

What Makes a Successful Matchmaker?

A YUConnects Research Study

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There are currently 86 million single Americans, 32.9 million of whom live alone.² Within the past three decades, the percentage of adults in their early 30s has risen from 9 percent to 30 percent for men, and from 6 percent to 22 percent for women.³ As more Americans remain single, alternative forms of meeting prospective romantic partners have proliferated. A study conducted by Forrester Research in 2012 reveals that the online dating industry is currently worth more than \$2.1 billion, with approximately 1,500 dating sites estimated to exist in the United States alone, catering to every conceivable religious, political and even racial niche. According to a study conducted by Harris Interactive for eHarmony.com, from January 1, 2008 through June 30, 2009 an average of 542 people were married every day in the United States because of that online dating service alone. During that period, eHarmony created more than 148,311 marriages, or 4.77 percent of all new marriages in the country.⁴

The Orthodox Jewish community also benefits from the technological advances available today, in which dating sites can host thousands of profiles and use sophisticated algorithms to generate potential matches. Sites such as frumster.com, SawYouAtSinai.com, J-date.com, YUConnects.com and ChabadMatch.com are populated with new members each hour, and other new sites emerge regularly. Given the effectiveness of matchmaking as a vehicle for marriage, whether through online sites or more traditional methods, YUConnects conducted a qualitative study examining the methodology (leaving the technological matchmaking algorithms aside for the purpose of this study), traits and attributes of successful matchmakers, with the objective of identifying and formulating best practices for others.⁵ There are many

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² www.unmarriedamerica.org

³ www.matchmakinginstitute.com/singlesmarket/.

⁴ www.eharmony.com/press-release/31/.

⁵ This survey study was designed by YUConnects and conducted by Rabbi Ariel Rackovsky under the mentorship of Dr. Efrat Sobolofsky. Rabbi Rackovsky analyzed the data response and reported the results and conclusions in this article.

people who would like to be more involved in matchmaking, both formally and informally, but are hesitant to do so, and others who dabble and would like to be more effective.

Survey Methodology & Sample Description of Matchmakers

Respondents completed an online survey or did so during a personal phone call, answering a series of detailed, open-ended questions about their involvement in matchmaking. They were questioned about areas including which population they serve, how much time they spend on matchmaking, what are the compatible factors they look for in potential matches, how involved they are in the course of a couple's relationship and if and how much they are compensated upon success.

Eighty-two matchmakers around the world, comprised of 75 women and seven men, responded to the online survey, representing a response rate of 26.6 percent of the 300 matchmakers e-mailed. The sample spanned the ideological spectrum of Orthodox Judaism, with representatives from the Modern Orthodox, Israeli Dati Leumi, Chabad, American Yeshivish and Chassidic communities. Several of the matchmakers responded anonymously, claiming it increased the truthfulness of their responses.

Matchmakers surveyed reported a wide range of successful matches leading to marriage. Out of 82 respondents, five (6 percent) reported having made no matches yet, and 40 (49 percent) had made between one and 10 matches. Twelve matchmakers reported making between 11 and 20 matches and two reported making between 80 and 90 matches. Six respondents refused to reveal the number of matches they made, and one respondent reported 15 successful matches a year. At the time of the survey (2011), two matchmakers were responsible for over 250 matches, and one matchmaker was responsible for over 1,000 marriages.

For those matchmakers who were compensated for a successful match, the amount varied from about \$500 to \$2,500 per side, with the modal response being between \$1,000 and \$1,800 per side. Three matchmakers give their monetary gift to their favorite charity; two of the three mentioned that they sponsor a wedding using their gift. Several matchmakers indicated that they don't request any given amount, and allow the couple or parents to use their own discretion. Pieces of silver and jewelry were identified as gifts by three matchmakers, but the majority referred to monetary gifts. One matchmaker who does matchmaking voluntarily said he asks for 25 cents to allow the families to keep with the traditional and halachically-based practice of *shadchanus*, or paying a matchmaker, but the families typically give him more.

Aside from varying rates of success, respondents reported differing areas of concentration in their matchmaking efforts, ranging from those who specialize in older singles to those who focus on a younger population. Some said they work with singles across the gamut of contemporary Orthodox Judaism, while others specialize in certain communities or subgroups.

