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## Romancing the recession

Vancouver matchmaking companies flourishing in economy's insecurity

GLEN KORSTROM

**T**he success of dating companies is confirming the conventional wisdom that during recessions people feel more vulnerable and seek the security of a relationship.

Both online dating website operators and matchmakers who arrange real-life meetings are reporting staggering growth.

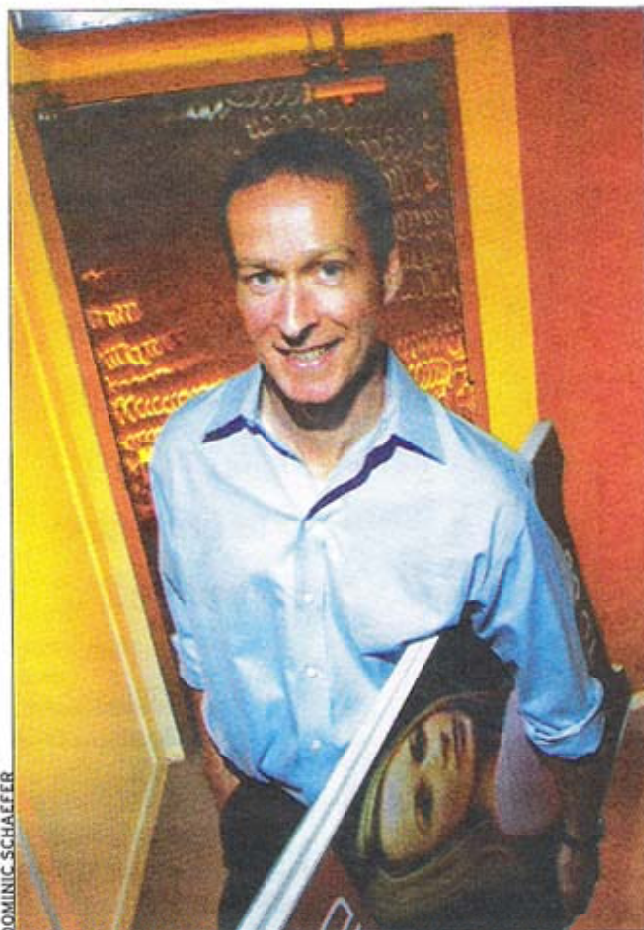
Internet media metrics giant **ComScore Inc.** (Nasdaq:SCOR) ranks Vancouver's **Plenty of Fish** as the world's most visited Internet dating site.

According to ComScore, daters visited Plenty of Fish's website 76.8 million times in July. That's more than twice as many as the 33.4 million global visits that second-ranked **Meetic** attracted.

"We've grown [visits] about 80% year-over-year worldwide," 30-year-old Plenty of Fish owner **Markus Frind** told *Business in Vancouver*.

"I don't want to talk about revenue, because then I'll just get a whole bunch more competitors."

Frind was more willing to discuss revenue last year when he told *BIV* that the venture



Paddi Rice, president and founder Executive Search Dating: founded the company in 2004 with a \$200,000 investment and a small line of credit; annual revenue this year set to top \$500,000

Frind agreed.

"All the major paid sites try to start free sites to compete with me," he said.

**"It's Just Lunch is a good**

brands: Livelinks, RedHot Dateline, Interactive Male, Fonochat, Lavender Line and Vibeline.

Teligence chairman **Rob Madigan** has told *BIV* that his venture generates approxi-

Calgary or Toronto markets starting next year.

He pointed out that his company's clients value their privacy more than do their online counterparts. They're also often too busy to scan Internet websites and engage in Internet chat to find a date.

"Our clients are generally defined as people who are quite successful and quite busy," he said. "There's a confidentiality issue as well. Often with online sites, in order to get traction, you have to post photographs. A lot of people are uneasy about that, especially when they get to the CEO level."

Rice performs rigorous background checks to ensure that clients:

- are single;
- don't have a criminal record; and
- have references that can vouch for other personal details.

Rice's clients say his service is worth the \$1,600 annual fee because it's a more strategic and selective approach than meeting people at random.

California-based **It's Just Lunch** is Rice's biggest competitor.

he runs out of his 900-square-foot Coal Harbour apartment generated \$10 million in advertising. He has almost no expenses.

Frind's six-and-a-half-year-old site is free – the fastest-growing category of dating website on the Internet according to **Forrester Research** (Nasdaq:FOFRR)'s Jupiter Research division.

Jupiter detailed in a 2007 report that U.S. online dating continues to grow, but it's hitting the saturation point when it comes to finding people who are willing to pay for access.

## way to meet people”

- Trenton Poy,  
owner,  
Mountain View Insurance  
Services Ltd.

“**Match.com** created a free site that didn't really go anywhere. **Lavalife** kind of had a free site: **Lavalife Prime**. Then they kind of went paid.”

Toronto-based **Questchat.com** has raised its Vancouver presence and is competing for phone-based dating customers with Vancouver-based **Teligen Communications'**

mately \$80 million annually. Smaller face-to-face matchmaking ventures are similarly enjoying robust growth.

**Paddi Rice** founded **Executive Search Dating (ESD)** in 2004 with a \$200,000 investment and a small line of credit. Steep losses in his company's first two years bled his initial investment, but steady growth since then has put his 2009 revenue on track to exceed \$500,000 and push ESD's profits into the six-figure range.

Rice is now seeking potential franchisees for either the

**Jacquie Brownridge** has expanded her Vancouver **It's Just Lunch** franchise to include **Whistler** and **Vancouver Island**. She also plans to open in the **Okanagan**.

“It's Just Lunch is a good way to meet people,” said **Trenton Poy**, who owns **Abbotsford's Mountain View Insurance Services Ltd.**

“I've used **It's Just Lunch** for about a year and gone on about 15 dates. I don't know if they always match you as good as they could, but it's a tough thing. I still haven't met **Mrs. Right** yet.” ■

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