



MATCHMAKERS

Private

*fill the gap for successful
marketing romance*

Waxer

*former marketing executive
Gloria MacDonald of
Toronto's Perfect Partners*

CHERYL HAWKING* KNEW the prognosis wasn't good. Middle-aged, divorced, mother of four and overworked physician aren't exactly the adjectives eligible men use to describe their ideal woman. Seedy bars and speed dating were definitely out of the question. And Cheryl's brief flirtation with the online dating service Lavalife produced nothing but in-box glut.

Tired of being alone, Cheryl did what an increasing number of highly educated, well-paid partner-seeking professionals are doing: she hired a matchmaker. Banish all thoughts of Yenta in *Fiddler on the Roof*. Today's matchmakers are highly skilled schmoozers with A-list Rolodex entries and non-refundable retainer fees. Prices can range from \$1,200 a year to \$25,000 for unions that result in wedding bells.

All it took was four months, \$1,200 and two dates for matchmaker Gloria MacDonald of Toronto's Perfect Partners to introduce Cheryl to the man of her dreams—a highly successful lawyer with two kids of his own. Inseparable for a year now, Cheryl's more than pleased with the return on her investment. "To have met someone after only two matches who I think is wonderful, how could you put a price tag on that?" she says.

It's no wonder singles like Cheryl are paying top dollar for the promise of companionship. If pop culture is any indication, flying solo has lost its cool. Single life-affirming television shows like *Sex and the City* and *Friends* have segued into the syndication bin just in time to make room for the domesticated protagonists of *Desperate Housewives* and *Trading Spouses*.

What's a freshly separated, typically fortysomething Canadian to do? Many resort to online dating outfits. A Google search of "online dating service" coughed up nearly two million options, from JDate.com for Jewish singles to AshleyMadison.com for discreet adulterers.

Despite this vast selection, many well-heeled and hard-working professionals like Cheryl simply don't have the time—or the patience—to sift through scores of awkward e-mail messages from less than savoury suitors. And that's precisely why they're handing over their hearts—and hard-earned dollars—to matchmakers like MacDonald.

MacDonald guides her clients through a relatively painless procedure. A former marketing executive, she modelled her two-year-old business after an executive search firm. For \$1,500, MacDonald conducts an in-depth interview with a client in the comfort of their own home where they discuss factors such as lifestyle needs, partner expectations, physical preferences and career goals.

MacDonald then sifts through client profiles in her database, seeks out personal referrals and explores a whole host of resources to find an appropriate match. Once a potential match is identified and the individual agrees to an introduction, MacDonald calls her client to personally run through a candidate's qualifications and the reasons for making a particular selection.

While most customers sign up for a standard package, MacDonald says an increasing number of singles are opting for the private executive search option. For upwards of \$25,000, MacDonald will travel throughout North America and as far as the U.K. in search of a suitable fit, as well as craft targeted advertising campaigns in an effort to lure the right candidates.

Ruth Claramunt also offers the option of a private executive search in addition to providing a standard matchmaking service. Claramunt is the president of Hearts, a professional introduction service with offices in Toronto and Vancouver. "People have become very choosy as to who they're looking for," says Claramunt, noting a recent 40 percent increase in demand for the strictly one-on-one personalized service.

At a cost of \$10,000, Claramunt takes on only one or two private executive search clients at a time, while it's not uncommon for Hearts to be simultaneously managing the love lives of nearly 1,200 regular clients. But more surprising than the sheer number of Canadians who have enlisted the help of a matchmaker is the startling realization that the majority of them

are highly intelligent and tremendously successful singles. "You would be shocked if you knew who some of my clients were, absolutely shocked," says Claramunt, refusing to name the "celebrities" and well-known "media personalities" she calls customers.

So what's stopping so many of today's wealthy singles from hooking up on their own? Nancy Ross has a theory. A Toronto-based psychotherapist with 30 years' experience, Ross has counselled her fair share of career-obsessed, overworked on-the-outs couples. The problem, she says, is that establishing a successful career in a competitive marketplace and opening oneself up to a prospective partner calls for the collision of two drastically different worlds. "I don't think it's easy to focus on getting a career going while being vulnerable and available enough for somebody intimate to come into your life," says Ross.

John Brownlee would be hard-pressed to disagree. Brownlee recently launched Executive Life Partners, a Toronto-based matchmaking agency. He says he takes on 15 to 20 clients a year, 80 percent of whom have already tried their hand at marriage. "As successful as they are in business, their social lives are in disarray," says Brownlee of today's financially blessed yet romantically challenged singles.

Brian Wilmont* is certainly no exception. The owner of a top advertising agency in Toronto and the father of two, Brian says that following his divorce five years ago, he quickly discovered how ill-prepared he was for the dating scene. "A lot of my life was focused on running my company and raising my sons with not a lot of time for going out and socializing," he says.

Still, hooking up strangers with high expectations, serious time constraints, young children and emotional baggage is no easy feat. Cupids such as MacDonald, Claramunt and Brownlee all have their work cut out for them. For starters, they must conquer the city's great gender divide.

According to Statistics Canada 2001 census data, there are five percent more females living in the Toronto area than males. However, a further study of men and women who are single (i.e. never married, separated, divorced or widowed) reveals that the imbalance between males and females just gets progressively worse. Between the ages of 35 to 59, the shortfall of men to women is about 17 percent. The result is a "buyer's market" for men.

Then there's the task of weeding out candidates with ill intentions. Despite advertising in upscale publications such as *Toronto Life* magazine and *The Globe and Mail*, Brownlee of Executive Life Partners says he's received his fair share of shady requests. "I've had women call me looking for a sugar daddy and I've had men in their 60s call me looking for women in their 20s," he says.

Fortunately, 20 years as a full-time matchmaker has sharpened Claramunt's antennae for detecting gold diggers. "I can pick it up in five minutes," she says, wearing her radar like a badge of honour.

And then there's simply the chore of convincing worldly and well-educated singles that enlisting the help of a matchmaker shouldn't be a source of embarrassment. Hearts candidate Brian says that while he struggled to meet women, the decision to hand over his love life to a complete stranger was initially a tough sell.

That is until Claramunt got the ball rolling. Sensing she was "an immensely intuitive lady," he immediately signed up. Two months later, Brian was handed a binder containing the profiles of five women who Claramunt believed were ideal mates. Brian went out with four of the women, and then fell hard for the fifth. They've been dating for nearly three months—a coupling that has helped him see the ancient art of matchmaking in a new light. Chuckling, he confesses: "Some ideas are just good from the start." ■

*Names have been changed.

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