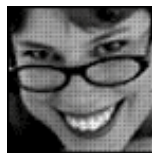




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COMMENTARY 



Sex Drive

Commentary by Regina Lynn  

Best Way to Date: Collaborate?

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If you could search every profile in all of the major online dating services with a single query, for free, would you?

Andy Arnott, founder and CEO of Collaboradate, says it would be illegal for him to write a program that lets you do that. But he believes he has launched a public beta of the next best thing.

Collaboradate does for online dating what Trillian does for instant messaging: It combines multiple services so you can manage everything from one place.

Most people don't sign up with just one online dating service. You might have a premium membership at Salon personals but a free profile on Yahoo Personals, AmericanSingles and JDate. Meanwhile, a scintillating dinner companion who just might be the love of your life has listed herself on Lavalife and udate.

When you create your Collaboradate profile, you enter the user names you registered at other dating and social networking sites. Then when someone searches Collaboradate and finds you, she can click through each site on your list to view your dating profiles.

If the external dating site requires membership to view profiles, she'll have to sign in. But if it doesn't -- like Yahoo Personals, Friendster and MySpace -- she can see your page immediately.

"Two users who have Collaboradate profiles can initiate a free contact (through Collaboradate)," Andy says, no matter what other services they use. Each profile links directly to any e-mail, IM or Skype handle the member decides to share.

Collaboradate launched its public beta just a few weeks ago, and so far, the user base is growing by 50 percent to 100 percent a day. About 35 percent of new sign-ups are women, Andy says.

The service has two main features in addition to the more standard search-and-bookmark tools. One is "My Dating Usernames," where you store your online dating and social networking handles. You can display these with your profile or hide them, granting access to the juicy details on a per-user basis.

The other is "DateMapping," which plots members visually on a Google map. "It doesn't give your exact location," Andy says, citing privacy and safety concerns. "It'll give you an overview of where you are, and you can zoom out and see the surrounding areas right in the profile view."

Each member appears on the map as the regular Google Maps teardrop. When I test it I find one tear on the map about 20 miles east of San Francisco. I click it and get a thumbnail photo of the person -- it's Andy at Collaboradate headquarters -- and a link to his profile.

Considering how often someone puts "San Francisco" or "Los Angeles" in a profile essay when their ZIP code is actually in San Ramon or Rancho Cucamonga, I can sympathize with the demand for a visual representation of more

local prospects.

Andy got the idea for the map when he first moved to the Bay Area and had no idea where the surrounding cities were or how to get there. Clicking back and forth from dating sites to maps added a layer of frustration to the already difficult process of meeting people in a new area.

The Collaboradate profile differs from other dating sites in two major ways. One is the one-click access to contact information. The other is that it allows a wider range of content, more akin to MySpace than [Match.com](#). Traditionally, dating services strip out any potential contact information or external links you try to include.

Andy has no problem with posting photos, links to your personal websites and blogs, even Flash animations to your profile, within reason. "Within reason," which means no nudity, even though you must be 18 to use the site. Suggestive is fine; explicit is not.

"It's not quite as free a rein as MySpace, because we don't want the site to turn into a garbage bin, with people posting huge, ridiculous-sized photos. The profiles are a little more structured in that sense," he says. "But really, I think when sites try to restrict (profile content), people will just go elsewhere. They want the freedom to post a link to their website or an e-mail address or photos."

Andy grew up in Hawaii and, with a friend, founded the HTML classes at his small Catholic high school in Hilo. He moved to the mainland in 1996 to attend the University of North Dakota and earn a bachelor of science in aerospace. He now works as an air traffic controller in the San Francisco Bay Area, and moonlights as an internet entrepreneur.

He is quick to point out that Collaboradate is a fledgling business, and as I create a profile for myself, I can tell. I'm accustomed to locating and then ignoring ads, but the Google ads along the top push the content down the screen just enough that the site looks messy. An occasional error pops up as I configure my account, but the data saves anyway so I'm officially logged in.

I ask him how the big players in the dating field are reacting to Collaboradate. So far, it's too new for them to perceive it as a threat.

"I'm not trying to steal their user bases, and I'm not trying to steal subscriptions," he says. "I'm trying to tie it together so people are more organized. You're on Match, and Yahoo, or wherever, and you're getting all these different e-mails. And you're thinking, 'Wait a minute, where did I meet this person?' It gets confusing."

To solve that, he's developing a feature that will grant a collaboradate.com e-mail address to each member, so they can direct all dating correspondence through the site. Other functionality in development: a browser toolbar that will add the profile you're perusing to your "My Collaboradates" list with one click, a "Group Date" scheduler, web 2.0 tags and the ability to add more dating services to the default list (where they become available to all users, unlike the current "Other" fields).

One aspect of all this that appeals to me is the ease with which you can research your prospects. Just click through from a Collaboradate profile to see how a person represents himself in different contexts. An [eHarmony](#) page will -- or should -- show a different aspect of a person than an [AdultFriendFinder](#) page. (And you'll never convince me that one person couldn't legitimately join both of those sites.)

You might gain insight into how someone matured when you compare her Friendster profile from three years ago to a [Tribe](#) profile she composed last week. And for all the controversy surrounding MySpace these days, you can't say you don't learn something about people from their participation therein.

Andy believes the subscription model for dating is doomed, and suggests that Collaboradate will be a positive force for online dating as a whole.

"The dating sites will grow their user bases, and a lot of them will have to switch to an ad-based revenue source to survive anyway," he says. "People just aren't going to pay when they can get stuff like that for free."

See you next Friday,

Regina Lynn

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Regina Lynn is the author of [The Sexual Revolution 2.0](#), which has one (just one!) chapter about online dating, but a whole lot of other information about relationships and technology. Autographed copies available at [reginalynn.com](#).