



Photos by Stuart Bayer/The Journal News

Gary Ferone, founder of Great Date Now LLC, meets with matchmaker Jennifer Forde at the company's headquarters in Purchase. The five-year-old company has nine locations in New York, Connecticut and New Jersey, and another will open on Thursday in midtown Manhattan. Ferone also plans to open offices in Jupiter, Fla., and Washington, D.C.

# A match made ... online

**Purchase-based Web dating service looking to expand matchmaking skills beyond the tri-state area**

Alison Bert  
The Journal News

**D**enise Schmidt used to take dating cues from her friends. Unfortunately the men she met were "either too old or insecure or jealous of my independence and my ambition."

The women Ralph Santino met online were more interested in serial dating than relationships, while the upscale dating service he signed on with in Manhattan kept fixing him up with women half his age.

"I tried online dating. I tried being introduced by friends and family. I just got disgusted with it all," he said.

They both ended up at Great Date Now LLC, a matchmaking service based in Purchase. A year later, they're both in serious relationships with the partners they met through the service.

"It's a nice way to meet somebody," said Santino, a graphic designer from New Rochelle. "You know you're going to meet a professional. It's not somebody hiding behind a mask on the Internet."

The business was started five years ago by Gary Ferone, longtime resident of Eastchester who previously worked as a Wall Street broker. At the time, there were a variety of matchmaking services in Manhattan, but few in the suburbs, and he has since bought out three of them.

Since then, Great Date Now has grown to be the largest personalized matchmaking service in the region. There are nine locations in New York, Connecticut and New Jersey, and another will open on Thursday in midtown Manhattan. Ferone is planning to open an office in Jupiter, Fla., in February and Washington, D.C., in the spring. His five-year plan is to open a dozen more locations, do a public offering and go national.

His business concept was hardly new.

But, as the market for online dating stagnates, more singles may be turning to the old-fashioned approach to meeting a mate.

The U.S. market for online dating reached \$649 million in 2006, the number of Internet users who report browsing these dating sites has dropped for the third time in four years, according to surveys by JupiterResearch LLC.



## On the Web

### The site

[www.GreatDateNow.com](http://www.GreatDateNow.com)



### Video

For a video related to this story, go to [www.lohud.com/videos](http://www.lohud.com/videos)

### Join the conversation

Would you use a matchmaking service? Join the conversation on Alison Bert's Cost of Living blog: [www.costofliving.lohudblogs.com](http://www.costofliving.lohudblogs.com)

The report, released in February, cited a recent survey in which non-users said they wouldn't trust the people they found on dating sites and are afraid of sharing personal information.

At Great Date Now, clients range in age from 23 to 86, with the majority of them between the ages of 35 and 55.

### Matchmaking goes modern

Each office has a matchmaker, who spends at least an hour getting to know the client, and follows up with conversations after each date.

But there's a modern twist. The computer database has information about the lives and preferences of more than 4,000 clients — in more than 100 categories. Matchmak-

ers do extensive background checks to confirm marital status and make sure clients don't have a criminal history. They also take a certification course from the Matchmaking Institute.

Although they haven't done same-sex dating yet, they are considering the possibility with the opening of the Manhattan office. It will depend largely on whether Ferone can get lists of gay singles for marketing purposes, he said.

Ferone said some of his success is due to the reality that today's singles are working more hours and are open-minded about how they meet their partners.

"Dating on the Internet has actually helped our business because it's made people aware that there are more options other than the bar and your Aunt Millie," he said.

### A downside to online

Ferone met his own wife on Match.com. But only after spending hours online every night — and a year dating women who didn't quite match their profiles. Ferone, who was formerly a Wall Street investment banker, called it "a full-time job," and mentioned having women lie about their age and post pictures and profiles that were more "fairy tale" than truth.

"I knew there had to be an easier way to meet somebody," he said, adding that 85 percent of his clients have tried online dating previously.

Santino, 54, a divorced father of two, said many of his peers have given up on online dating because they don't have the time for it.

He also concluded that it would be more cost-effective to date people that were hand-selected and screened, because dates were costing him at least \$150 for dinner and drinks.

"And you want to be a gentleman; I used to bring the girls flowers. I'm old school," he added. "If I went out on 20 dates, that's two grand, and I still didn't find anybody."

He decided he was better off going on fewer dates with better prospects. A friend told him about an ad he saw for Great Date Now.