The following points emerged from the data, which should assist those who wish to undertake this sacred mission and to advance the techniques of those who already do.

Matchmaking Methodology

Matchmakers were asked how they get to know the singles they are matching up. Fifty-two out of 82 matchmakers (63 percent) responded that they prefer an in-person meeting before setting someone up, especially when geographically feasible.

The matchmakers were then asked to identify and list the factors they apply in considering match compatibility. The responses, a total of 144 free-form comments from 82 matchmakers, were categorized and aggregated into the most frequently stated themes. Overall, matchmakers listed religious observance levels “*hashkafa*” (27 percent), personality and character traits (17 percent), and common goals and values (13 percent), as the three most significant factors they employ in considering compatible match possibilities for people in similar age groups. Additional key compatibility factors included: similarity in family background (11 percent), intelligence and education level (10 percent), and common hobbies and interests (5 percent).

The majority of matchmakers indicated that they first contact the man (or, in more *yeshivish* circles, his mother) to suggest the match and once he accepts and says he is interested, the matchmaker proceeds to ask the woman. Interestingly, three matchmakers noted that in a situation where it may be challenging to sway the woman in the match to agree to meet the man, matchmakers may want to consider approaching the woman first to ensure that she will accept the idea before contacting the man. “This saves time and aggravation later,” in the event that she is definitely not interested, commented one of these matchmakers. Respondents explained that information is shared over the phone or as part of a general e-mail, no matter who is contacted first. If the single or parent expresses a level of interest, a more specific e-mail follows with the profile of the prospective match providing more details (including family background, current occupation or schooling), references and sometimes a photo.

Three matchmakers articulated the importance of gathering as much information as possible about the people they are representing, because doing so enables them to enthusiastically describe one to the other and highlight the unique character traits that the other party would find most appealing. One matchmaker, with over 225 marriages to her credit, said, “What I am is a saleslady—I sell people to other people.” Once there is an affirmative answer from the man, the woman is contacted with information about the young man and decides if she wishes to meet.

Matchmakers who use online dating sites such as SawYouAtSinai and YUConnects use technology to perform the same matchmaking tasks. When they send the man the profile of the woman, it is usually accompanied by a personal e-mail sharing why the matchmaker is suggesting the match, whereupon he can choose to accept or decline the match. Once the man accepts, the matchmaker forwards the man’s profile to the woman accompanied by a personal e-mail, and she, too, can accept or decline the match. If both parties accept, a mutually approved match is made.

Five seasoned matchmakers echoed the sentiments of one matchmaker who has facilitated over 300 marriages, and said that for best results, it is critical to “suggest ideas people want—not what you think they *should* want.” Similarly, another matchmaker shared that she prides herself on

sending targeted ideas, as opposed to numerous match suggestions, and her online members thank her for never insulting or depressing them with any “way off” prospects.

Matchmaker Prerequisites & Traits

A Matter of Time & Accessibility: Two features common to all successful matchmakers were investment of time and accessibility or availability to the singles and parties involved. Those who wish to be involved should be prepared to dedicate significant time to matchmaking, particularly if it is a source of income. While most of those surveyed had no set amount of time they spend on matchmaking, those on the low end spend between three and five hours a week doing so, and others spend more than 20 hours a week. Indeed, a typical (though vague) response to the question of how much time was dedicated to matchmaking each week was “all the time,” or “too much.” In fact, two volunteer matchmakers said they would benefit from a secretary to field their calls. Investment of time not only refers to the time spent in suggesting a match, but being accessible and getting the various parties to agree to meet. In some circles, the respondents shared, it also means making the phone calls to arrange the first few dates. Efficiency and speed are also critical skills. One matchmaker said, “People do not like to be kept waiting—you have to make your phone calls in a timely fashion. I can have 14 people out on a date the previous night, so it can take me until 1 p.m. just to follow up on all seven couples.”

As a follow up, we asked whether and how matchmakers guide couples throughout the dating process, and at what point (if at all) they encourage singles to proceed on their own without the guidance of a matchmaker. Here, 70 out of 82 (85 percent) replied that they don’t have a specific time frame and that they encourage the singles to “drop the *shadchan* or intermediary” when comfortable. The next most common answer, often overlapping with the first, was the one given by 26 out of 82 (32.5 percent) respondents, who indicated that most dating couples proceed on their own after three or four dates. Interestingly, a few matchmakers indicated that while they are happiest not functioning as day-to-day micromanagers, couples expressed appreciation for their periodic texts or e-mails checking in and reminding them of their availability to be called upon for assistance. Several successful matchmakers shared that if prompted, they use those interval “check-in” opportunities to offer gentle recommendations on ways to advance the relationship, including advice about appropriate romantic gestures demonstrating emotional closeness.

