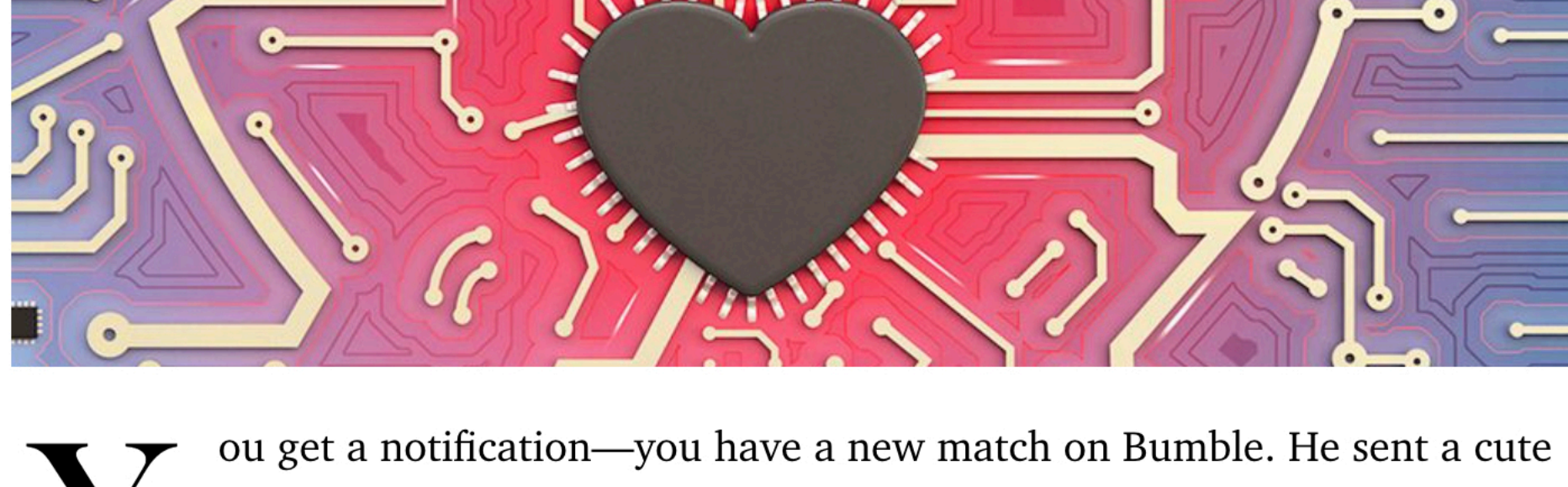


‘When the Dow Is Down, Love Is Up’: Modern Matchmaking Is Booming

Today’s human-*and*-algorithm-driven services are highly involved, technologically enhanced, and thriving. ▶

By [Lauren Kranc](#) Dec 11, 2020



You get a notification—you have a new match on Bumble. He sent a cute opener, something about your dog. You go back and forth a few times, set up a date. You meet in person. It’s great—you have two drinks each, sit and talk for hours. Three months later, you’re officially dating. Then, he says he has something to tell you. It’s not a big deal, doesn’t matter or anything, but he wants you to know he didn’t actually write that cute opener about your dog. He was using a matchmaking service that managed his dating apps. He felt weird telling you before but didn’t want to keep it from you now. Is that okay?

The matchmaking industry doesn’t look like *Fiddler on the Roof*’s Yente anymore. And really, it doesn’t look a lot like Sima from Netflix’s smash summer hit *Indian Matchmaking*, either. Today’s matchmaking scene is a highly involved, technologically enhanced—there are algorithms to determine what opener you’re most likely to respond positively to!—and often prohibitively expensive luxury service. And these matchmaking companies, of which there are hundreds throughout the world, think of themselves as an outsourced service, like one might outsource their taxes to an accountant. You still have to go on the dates yourself, of course, but all that strenuous, awkward pre-show banter can be taken care of for you. For a price.

Jennifer was not happy, by the way, when Terry told her that he had been using a matchmaking service called VIDA Select during the time of their courtship and hadn’t written those messages himself. But she got over it, and the couple tells me they have been together for over a year.

VIDA Select is a modern matchmaking experience. It does match its clients with one another like a traditional service, but it also gets them set up on two to four [dating apps](#). “With today’s modern technologies, especially in a COVID world, online is just the most common way for people to meet. Actually, online dating sites and apps have been the number one way that single people meet since, [according to Stanford researchers](#), 2017,” VIDA Select founder and CEO Scott Valdez tells me. “Not going online today when you’re single is kind of like if you’re on the job market and forgot to set up your LinkedIn account. It just wouldn’t make a ton of sense.”

So instead of relying on old school matching—Valdez insists the industry is so tech-adverse that many companies “still literally have printouts and rolodexes” of clients—VIDA does your online dating heavy-lifting. Its team takes authentic, natural photos of you (Valdez assures me they only subtly retouch), gets to know you and your interests, and then writes your profiles up, handling all the swiping and messaging, too. It’s quite the operation; 15 people or more could be involved in the setup of an account.

