

DATING MS ARNDT

“*Sex therapist seeking love ...*”

Returning to the dating game after 20 years of marriage could be a little daunting for some, but **Bettina Arndt** goes online and embraces the challenges with gusto – plus that tricky question of what she does for a job.



THE FIRST TIME I tried internet dating, I'd been chatting by email to a man who seemed promising – he had hair and a job, and could actually string properly spelt words together. I took the plunge and sent him a note giving him my name and mobile number. Within a minute, the phone rang and there he was, roaring with laughter. It turned out his son was a good friend of my oldest child. I'd had his boy in my home hundreds of times, but somehow had never met his dad.

What a relief. It was so comforting to meet someone whom I almost already knew. Since then, the internet has introduced me to dozens of men with whom I have even less than those famous six degrees of separation. Men who are friends with others I know, or have actually brushed paths with me in years gone by. Internet dating often brings you in touch with men who are just outside your own social network. You might never stumble into each other if it wasn't for this wonderful new means of connection. That really helps to

dispel those fears that you'll end up with an axe murderer.

I once met a man who'd been joking about axe murderers with a woman he met online. They'd hit it off on the phone and arranged that he'd pick her up for their first date from her home. He turned up at her door with an axe slung over his shoulder. Luckily, she saw the joke.

Of course, it is a lousy idea to invite any strange man to your home. It pays to be sensible if you are embarking on this business, following the basic rules about not giving out personal details or ➤

After her 20-year marriage ended in divorce, Bettina is embracing the search for fun male company online.

BETTINA'S RSVP PROFILE

♥ I'm far more interested in what you've got between the ears than elsewhere – intellectual gymnastics make me go weak at the knees. You might know my face, which is why there's no photograph. Never fear, I'm not Dame Edna, although I too have a great pair of pins, and I'm known for stirring the possum. I'm happy to exchange photos if we seem to connect. I'm an indoor girl who likes a good read, prefers Rohinton Mistry, Ian McEwan, Tom Wolfe over Simon Schama, would rather play bridge than bushwalk and prefers a quickstep to a conga line wearing a coconut-shell bra. That said, regular bike riding is helping curve the calves and keep trim the biker's bum, but you'll never see me in lycra skins at the velodrome. Then there's the regular exercise I get hanging onto the fast-moving lead of my large, cat-eating dog – only one decrepit cat, so far, although I should confess to that slow-moving possum. But don't worry – male suitors remain unscathed. I'm not keen on glum, silent types. Prefer a man who talks a lot (when it matters), thinks, reads and embraces life. Particularly enjoy a playful man who doesn't take himself too seriously. My passions are my family – three grown children – and my challenging work, which continues to provide unexpected thrills. After an exciting few years – moving into my newly renovated house and working on some exciting projects – I'm looking forward to some time-out, hopefully including travel. Fireworks with the right man would top things off.



addresses and meeting first in a public place. If you do this, internet dating is not usually a risky business and is probably far safer than picking up someone in a pub or meeting a stranger at a party.

I'd been writing about the internet dating scene long before I first tried it five years ago. I was delighted to see it going mainstream, acquiring a new respectability when Fairfax and other media players bought into the business. Luckily, this was just about the time I found myself 57 and single, after a 20-year marriage. I certainly wasn't looking for the love of my life – just some cheerful male company. Internet dating came up with the goods, leading to great friendships and a sizzling romance or two – even with men with little or no hair.

Yet, along the way, I have consumed many dozen cups of coffee and made small talk with all manner of unsuitable men. I now have the whole process down to a fine art, arranging to meet at an outdoor cafe where I can bring my large bouncy dog. That gives me an out if we don't hit it off. I suggest a walk with my pooch in the local park rather than enduring the required hour or so of tedious conversation. I've also learnt to cut to the chase, moving quickly onto phone conversations rather than wasting hours exchanging getting-to-know-you emails. A quick phone chat is a far

easier way of working out whether this one is a goer.

Internet dating is not for the faint-hearted. Imagine having an email exchange with a prospective date and sending through your photos, which are then greeted with a deafening silence. Or having a hot first coffee date which ends with an awkward "I'll call you" promise which never happens. Aaaaah! I am far too old to wait for the phone to ring. If he doesn't get in touch, I send a quick email asking him to let me know if he's just not interested. Most have the courtesy to reply.

Naturally, having had a very public career talking about sex does tend to complicate matters. In some ways, it works for me. Of course, I don't post photos with my profile – I've always attracted nutters, so I can't afford to be too public. Yet in the highly competitive market for the greying male, you don't get to first base without showing what you look like. And I don't wait to be asked – I'm usually the one who makes the first approach, sending the photo password so he can inspect the goods. The result is a very high hit rate. Most men are keen to meet me. Yet some,

"I'VE LEARNT TO CUT TO THE CHASE."

I suspect, are only ever interested in that chance of a brief brush with fame and the coffee date goes nowhere. I console myself with the thought that I might be too much for them.