Additionally, prolific matchmakers treat every social encounter they have as a potential “lead,” and utilize any conversation with a new person they meet or with old friends as an opportunity to network. This author was asked several times by enterprising matchmakers in the course of his research if he knew people who fit into various specific ideological demographics and age groups. Anyone wanting to be a matchmaker should be prepared to act on any encounter that may lead to a shidduch, and to follow up if necessary, being ready to answer questions and make phone calls with alacrity.

Sensitivity, Respect and Building a Relationship: Close to 10 matchmakers strongly asserted that matchmaking requires deep sensitivity, unconditional respect for anyone they serve and an overall level of passion and dedication for the cause. A matchmaker who focuses on matching

baalei t'shuva shared that it is most helpful to put oneself in the single's position, fostering the right empathy skills, and recognize that "no single (or married person for that matter) wants to be nagged, lectured, or harassed, by a stranger or a devoted matchmaker."

A matchmaker who specializes in a broad range of singles in their 30s and early 40s across the Orthodox spectrum said that she works especially hard to develop relationships with her numerous online members built on active listening, trust and respect. The warmth and deep-rooted care she shows enables each person she serves to maintain a positive attitude and the confidence helpful for the dating process. Furthermore, one woman added that when a matchmaker gets to know the singles she or he works with, the singles are more likely to accept that matchmaker's suggestions.

Persistence, Patience and Resilience: Aside from time and availability, there are three character traits that are critical for any matchmaker—persistence, patience and resilience. Persistence was shown to be an important trait in making matches because a significant percentage of those surveyed indicated that if they felt an idea they had for a match had potential, they did not drop it even if it was initially rejected by one or both parties. Some would provide a more detailed reason behind the suggested match and present it again immediately, others would wait some time (even several months) and then suggest the match again if they felt the members of the potential couple would be more open to it. One matchmaker said, "I am very persistent when I truly believe in something, and I will continue bothering people for years if I feel the shidduch is a great idea." Along the same lines, one matchmaker reflected that very often people reconsider their earlier hesitation or rejection to meet someone when the initial decline was for unsubstantial reasons.

Matchmaker patience is critical as well. When suggesting a match to someone, the person being set up may not be able to follow up immediately, either because they have already accepted another match suggestion, have begun dating someone else or have other commitments and obligations that make dating difficult. In other instances, it may take some time for a person to get back to the matchmaker about a suggestion. In the former case, to see such matches come to fruition, it is often necessary to wait for some time, perhaps even in the order of months or years.

Finally, matchmaker resilience is a key character trait because rejection and frustration are routine for those seriously involved in matchmaking. While it may be easy to feel that one's sincere efforts have gone for naught, and feel affronted as a result, the key ingredient to success in matchmaking is to continue in spite of these perceived setbacks. "Hashem credits you for trying your best, not necessarily for securing an engagement," a matchmaker commented. Three other matchmakers elaborated on this trait and advised that other matchmakers should "recognize their own limitations and be honest with themselves when they need to shy away from situations where they may not feel comfortable or successful, in representing or matchmaking." Another matchmaker recommended that her peers take brief breaks from matchmaking to energize themselves to resume their holy work. Two matchmakers suggested focusing on a specific niche (an age group, a hashkafa, a localized population, etc.) to maximize results, and as a way of counteracting burnout.

Recommendations for Change Offered by Matchmakers

Another question on the survey asked matchmakers to identify one area in the contemporary “shidduch system” that they would like to see change.

An Equal Playing Field: Among the most common answers were that the current “system” is weighed too heavily in favor of the men—13 out of 82 (16 percent) responded along these lines. Three matchmakers elaborated on how this unequal playing field manifests itself. The first matchmaker focused on the delayed response time, or lack of a response altogether, when a man is presented a match. “I know he may be overwhelmed with suggestions, and after I follow up and call him back a few weeks later, he’ll say that he has to get back to me and does not. I would even appreciate a response which resembles, ‘thank you for thinking of me, but I am not interested.’”