All you have to do is approve your profile, choose one of VIDA’s six messaging styles—options for women include “the Coquette” and “the Girl Next Door,” with “Strong Attention Grabber” and “Detailed Story” for men—and show up for your dates. VIDA’s ghostwriting team handles the rest. “It’s predictive modeling...we’re sending out tens of thousands of openers a month, right? So with all these openers that we’re sending out, we just track [who responds],” Valdez says. “It comes down to different factors like age, geographic location, and occupation we found to be a big one. And we are constantly changing up the messages that we’re sending. Creating new material, testing it, then introducing it into the rotation, then monitoring the data.”



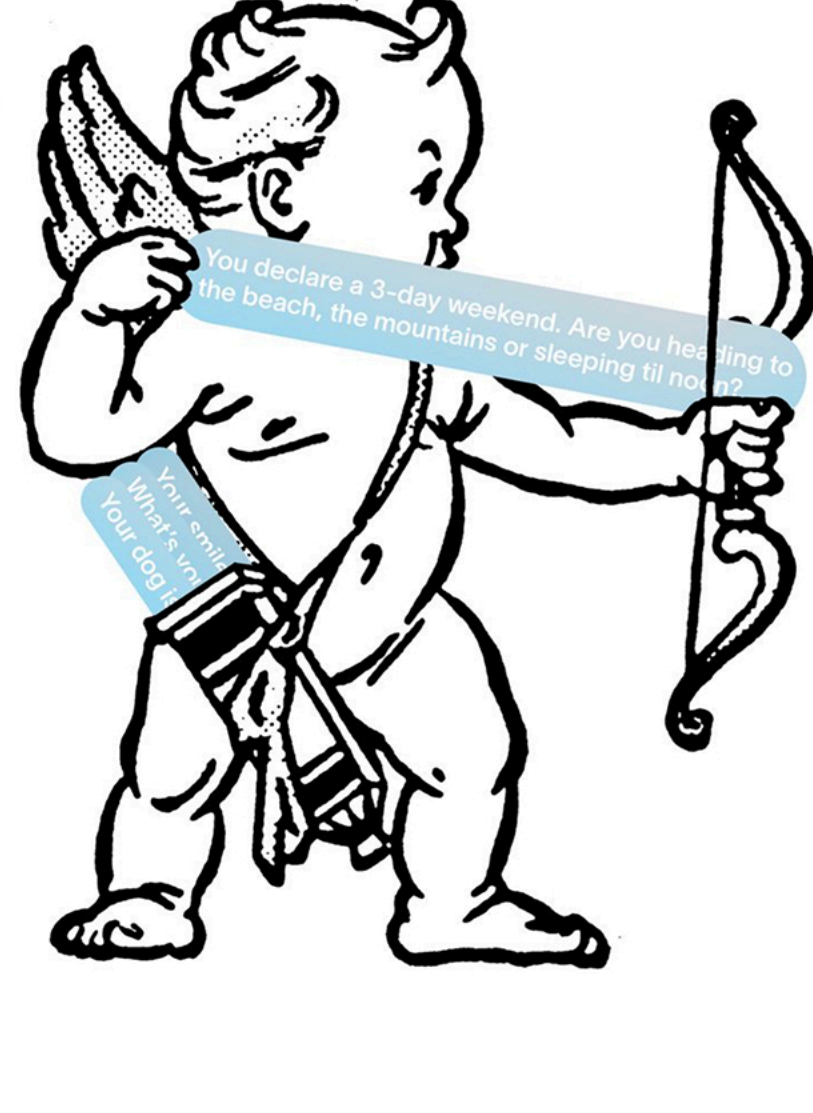
"You could buy a fairly nice luxury vehicle for what was charged."

VIDA is, relatively speaking, reasonably priced. Its packages start at \$895 per month—the month-to-month pricing makes it a standout in the matchmaking space, where contracts typically run between six months and a year, and can cost up to a million dollars. (You can’t put a price on love, right?) Valdez says his cheaper service is just as or more effective, mostly because “the idea of relying almost exclusively on your own database of paying customers and registrations just is something that made sense when there weren’t huge social media platforms and online dating platforms available.”

[Selective Search](#) would disagree. “It’s almost like self-serve at a grocery store versus someone that’s actually making you gourmet food, organic, farm-to-plate, in your home,” founder and CEO Barbie Adler says of how her team differs. Adler comes from the world of executive search, where she worked for years to place people in the right professional positions. In 2000, she wasn’t sure why the same methodology couldn’t be applied to placing people in the right relationships, so she gave it a try. After 20 years in business, Selective Search boasts that it has the highest success rate in the industry—87 percent—and the largest proprietary network of over 250,000 candidates. (Most luxury matchmaking firms make similar claims.) Even though Adler believes dating apps are not the right avenue for her (rich, older) clientele, she does think online dating is making it less stigmatized to ask for help in finding love.

