



Pittsburgh, Pa. Monday, Feb. 16, 2004

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Love in the fast lane: Singles in a hurry turn to brief encounters of the 3- to 8-minute kind to find a mate

Friday, February 13, 2004

By Diana Nelson Jones, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

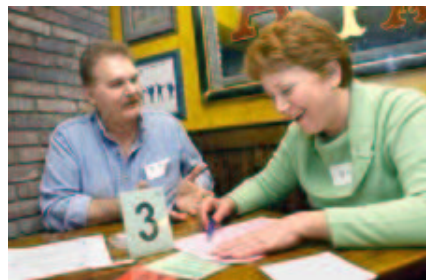
What was it that Mama said -- "You can't hurry love?"

Let's get real. This is 2004. You're so penned-in with stuff penciled-in, there's no time to work on finding love. So here you are at table 3 at Houlihan's at Station Square, when the first guy of the night sits down.

You've got six minutes. Go!

Barbara, who works in export sales, smiled wanly at the man whose ponytail held all but the combed-over hair falling in his face. His would be her first of 11 six-minute conversations this evening.

Timed dating has become so popular that on the same night this Valentine's week, across the way from Houlihan's at the Red Star Tavern, another group occupied 18 tables. At Bar Louie, a brief walk away, HurryDate was having a similar gathering.



Matt Freed, Post-Gazette
Ray Gercar of Cleveland and Teresa Heid of Gibsonia share a laugh during a speed-dating event at Houlihans at Station Square Wednesday night.
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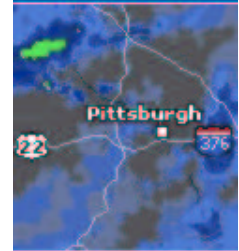
The services that have sprung into action for rushed, over-scheduled singles began with SpeedDating in 1999. SpeedDating is fighting to retain its trademark, as the term is used generically to describe all the imitators: HurryDate, Match Live, Pre-Dating, Mini Dates and 8 Minute Dating among them, all orchestrators of musical-chairs, one-evening conventions for singles in hundreds of cities.

SpeedDating was created expressly to help Jews meet Jews to reduce marriage outside the faith, said Sue Deyo, one of its founders. But the concept obviously has a more universal application, one that Barbara, who is 43, conceded as a fact of her life: "It's hard to meet people. I figure, where can you go in one night and meet 12 men?"

Pre-Dating, host of the gathering she attended, holds about 10 events in the Pittsburgh area each month. It pre-registers and schedules participants to get the same number of men as women, sometimes without complete success.

Most quick-date services follow its pattern: The meets are designed for age groups: Of the two it held this week at Station Square, one was for

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people 25 to 37, the other for those in their 40s. Last names are not used. The women are assigned tables, the tables are assigned numbers and the men move from one table to the next.

At the end of each conversation, participants have one minute to make notes before beginning the next conversation. Only when two people circle each others' names do organizers provide contact information.

An unwitting observer scanning both groups might have thought these were job interview sessions for people starting new careers in which every day is casual day. Some of the women held their hands tightly together atop the table or tilted their heads. Some of the men seemed to be concentrating on sitting up straight. The talk caused a buzz, not a din. A very few drank.

"This your first time?" one man asked a woman as he slid into a seat at her table.

Another, who had to be nudged when his time was up, wailed, "Wait! I didn't even get to ask her what she does."

Some services offer interest-specific meets -- for African Americans, for gays, for people who love dogs, for people who like sports. The single-event prices -- \$25, \$35, \$40 -- beat or are fairly close to most Internet dating services' monthly memberships.

"This is what it's come down to in a fast-food society," said Vince Gelormine, founder of Pre-Dating. The efficiency of meeting 12 people in one evening breaks down the "hard work" of finding someone you're compatible with and want to date. You could meet your ideal mate tomorrow on the elevator, he said, but compressed pre-dating gives you an edge in "the numbers game."

Although live events are a hot trend, Internet services still outnumber them. One, 8 Minute Dating, began holding live events to offer clients the chance for eye contact with the security of screening, said Mark Towler, director of marketing.

"We decided on eight minutes because it's easy for people to dismiss others in a short period of time. It's true that after a minute, you may decide you don't want to spend one more minute with a person, but it's only seven more minutes and it's not like a blind date, where you're stuck for hours."

Pre-Dating, based in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., started in 2001 and has coordinators in 65 cities. It stages 4,000 meetings a month nationwide, said Tom Truitt, the regional coordinator. Inexplicably, Pittsburgh "is the only city we serve in which women account for more no-shows than men," he added.

At the Red Star Tavern, five women had bailed. At Houlihan's, Richard, a retirement consultant from Squirrel Hill in his 40s, took his turn being the odd man out for six minutes while the 10 women were all occupied.

"My expectations are low based on my experiences," he said. "My first was the eight-minute version three years ago. Last spring, I did the three-minute version. Three minutes is enough to rule someone out but not enough to be sure" you want to rule someone in.

"I haven't decided if this is a substitute for other ways of meeting people, but the best thing about it is, people are [legitimately] available."
(Pre-Dating requires pre-registration to screen for marital status.)

Carl Barry, 36, a union plumber from Harrison City, came out to the Red Star Tavern with "zero expectations," he said. "But it's a night out, and who knows? I'm divorced. All my friends are married, and I have my son on weekends. I have no way to meet anybody.

"I think this should be 10 minutes. With six, right when you get in the groove ... " -- he pretended to sound the chime -- "Bing! Time's up."

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