The second matchmaker referred to the difference in approach between men and women in dating. Women, she asserted, are more forthcoming in signing up for events, networking with matchmakers, and joining online dating sites and databases, while the men are slower to do so. “We need more men coming forward earlier in their dating careers, so that we can be more helpful to them and many others,” she commented.

A third matchmaker added that the current system shifts the traditional paradigm, in which men functioned as the pursuers. She insightfully shared that “in today’s time, a man enters the dating stage, often told by many that there are dozens of suitable women available to him, quickly inferring that he is in the esteemed position. Shortly thereafter, through dating and serious courtship, the messages begin to change. The man is then expected to make the correct adjustment, demonstrate chivalry, and genuinely place the needs of his wife-to-be before his own.”

More Focus on Character: Five matchmakers pleaded in their responses that we work together as a community to focus less on externals and labels and instead emphasize personal qualities and characteristics. One matchmaker asserted that “the improper importance placed on physique (beauty and dress size) and money does not lead to healthy relationships,” while another expressed concern that the portrayal of immediate attraction and love as found in Hollywood and Western culture leads to the premature conclusion of potentially promising relationships.

“TMI” Available Today: A related concern was the role of pictures in the dating process. Four respondents said that they would like to abolish the practice of providing pictures and three matchmakers responded that the prevalence of Facebook is detrimental to matching couples. “The phenomenon of ‘TMI’—too much information—posted and available before a date, available at lightning speed, is contributing to the quick rejection of match ideas, leading to a decrease in first dates,” one matchmaker explained.

More Social Events, Networking and Meeting Opportunities: Another recurring suggestion, mentioned by nine percent of correspondents, was the need for more venues and opportunities for singles to meet in a non-threatening, non-segregated manner. One matchmaker reminisced about a well-known forum for singles to meet several decades ago: “I feel very strongly that there

should be an ongoing weekly program for singles in a central location, like weekly lectures at Lincoln Square Synagogue many years ago. That was the one place that people could meet and re-meet.” Another recommendation asked for more efficient and fluid ways for singles to share suggestions for their peers, leaning on previous dating and networking experiences.

Further Matchmaking Training: The final question asked matchmakers for areas where they would benefit from additional training. The most common response, given by 20 percent of respondents, involved advancing their skills in mentoring singles properly, especially those who have been dating for longer. One matchmaker honestly shared the concern that “sensitivities are involved, and no one wants to be responsible for an unhealthy relationship or marriage.” Similarly, another matchmaker said, “I would never want to encourage something that’s really not meant to be.” Other responses to this question included specialized training in sensitively serving second-time singles and mentoring in properly assisting those with emotional or psychological challenges.

Conclusion

The results demonstrated that while there may have been slight differences in the way the respondent matchmakers meet and match their singles, six compatibility factors matchmakers use in considering matches were highlighted: religious observance levels, personality and character traits, common goals and values, similarity in family background, intelligence and education level, and common hobbies and interests. The data clearly showed that time, along with accessibility and availability to the singles or parties involved, are prerequisites for success.

Being sensitive, treating all singles with dignity and respect, and taking the time to develop relationships built on care and trust, are task requirements that increase match and networking opportunities. Persistence, patience and resilience are attributes a matchmaker should keep on hand to promote healthy relationship-building for the people they serve and to avoid burnout. Finally, the matchmakers raised awareness and shared a few recommendations for improvements in the system. The matchmakers also asked for more matchmaking training to assist them in becoming more proficient and specialized in their role.

While there were limitations in this study, in that it used a qualitative approach and responders were not mandated to answer each question to participate, it is hoped that the information gleaned will encourage and guide more people in becoming involved and assist those who are already trying to reap success in their pursuits.

The Medrash (*Bereishit Rabbah* 68:4) relates that now that the world has been created, G-d spends his time making matches. It is most noble for people to help do the same as a partner and an agent of G-d. As one of the matchmakers concluded her survey, “Put your heart into it, and pray to Hashem that He allows you to be a *shaliach*—a messenger—in this very important mitzvah. Think of it as teamwork, open your eyes and ears to their needs (not your own), and finally, make yourself available to another. In this way, may we all merit to see more success in our efforts.”