



The Business of Love

In a way, Anne and Roland Stringer risked everything for love. In 2006, the husband and wife team left behind successful accountancy careers to follow their dream of owning a company that engaged with the public. They chose RSVP, an 'offline' dating agency. Tamsin Cocks spoke to 'practical romantic' Roland Stringer to find out if the gamble of love has paid off.

The world of online dating has exploded in the past decade. It is estimated that over 9 million people in the UK alone (that's roughly one in six of us) actively use the internet to find love. There are over 1,500 sites to choose from, covering all sorts of niche markets from 'Yoga Romance' to 'Date A Millionaire', and the burgeoning industry raked in a cool £170 million last year. Deliberately bucking the trend, RSVP employs an old-school approach to dating, in the form of personal introductions, events and clever matchmaking technology. Although they have adapted to the online world, with over 85% of their enquiries coming via the website, they have purposefully stayed away from the idea of online profiles or an internet based platform. It seems like a risky move in a climate where e-commerce is the buzzword. But Roland Stringer insists it is a calculated decision.

"We've certainly considered the online route," he reveals, "but our product is aimed at the professional market; businessmen and women, professional lawyers, doctors, accountants and so on. And when you talk to most of the members, the very reason that they've joined us is so that they don't have to have a profile in the public domain and their photograph isn't plastered all over the internet. So for business people and professionals who already have a high profile in public life, we're able to offer them a degree of discretion and privacy in their dating lives that they wouldn't otherwise enjoy, so that's why it works pretty well."

Interestingly, Roland believes the huge growth in online dating agencies has actually helped his business. "Since online dating has entered into the mainstream it's had an effect on the concept of using dating agencies, whether they're online or offline. It has become an accepted way of life. Obviously we are in competition with online dating sites, but generally people who are more interested in privacy and discretion will go the offline route."

While discretion seems to be a highly sought after commodity, it doesn't come cheap. For RSVP's "basic" Neon package there is a one-off registration fee of £425 plus monthly payments of £29.95. This is a significant amount of money, considering, as with any dating site, there are no guarantees of finding "the one". It's also another brave move, given that many online alternatives offer cheaper or even free services. However, Roland believes that RSVP offers a superior service that justifies the fee. And his clients clearly agree, as the business has grown to 19,000 lifetime members from approximately 15,000 members in 2006.

One of the more unique elements of RSVP is the focus on organising regular events, an area of the business that Anne and Roland have deliberately expanded since they took over. This is again contrary to the general trend, as while twenty years ago lots of dating agencies put on events, this has gradually fallen by the wayside as the move to online profiles has dominated. RSVP put on over 30 events across the region every month, from country walks to extreme sports and murder mystery



Left to right: Roland and Anne Stringer; Anne Stringer and membership recruitment advisor Kerry Walker; Event calendar available to all members.



dinners, with clients welcome to attend as many as they wish. “They are designed to be quite relaxed and informal, just like going out with a group of friends or something like that,” explains Roland. “Our members are very keen on them.”

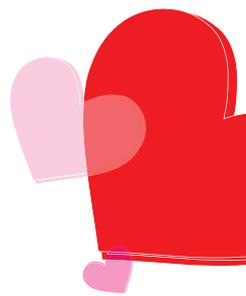
The second major distinguishing factor is the personalised matchmaking service, available with the Gold and Premium service. It’s a two-stage process beginning with a computer algorithm that draws up a shortlist of potential matches based on criteria such as age, height, weight or location. In 2006, Anne and Roland invested heavily in upgrading this technology to be able to use more complex criteria that encompassed ‘personality types’ to help create more accurate matches. The particular system used by RSVP is developed from the Myres-Brigg information based on the philosophy of Carl Jung – a fairly complex system of psychometric assessment to assess traits such as “extroversion” or “introversion”. After this list has been created, the personal matchmaking team further refine this list based on a more nuanced set of criteria that includes things like hobbies or aspirations.

