-only workshops. For an additional \$1,500, associates can secure exclusivity and block out competitors.

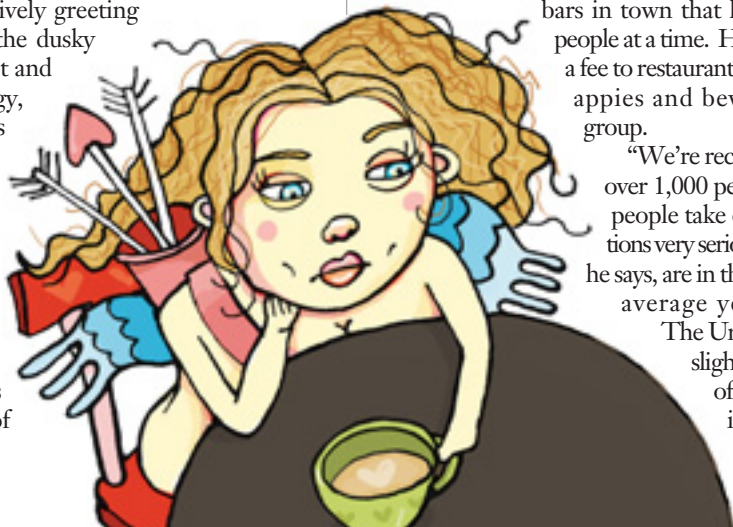
While Greenfeld explains that her club is not restricted to singles, she

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notes that 80 per cent of her membership is unattached, with a male-to-female ratio of 52 to 48 per cent and an age range of 30 to 50. Single herself when the establishment first opened its doors, she now sports a nice piece of bling on her left hand and is preparing to tie the knot with one of her members. "We can't keep a single staff member," she laughs. "They all end up married, myself included." She says that 12 member marriages have taken place so far, not to mention the spawning of numerous long-term relationships.

Greenfeld may have found true love as a result of starting Campoverde (which she is considering franchising), but for Raj Taneja, a 30-year-old entrepreneur, the dating world is all business. "I put myself into a peculiar position," he says. "I don't date any of my members." Taneja is the president of Urban Mixer and Social Empire, two social groups catering to the unattached. Urban Mixer is free to join and is strictly for singles, while Social Empire is open to anyone but requires that members pass an initial interview and pay a joining fee of \$35. Each organization hosts numerous activities and events that encourage mingling; cash is collected at the door from attendees. Taneja says the Social Empire membership numbers 1,000, and the Urban Mixer mailing list gets sent to more than 3,500 names every week. Like Greenfeld, he sells advertising on his websites and emails, and is busy forging relationships with restaurants and bars in town that host his events of 70 to 200 people at a time. He is now considering charging a fee to restaurants for the privilege of providing appies and bevies to his Social Empire group.

"We're recommending this restaurant to over 1,000 people," he insists, "and a lot of people take our restaurant recommendations very seriously." Social Empire members, he says, are in the 35-to-54 age range with an average yearly income of \$100,000. The Urban Mixer's demographics are slightly different, with an age range of 28 to 38 and an average yearly income of \$65,000. Taneja



bought out Social Empire two years ago after being a committed member of the group for three years, and acquired Urban Mixer 18 months ago when its previous owner moved to Toronto. In September he bought out a Vancouver-based, 130-member social group called Influx and merged it with Social Empire.

Taneja says he has profited in many ways from his connection to the singles market. Not only has he expanded his social life – he attends every single event – he’s also found himself a built-in customer base for his IT firm, Clear Choice Technologies, which provides a range of services from web hosting to software development. “It has cross-benefits,” he says. “I’m meeting people [and] I can leverage [them] into my other business.”

In addition to all of his acquisitions and mergers, Taneja has joined forces with Rice to write a book with the working title, *A Singles Guide to Vancouver*. Envisioned as a *Lonely Planet*-style publication for the swinging bachelor or bachelorette, Rice will supply the copy on how to be a successful dater, while Taneja will highlight the hot spots in and around town. It makes sense that the two would work together; the industry is one in which clients float freely from one group to another. At a recent Social Empire event, one marketing professional in her early 30s mentioned she had been head-hunted for a fruitless date by Browman and dropped by Campoverde on occasion. She also admitted to giving Internet dating sites a whirl. And Jack, our happily coupled exec, regularly stops in for a drink at Campoverde where a fellow member first recruited him for ESD.

Cynical singles might think this all seems a little too contrived. Where is the romance? The chance meetings at the grocery store? The dinner party flirtations? Are we really so useless at dating that we need to spend money in order to get hooked up? Carstens says her ‘executive gentleman’ is a successful CEO of a local company who apparently didn’t lack for dates but wanted help finding someone outside his social and business circles. Often, the end of a serious relationship and the sudden fear of being alone is the impetus for joining a dating agency. And then there are those very logical, left-brained singles who have put all their efforts into building a career and simply decide one day that it’s time to work on building a family instead and why not hire professional help?

“Yentas worked for thousands of years,” points out Rice. “It’s one of the oldest professions around. If I didn’t think there was a niche [for matchmaking], I’d be the dumbest guy in Vancouver to start a company around it.” ■

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