The toughest lesson any woman learns from internet dating is to discover her real market value. Last year, journalist Lori Gottlieb published a great book called *Marry Him: The Case For Settling For Mr Good Enough* – all about the adjustments she had to make to her dating expectations. As a 39-year-old single mother, Lori documents her growing realisation that every year she'd spent in the search for the perfect man, her buying power decreased. She tells a humiliating tale of emailing "a scuba-diving 40-year-old lawyer", only to have him remind her they'd met five years earlier. Back then, she'd knocked him back. She'd dismissed him as a "five", now he was an "eight" and she was the one who no longer made the cut. ➤

“Maybe we need to get over ourselves,” she writes, ruefully.

It's a numbers game and it works in men's favour as they grow older. Single women outnumber men in every age group over 30, by a solid 68,000 for singles in their 50s. Women seeking high-status partners – high-earning, well-educated men – face stiff competition. For instance, of the 259,000 available men in their 50s, only 34,000 have degrees (13%) and 20,000 (8%) earn more than \$83,000 per year. Almost twice as many of the single women in this age group have degrees. To make matters worse, these highly desirable, successful men are not necessarily seeking their equals. Many high-status men fish outside their pool, choosing younger, less-educated women than themselves.

The men are in a buyer's market and they revel in it. I met one man – a 65-year-old university maths tutor – who received an astonishing 85 responses in the first hour his profile was online. “Keep meaning to spend a year with Proust, but who doesn't?” asked his profile, a teaser designed for those well-educated divorcées. It worked wonderfully.

“I'm like a kid in a candy shop,” says a 58-year-old accountant, a former date who is now a good friend. As a young man, he had no luck in attracting the ladies. At a recent school reunion, he ran into one of the hot babes from his school days. She told him she now regards him as a great catch, adding that “when we were at school, I wouldn't have looked at you for a second”. He delights in being in such demand, boasting of the time he dated eight “good sorts” in a single week.

Internet dating allows men to enjoy the huge smorgasbord now on offer – and leads to some pretty gross behaviour. Some of the men's profiles make you cringe with their crass comments and poor spelling. There are men who simply disappear after a date or two. Men who say they'll call, but never do and men who are skittish about even paying for that first cup of coffee – although they

have a right to complain about the number of women who still apparently expect men to pay for everything. And there are men who put the hard word on you the first night out.

Yet there are also stories of women behaving badly. I met one man whose enticing profile mentioned he was “in finance”. He was swamped with responses and was working his way through 30 or so meetings with eligible prospects when lunch with a charming professional woman concluded with her tightly buttoning her coat and visiting the loo just before their departure. He escorted her to her car and was stunned when she suddenly flung open the coat to reveal her naked body, whispering she had plenty to offer him. During the trip to the ladies', she'd removed her clothing and stuffed it into her handbag. How weird is that?

Despite all this, dating websites do really work well. We all know couples who have met up that way. Women, particularly older women, need to get active if they want to compete in this competitive dating market. That means, where possible, putting up photos. Yes, choose attractive ones, but be realistic. There's nothing worse than having his face fall when he actually meets you.

And there's no point lying about your age or other vital statistics. I once met a man who was a good 10 years older than he claimed on his profile. I was so cross, I made no effort to get to know him. Don't just put your profile up and expect men to come running. Some will, but you'll often miss out on the best ones that way. Do a search and send messages or even paid emails to men who really appeal. High-status men are often snapped up within a day of appearing online, so you need to be mighty quick to connect with them.

Good men are out there and you are far more likely to find them on the net than hoping to bump into them in your local supermarket. Whether you are looking for a hand to hold in the movies or seeking that elusive soul mate, internet dating is your very best bet for making it happen. ■

“THE MEN ARE IN A BUYER'S MARKET.”

THE FAME GAME

Bettina talks about the pros and cons of being a well-known person trying to meet someone online.



“Like to ruffle some feathers with a high-profile chick who's flown the coop?” These are the words I chose to introduce my profile when I first started online dating. I wasn't prepared to show my photo for obvious reasons, but I needed something to grab attention. The “high-profile” tack worked well, warding off the guys who couldn't cope and attracting the curiosity of more interesting men. Once we are in communication, I'm always open about my work to sift out those who can't deal with the idea of someone who makes her living talking about sex.

Many of the ones who balk seem convinced I must be dating to gather stories for an article and refuse to believe me when I assure them I'm not in the business of humiliating men by writing about my dates. I'm sure there are some men who see my profession as a come-on, but that type is unlikely to get past first base with me. Funnily enough, I have an imposter – a creepy woman who is into all sorts of exotic sex and pretends to be “Bettina Arndt” as a means of meeting men on RSVP. It's infuriating for me, but she obviously finds it works for her.

Other men clearly assume I must be very understanding and immediately tell me all about their sexual foibles. That's sometimes very touching – how many women learn on a first date not only that her prospective suitor has had prostate cancer surgery, but the type of erection treatment he's now using? No, it doesn't put me off. After all, my website does sport the motto “Never too much information”.