So how successful is this method of matchmaking? “Well that’s a very difficult question to answer, as all online dating agencies will tell you,” Roland says. “Many of our clients are quite private about it and they don’t want to jinx a relationship by telling too many people in the early days, we don’t always hear when we’ve been successful.” On the other hand, he has received a number of thank-you letters and even some

wedding invitations and admits when that happens it’s one of the best elements of the business.

“Our staff think it’s the best job in the world. Some of the letters you get are hard to beat. I suppose we are romantics really – practical romantics I would say – and it’s one of the things that interested us in the business in the first place.”

While the idea of working in the love industry may have appealed to the romantic side of Anne and Roland, it was actually the traditional business model that appealed to their practical nature. Their accountancy backgrounds gave them a huge advantage in being able to assess the viability of different options they were looking at, and the monthly payment system of RSVP provided a more sustainable business model than others. Another interesting aspect of the business model is the idea of having “lifetime members”, when surely the very nature of the business would demand a short-term client relationship. But actually, RSVP has positioned itself to instigate long-term relationships where clients can reactivate their membership whenever they like and just start paying the monthly fee again. Although Roland points out it’s only a low percentage of returning clients, getting any kind of repeat business in this industry is unusual. “It’s one of the nice things about how we operate. You might have an absolutely brilliant relationship that goes on for six years, but then you might drift apart, or move. And if that happens you can just come back to us and start up where you left off and meet new people.”



Profile |



From a customer point of view, there is also something to be said for doing things in a more traditional fashion. While the stigma attached to online dating is certainly waning, it still tends to be a younger demographic who are logging on, whereas RSVP has attracted a slightly older clientele, with the majority in their late 40s to early 50s.

“There are a few reasons for this,” Roland explains. “One reason is that because we are a more expensive service than some, you need to be reasonably well established in life to justify spending money on a service like ours. And secondly, I think we appeal to people whose route to meeting single people is now closed. You know, if you’re 20 or 30 you might go down to the local pub, or have friends that are single, so there are natural routes to finding people who are single. Whereas I think as you get into your 30s and 40s those routes kind of get closed off and so I think people need us more.”

Inheriting a slightly older clientele has actually been a huge learning curve for Anne and Roland. Marketing to the over 50s was a new concept to both of them, and in the early days they completely misjudged their customer and learnt a very valuable lesson, as Roland explains:

“When we took over RSVP, the previous owner, (Peter MacDonald) had a concept of developing a sub brand for the over-fifties market and we spent a fair amount of time pursuing this sub brand ourselves. But it became pretty obvious to us that in fact this is precisely the opposite of the way you should market to the 50 plus group, because people always see themselves as slightly younger than they actually are! For example if you showed somebody who is 60 an image of another 60-year-old, they would think that person looked older, whereas if you show them a picture of someone who looks 50 they’ll think – yeah, that’s about my age. So they’ll identify with the image of the person who is 50 much better than the 60-year-old. And that’s been the lesson I suppose. It took us a while to discover it but it’s been fed back into our marketing. We completely abandoned the idea of a sub brand at all, and now we market to all age groups in exactly the same way, from 25 upwards, and it works much better.”

Roland regards these challenges as opportunities and has thoroughly enjoyed learning different skills to deal with the new sector. While Roland has taken over the behind-the-scenes aspect of the business incorporating things like marketing, advertising and IT, Anne handles the client-facing side of the business. Roland believes that having clearly defined roles helps them to juggle the delicate scenario of running a business with your spouse and claims it’s quite rare that there are any disagreements. Both also enjoy the flexibility afforded to them by being able to carve out free time that suits them, although there hasn’t been much of that recently as Roland laughs: “The period between Christmas and Valentine’s Day is always rather manic!” On that note, we best leave Roland to return to his role as Cupid. ■



FOR MORE INFORMATION
www.rsvp-uk.com
T: 01604 585999
RSVP, 2 Saddlers Court, Oakham, LE15 7GH

The RSVP team

