

The online path to true love may be littered with hidden costs

Beware of agencies who are cashing in on your romantic search, says **Aideen Sheehan**



Money can't buy you love but it might help you get acquainted with Mr or Ms Right.

Irish people are increasingly turning to online sites to seek a partner — while old-fashioned introduction agencies like the Knock Marriage Bureau are also going strong.

As many as one in six Irish couples have met online according to a study by the Oxford Internet Institute which is part of Oxford University.

That survey was based on a relatively small sample, but anotherfriend.com — just one of many agencies operating in Ireland — now claims to have 450,000 members signed up to use its services — an indication of how popular and mainstream these services now are.

Smart Consumer took a look at the online and offline world of dating agencies to find out what the quest for romance involves and costs.

Many online agencies offer a free service for initial browsing — but then encourage members to sign up for premium memberships which allow them access to more details, photos and contact opportunities with prospective matches.

These then charge different rates depending on how long you sign up for.

Unfortunately it's not always a very transparent process as many sites make it extremely difficult to find out what the charges

are until you register with them which means they already have your email address.

Online agencies also typically roll over membership to the next period if you don't explicitly cancel it in time — and this has been a source of problems for many consumers.

The European Consumer

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Centre in Dublin has reported a growing number of complaints about online dating agencies.

Its spokesperson Caroline Curneen said they had received around 50 complaints in the last three years, but this was likely to be very underreported as many consumers were still embarrassed to admit using them.

The typical problem was with people taking out a fixed term contract which was then rolled over for another period because of an auto-renewal clause in the small print, while others faced difficulties cancelling.

'Some consumers have reported that they followed the appropriate procedure to cancel but were still charged while others claimed that it was impossible to cancel due to difficulties with the websites," Ms Curneen said.

She advised consumers who ticked on the box not to have their contract automatically rolled over in the future to also send the company an email stating this which they should save as proof of their wishes.

Consumers using online dating services are also advised to be cautious about their personal security, as there's obviously the potential to run into timewasters or worse online.

Key security tips include not disclosing your address or home phone number to a prospective match, and meeting somewhere public and safe the first time.



Dating dream: Jennifer Haskins and Bill Phelan met through an agency and now they run their own agency.

Photo by Ronan Lang

'He asked me to go for dinner. We took it from there'

When Jennifer Haskins met Bill Phelan there were no fireworks but they liked each other enough to arrange another date.

They'd both signed up to the dating agency Who's Who for the Unattached and arranged to meet over a glass of wine at a local restaurant.

Jennifer said she was a "dab hand" at the dating process at this stage having already met a few men through the agency, and

knew a relaxing drink or coffee was better for the first date than a lengthy meal where both people were nervous.

"There were no fireworks the first time we met, but it was just easy, I thought he was a nice guy and easy to talk to and at the end he asked me to go for dinner some time, and we took it from there," she said.

Over a few meetings Jennifer realised this could be the man for her.

Now five years later the

Dun Laoghaire-based couple live and work together and have set up their own dating agency Two's Company to help others also find romance.

Jennifer said both she and Bill had turned to an agency themselves after their marriages broke down as both had children and busy lives.

"I'd be very proactive in all areas of my life and I knew Brad Pitt or George Clooney wasn't going to come knocking at my door

if I sat at home, but the idea of dragging myself into the Shelbourne or wherever in hope every week didn't appeal, either," said Jennifer.

"If I had one thing on a wishlist for our clients, it would be a sense of adventure in all this.

"At the end of the day, no matter how many criteria someone matches, there's still going to be chemistry involved, but you just have to give it a chance to show," she said.

My dad cancelled phone contract but is still being charged

Q Joe contacted *Smart Consumer* about a home phone contract his dad signed up to.

He explained that his dad ordered the deal over the phone but that he later wanted to cancel.

So when a representative from the same company called to the door by chance in December he says that he was given a cancellation form to fill out and send in.

This was done "but the money is still being debited," writes Joe.

He adds that the original order was conducted by phone and that "he didn't sign a contract with them so there is no written agreement between both parties."

"Can you help us?" asks Joe.



A The first thing to set straight here is that there does not have to be a written agreement signed for there to be a legally binding contract.

If Joe's dad agreed verbally to enter the contract for the provision of a landline service, agreed to the price, gave his payment details and then received the service, a contract is in place.

All of these contracts come with terms and conditions and there is usually a fixed time period on the duration, maybe 12 months, 24 or even longer. Unfortunately, if you decide to leave in the middle of the contract, you will still have to pay the monthly charge until the contract period is up. This is why Joe's dad is still being charged.

So the best advice for anyone considering switching or cancelling provider (whether landline, mobile,

broadband or TV) is to contact your provider first to ask if you are in a contract, when it ends and what the penalties are for leaving early?

If you still have some months to go on a contract then take note of that end date. As you may have to give a month's notice to cancel, note that date on your calendar too. This is the time to cancel and switch without penalty. It all takes a bit of planning but is well worth it when losing money is at stake.