What Selective Search provides beyond the apps is a bespoke service—both algorithm- and human-driven—to wealthy people across North America, and its custom programs can range from \$25,000 to \$1 million, depending on the duration and breadth of the search, seniority of strategist on the case, and custom add-ons, such as nutrition counseling, fitness coaching, and styling. “When they told me the pricing on it, I wasn’t shocked, but...it absolutely put a smile on my face, because you could buy a fairly nice luxury vehicle for what was charged,” Mark (not his real name), who married a Selective Search match earlier this year, laughs over the phone. “I was just a little bit like, *holy cow!* And I said, listen, this is a lot of money, and it’s either going to be a crazy waste of money or it’s going to be the best investment I ever made. Because if I truly find the love of my life, again, and get married to her, it’s going to be a drop in the bucket.” Looking back, he’s certain he never would’ve met her otherwise.

It’s the second marriage for both of the Chicago-based newlyweds—and Laura (not her real name), for her money, agrees that she would not have gone out with Mark had Selective Search not had its way with him. “He wanted to give them all these hunting pictures of him holding like dead animals, with a full beard and stuff,” she told me from their new shared home. “They advised him, no. You need a professional photographer and can’t be holding anything dead in your hands, and you got to dress up nice.” Rest assured, the profile that Selective Search eventually emailed her featured only living things.



Amber Kelleher-Andrews, CEO of [Kelleher International](#), thinks she knows why online dating doesn’t work for everyone: There’s no vetting. “Here’s the real truth behind matchmaking,” she tells me over the phone. “Beautiful women cannot meet men online because there’s thousands of predators. Beautiful women are freaked out by apps because these guys could be rapists and weirdos. And it’s really hard for a beautiful woman to filter through all of the men and spend all of her time talking to guys, and not even knowing if he’s married or whatever.” So they come to her instead.

But you have to be *somebody* in order for Kelleher International to take you on as a client. The company only makes matches for highly successful entrepreneurs, royalty, celebrities, and otherwise notable people, and only two percent of applicants are accepted. A Kelleher International membership costs between \$25,000 and \$300,000 a year, depending on the scope of your search. The Kellehers—it’s a family-run enterprise started by Kelleher-Andrews’ mother Jill in the ‘80s—don’t just set up dates for you, either. They throw private parties in castles and vineyards, organizes safaris, and plans global philanthropy trips for their singles. “It’s kind of like the world’s most exclusive club, because it’s pretty small and you have to be single to get in,” Kelleher-Andrews jokes. “That’s a way for our clients to not just sit and wait for their one and only match.”

Wealth and status aren’t the only prerequisites for matchmaking services—in many cases, you’d have to take your business elsewhere if you aren’t heterosexual. Tammy Shaklee was happily married to a match from a matchmaking service, and in 2012, tried to refer a gay friend to the company. “I just assumed my matchmaker was matching gay and lesbian singles. It never occurred to me that they wouldn’t,” she says. So she took matters into her own hands. “I started research, a feasibility study, focus group interviews, and I ended up designing a gay and lesbian matchmaking company.” Shaklee feels as though [H4M](#) is her calling as a straight ally. “I was often asked in the beginning years, ‘Are you ever going to match straight people?’ And I would joke and say, ‘No, straights are crazy.’”

While she’s progressive where it counts, Shaklee is a traditionalist when it comes to the matchmaking process. “I think there are some matchmakers out there that try to *streamline-streamline*, to where now it almost feels like you’ve hired a company to do your online dating. I encourage the industry to stay more traditional.” She interviews each client personally before emailing over prospective matches, and H4M even handles the reservation-making for first client dates. (VIDA has some LGBTQ clients, Kelleher says it’s currently working on offering services for LGBTQ singles, and Selective Search states it will “definitely go that direction when we’re ready to be the best.”)

In a pandemic-ridden world where all dating has been whisked from loud, crowded bars into sterile, rigid phone screens, the matchmaking industry is experiencing an unprecedented boom. Kelleher-Andrews says that virtual dating has opened up even more potential matches for her clients, and she even has a Canadian client moving to Puerto Rico to be with a man she

met over Zoom in the spring. Nicole Wall, the SVP of Selective Search, agrees. “We always say that when the Dow is down, love is up, but the pandemic has been the most powerful thing I’ve ever witnessed since I’ve been here,” she says.

Still, it’s hard to think about matchmaking without the refrain of “Tradition” from *Fiddler on the Roof* popping into your head. Maybe it’s only for the ultra-rich. Maybe it’s only for desperate people. Or maybe matchmaking is the most efficient way to date today. What was once a Yente with a rolodex is now a landscape of bespoke, fast-tracked services. Do we want to outsource our love lives? Is it unnatural, unspontaneous, transactional to do so? The same questions were asked when Match.com was created in 1993, and again when Tinder came to be in 2012. Perhaps the next great evolution in dating is the most traditional yet.

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