

Online Dating Adds Video, Goes Local

By Nicole Solis Feb 11, 2009 5:00 pm PST

Reviews

Most traditional dating sites require a lot of work up front before you even get to meet the person (and even then, [incompatibility horror stories](#) sometimes result). Why not fast-forward to the fun part? Four new sites are helping online daters meet face-to-face more quickly, both online (through video speed dating) and in person (by matching users with nearby singles) so they can exchange real winks instead of the virtual kind.

A caveat: Though these sites have cool features, they may not have a huge user base—or a significant user base in your area. Since much of a site's value depends on the pool of people who participate in it, your results may vary.

(Just [want to flirt? Try these sites.](#))

Video Speed Dating

[WooMe](#)

Designed to remove the stigma associated with matchmaking sites for young adults, WooMe creates a speed-dating venue for singles between 18 and 24 years old. Signing up takes seconds. After supplying minimal personal information (no last name required) and a photo, you can start your own chat session with other users or join an existing session. WooMe is about getting people talking, not about assembling detailed profiles.

WooMe's video meetings let you chat or (in this case) serenade.

Unlike most dating sites, which restrict member-to-member contact, WooMe makes communication between users pretty much a no-holds-barred affair. Before I had finished confirming my account, I received multiple friend requests, nudges, and even a flattering invitation to join the "hotties" chat session—all popping up in the middle of the screen.

Theoretically, chat sessions can focus on any topic, but in practice most seem geared toward younger users. Topics like "bored and nuthn to do," "nobody better lay a finger on my butterfinger," and "PaNTieS display" are fairly common, as are more explicit ones. The "CEO compensation limits" discussion I hosted attracted the two oldest men I chatted with—a 27-year-old and a 28-year-old.

Chats have set start times, and the fun, funky music accompanying the countdown wouldn't be out of place in a porn soundtrack (not that I would know...). Most discussions match two or three girls with the same number of guys. Once the chat starts, you have 60 to 90 seconds to talk to each person one-on-one through some combination of Webcam, audio, and IM; most of the speedthroughs I participated in included Webcam and IM, but no audio. To see some examples, check out the WooMe TV part of the site. After the discussion ends, you can contact one of the other participants by sending them a friend request (which allows you to message back and forth) or a nudge.

To find more people to chat with, friend, or nudge, you can search based on WooMe's profile parameters, which include—besides age range and location—looks (hot, beautiful, fine, etc.), "in their element" (anywhere, in a club, behind a computer, etc.), and personality (party, smart, chilled, etc.).

WooMe is a bit of an assault on the senses, but it's also kind of fun. The developers get points for including a "computer Woo test" so you don't have

to worry that technical difficulties with your Webcam or microphone might prevent you from discussing “hotties with bodies.”

Explore with a question

SpeedDate

After sprinting through the lightning-fast 60-second chats on WooMe, I found the dates on SpeedDate almost luxuriously long. SpeedDate basically replicates the real-life speed-dating model, in which you chat with a complete stranger for 3 minutes. Just fill out some fairly rudimentary information, and upload a photo. Within minutes, you'll be set up on an online date, chatting through Webcam, audio, or IM (in my experience, IM was the dominant mode; I was the only person using a Webcam). After the date ends, you immediately notify the system whether the minitryst produced a match; and if both of you vote yes, let the messaging begin!

You can limit your pool of potential speed dates by age range and by general location (Near Me, United States, or Worldwide), but that's it. Be warned the interpretation of “Near Me” is fairly loose: I went on a SpeedDate with one guy who turned out to live about 200 miles away.

Besides going on dates, you can view users' profiles and flirt (send a brief message), wink, or (if you pay \$60 per month for a premium membership) add special someones to your speed-date queue; but that's about it.

Premium members also get to go drill down past the basic search parameters and into any form field in a profile, such as ethnicity, political beliefs, and height. On the other hand, no user—premium or free—can search open-text fields for interests, hobbies, or other information that might be hidden away in a profile description.

SpeedDate's iPhone app has a simple interface that gets right to the point.

The special iPhone application for the SpeedDate service provides an especially satisfying way to scroll through potential matches, thanks to the design decision to place its "Wink" and "Flirt" buttons right above the large profile photo. That makes for a user-friendly interface with one-click convenience.

Location-Based Dating

Skout

Think of Skout as a local-food—or perhaps convenience-store—approach to dating. You update your location, and the Web site maps out your fellow users' locations with small profile photos. From there, you can check out their profiles, send them a message, or add them as a friend, perhaps resulting in a real-life, spontaneous meeting.

Skout's location-based dating system shows you singles in close proximity.

Users can choose who sees their location: no one, friends, or everyone. The site can automatically update your location, or you can supply it yourself, with whatever degree of specificity you like. When others view your profile, the locator map will be zoomed in or out accordingly. In the San Francisco Bay Area, Skout staffers seemed to be the only people using actual street addresses.

Skout organizes users' geotagged photos and status updates into time-stamped news feeds (a carryover from its previous incarnation as a general social network), so you'll know at a glance how current the information is. You can control the location tags for your updates, too. One user posted a stunning photo of a sunset over a forest, tagging it "New York, New York," steadfastly refusing commenters' requests for a more specific location. (It clearly was not taken in New York City.) Currently, the number of Skout users hasn't achieved the critical mass necessary for the site to realize its full

potential, but as far as location-based dating services go, it skews far closer to cool than to creepy.

Skout's nearly full-featured mobile site (m.skout.com) is the best part of this service and has a simplified interface that's much easier to navigate than the service's Web site. It lacks the map, but adds the ability to search by keywords. Apple is currently reviewing the company's iPhone app (which is why I don't review it here); but previews of the app suggest that it shares the same functionality as the mobile app.

[MeetMoi](#)

MeetMoi's goal is to take online dating out into the real world. Though it borrows heavily from traditional dating sites (including their somewhat earnest tone and limited features), it also has a mobile site (m.meetmoi.com) that can do nearly everything the full site can. The basic service is free, and for \$10 per month (charged to your cell phone), you can initiate conversations with other users.

You can set your basic search preferences to include age range, location, and when your prospective date last updated his or her profile. The results, sortable by much the same parameters, show distance as miles away from you. The Web site also adds a locator map for each user, zoomed in or out depending on how specific the location information is.

You can choose who gets to see your exact whereabouts on a map: no one, favorites only, or anyone (the default is no one). BlackBerry, Android, and Symbian phones users can download [Xtify](#), a phone application that automatically updates their locations through the mobile site. If you choose not to update your location automatically, you can type in just your city.

Only premium users can initiate conversations, but all users can respond to

messages and send winks. You'll be notified by text message when someone contacts you, but don't fear: You can set a maximum number of texts per day as well as the time of day that such messages are welcome.

Location-Based Dating iPhone Apps

[Match2blue](#) and [WhosHere](#) (note that the WhosHere app is offered through iTunes) are free, stand-alone iPhone apps for location-based dating. Both offer very similar features: quick signup, streamlined communication, and proximity-based searching.

The WhosHere iPhone app lets you find dates within 2 miles.

Match2blue further tries to match people by interest, showing more stars in the 'Let's Match' results for people whose declared interests are more in sync. It also allows you to make your location either private or public.

WhosHere lets you set the accuracy of your location from "within 30 feet" to "within 2 miles." Still, the privacy controls are fairly loose compared to those enforced at Skout and MeetMoi, so these might be better fits for people who are accustomed to broadcasting their life online—and who have no outstanding warrants.