

Helping professionals find good company

Introduction service helps match gays and lesbians

By Steve Mettsch | Staff writer

Bonnie is 51 and still enjoys dating, but finding romance can be difficult.

"It's hard meeting people in the working world," said Bonnie, who works as a marketing manager in downtown Chicago.

"It's not like college," she said, "where there are thousands of people trying to match up. The older you get, the harder and harder it gets to meet people."

And it's really difficult to meet new people if you are gay, and have no interest in hanging out at bars or relying on friends to set up blind dates, she said.

That's why Bonnie, who lives on Chicago's Southwest Side, enlisted the help of In Good Company, a new, Chicago-based introduction

service for gay and lesbian professionals.

The company was started by Bill Rossi, who grew up in Steger. He says the service has signed up more than 200 clients since starting in late June.

Bonnie, who requested anonymously, said she saw an ad for In Good Company in the *Windy City Times*, a newspaper geared toward Chicago's gay community.

"They said it was a new way to meet new people," she said. "They explained what they did, but I waited awhile to decide. I called back a month later and decided to give it a try."

So far, so good. Bonnie has had dates with four women, two of whom she's gone out with more



Mark Martin/Daily Southtown

Bill Rossi and Emily Fry run In Good Company, a Chicago-based introduction service for gay and lesbian professionals. "The worst-case scenario is you make a new friend," Fry says.

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than once.

"I've enjoyed meeting the women. There haven't been any sparks yet, but I've met some nice people," Bonnie said.

That's the idea, Rossi said.

He recounted the story of two men, both avid cyclists, who met through his service.

"They had a great time, but there was no chemistry. They weren't physically each other's type, but now they are friends who go bike riding together all the time," said Rossi, who also is gay.

'Just friends' is OK

It can't hurt to make new friends, said company director Emily Fry, a lesbian.

Fry is one of the matchmakers who analyzes personality profiles and conducts extensive client interviews to determine who might make a good connection.

"The worst-case scenario is you make a new friend. That's not a bad deal," Fry said. "If you get something more out of it, it's even a better deal."

Rossi, who has worked for heterosexual dating services, started planning his company about a year ago.

"It's hard for people in the heterosexual community to meet new people. It's even more difficult for gay people," Rossi said. "The best way to put it is a man can go into a grocery store, see a good-looking woman, walk up and say,

'Hi, how are you.' The worst thing she'll say is she's not interested."

"But if you're a guy and see another guy you are attracted to, not only do you not know if that guy is gay or not, you're also taking the chance that he's going to punch your lights out because he's got an issue. It's not common, but I've seen it happen."

What are you looking for?

The process begins with a client listing the kinds of things he or she is seeking. For example, a gay man might say he is looking for a man in his 30s who follows the Chicago Bears and enjoys golf.

Rossi and his team of experts search their files for someone who might fit the bill. They also make sure there are enough things the two do not have in common, so that first meeting isn't too boring or predictable.

"The heterosexual community is no different than the homosexual community in what we want," Rossi said. "Everybody wants the same things out of life. The house with the white picket fence, a loving relationship, stability, success — all the good things in life. But it's just a lot harder to get them when you are in the gay lifestyle."

Happy and gay

Dan Earles, 49, of Highland, Ind., knows that firsthand. He had been four years since his last long-term relationship.

"It's time consuming," Earles said. "You meet at a bar, but you never know for sure. You can go through friends, too. But this system is nice because they kind of go through things for you

and figure out if two people have similar interests."

He signed up with In Good Company in July and soon met Keith, a 47-year-old South Sider. They've become inseparable in the two months since they first got together, Earles said.

"Our first date lasted 9½ hours," he said. "We met for lunch, and they kicked us out when they set up for dinner. We went to another place for dinner and sat there talking until 10 o'clock. The night went by so fast. We were never lacking for something to talk about. I knew Keith was definitely special."

They both called In Good Company the next day and asked them to put their memberships on hold, Earles said.

One week after their first date, Keith supported Earles in running a marathon by riding his bike along the way. They are the unofficial "poster boys" for his company, Rossi said.

Services fill a need

Steve Long, senior vice president and managing editor of www.ChicagoPride.com, said his online dating service and In Good Company serve a need in the gay community because they "create a solid alternative to the bar scene."

"Meeting someone online or through a dating service generally offers the same situations and probabilities as that of meeting someone in a nightclub, with considerable less social stress," Long said.

ChicagoPride.com features more than 40,000 local, national and international members, Long said. And, it

offers online personal ads for free, which is more economical than a dating service.

In Good Company is not cheap. A six-month membership, with a minimum of six introductions, costs \$600; nine months with a minimum nine introductions is \$700; and a 12-month option with a minimum of 12 introductions is \$800.

But, as Rossi noted, a weekend of trying to meet someone in bars could cost \$300 or \$300.

"While a dating service might better facilitate the entire dating process from beginning to end, the higher costs of a dating service can hamper some from utilizing them," Long said. "While not necessarily for everyone, I do believe online dating and dating services offer an alternative for many in our diverse community."

Rossi said getting people together is personally rewarding.

"We launched this at the end of June with the Gay Pride Parade, and the response has been incredible," he said.

How incredible?

Rossi is hearing from investors interested in his company, and he's making plans to expand into the New York and Los Angeles markets next year.

"I don't know if I could have done this 10 years, five years or even one year ago," Rossi said. "Society is becoming more accepting of gays."

For more information, visit www.igc-chicago.com or call (312) 499-9900.

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