"It does cost you a little extra," he said, "but not as much as if you've got to pay for the Internet every month, you've got to invest your time and become a serial dater."

### Meeting the matchmaker

When Santino visited his matchmaker, he knew what he was looking for: "Somebody that knows how to cook,

# Online matchmaker looks to expand

GREAT DATE, from 1D

somebody that likes to go to the theater — I like the opera — boating, walking, just being active outside. I didn't want a couch potato."

Schmidt, who lives in Ramsey, N.J., said she "bonded" with her matchmaker in the Englewood Cliffs, N.J., office.

"She knew the type of person I was attracted to, and she had like a knack for this connection," said Schmidt, an independent skincare consultant for Arbonne International.

At the Purchase office, matchmaker Jennifer Forde starts by giving a free consultation, which lasts from about an hour to 90 minutes. She is a former human resources recruiter who said she used to find herself setting up clients with dates as well as jobs.

Forde said she takes time to get to know her clients, asking them about what they're looking for as well as relationships that did and did not work in the past. But sometimes she looks beyond what clients tell her.

"If it doesn't jibe with what they've been through in the past, then I have to stop and reevaluate what this person is telling me ... and whether this person's expectations of a relationship match what they need to be," said Forde, who lives in Rye. "I'll say, 'OK, you've dated three stock brokers and not one of them has worked out; let's take a look as to why that is.' Where they may be

attracted to the way that looks on paper or the way that gentleman-type presents himself, it might not be the best match for them."

At the end of the session, Forde tells the client whether she foresees a reasonable chance of success with the service; if there is, she quotes a fee, usually between \$2,500 and \$5,000. Clients who are very particular require a higher level of service, she explained.

She said many clients prefer the privacy of this service, compared to posting their picture and profile online.

When a client signs up, she searches for good matches in the database. If the clients are interested in the prospective date, her office makes all arrangements.

After a date, Forde checks back with each client for a report, typing notes into the system and refining the search based on their feedback.

Although the service is billed as "personalized matchmaking for upscale single professionals," salary isn't everything.

"It's up to each individual matchmaker to select who he or she feels they can work with," Ferone said. "Some of our wealthiest clients are people in a blue-collar industry with an extremely high white collar income."

"There are people in the noblest of professions who may not make as much money," Forde added, "but they're the type of people our clients are looking to meet as well. That's why we do sit

down and we spend a lot of time getting to know that individual as an individual as opposed to looking at him as a statistic on paper."

## Starting the business

Ferone had a friend who ran a matchmaking service in Cleveland, and he used to always tease him about his work. However, his experience with online dating gave him a new respect.

When he scoped out the market, he found the scene wide open in Westchester and Rockland. He opened an office in Mamaroneck and spent more than \$100,000 in advertising his first year.

"The business is a very difficult business to start if you haven't had any clients," he explained.

Midway through the third year, his business started turning a profit, he said. The database of clients was expanding, meaning they would be more likely to find a match with their religious preferences, interests and compatibility.

To further expand the database and geographical reach, Ferone bought three competing companies: The Single Network, which had offices in Stamford, Milford and Danbury, Conn., and Hartsdale; YourSoulmateSearch.com in Long Island; and Signature Singles in Ramsey, N.J.

Five years ago, his company made about \$10,000 a month in gross revenue, he said; now, it brings in more than \$200,000 a month. He spends between

\$100,000 and \$150,000 a month on advertising, including radio, direct mail, newspapers and magazines. There are ads in magazines with upscale demographics, like *Golfing* and *Soundings* for boating, and in the menus of *The Cheesecake Factory*.

## Clients respond to ads

Schmidt had received a mailing from the service and returned its postage-paid questionnaire about dating.

Meanwhile Tom Amoriello, a father of two who lived in White Plains, visited the Westchester office. As a general contractor, who owns *Jaco Group Inc.*, he worked in Westchester and Bergen counties, so he was open to meeting women from New Jersey.

"(Gary) set me up on a couple of dates, and they went OK, but nothing like Denise (Schmidt)," he said.

Schmidt instantly remembers the date they met: November 28. In February, Amoriello moved to New Jersey to live near Schmidt and her family.

Santino took longer to meet his mate. On his fourth date, he met a woman he would date for six months. When they parted ways, he contacted his matchmaker again, and they resumed the process. Last January, he met a woman from Scarsdale who also has two children. Now they plan to get engaged.

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