

## Yes, (offline) matchmaking is alive and well – and capable of bringing in six-figure revenues

Feb 14, 2015, 11:35am EST

Sameera Sullivan is in the business of love. The old-fashioned kind.

Sullivan, 34, is a matchmaker – rather, the antithesis of the \$2 billion online dating world that's come to define 21<sup>st</sup>-century romance.

And people use her, not to scope out half the city from the relative anonymity of the Internet, but to get hand-selected dates, as well as the coaching needed to put their best foot forward.

### See Also

- The work-life merger: How 3 married couples run businesses together
- Expletive-laden emails, a traumatized staff and dueling lawsuits: The dark side of blending love and business

Her clients range in age from their mid-30s to their early 70s, and they pay between \$25,000 and \$35,000 for basic services.

Yes, that's a lot more than the \$42 per month that Match.com charges. And yes, your average love-hungry single can't afford it. But for those who can, the upfront investment isn't as startling as you'd think. Divorces aren't cheap, after all.

"I've had men tell me that their last divorce cost them more than a million dollars, so why not invest in this?" Sullivan said.

### 'A great habit-breaker'

Vancouver resident Milissa, 48, had her first consultation with Sullivan in October.

Divorced, Milissa (who asked that we not use her last name) had been with her ex-husband for more than 24 years. And she knew it would be easy to find herself in a similar relationship once again.

"One of the things I told her that was important to me was I didn't want to go down the same road," Milissa said. "She said, 'I'm a great habit-breaker.'"

So they had the home visit, a wardrobe analysis, a makeover at Nordstrom and then Milissa's first Sullivan-approved date.

After that first date, Sullivan debriefed with each of them. Her judgment was spot on: They'd both had a great time. They wanted to see each other again.



Courtesy of Sameera Sullivan

Meet Sameera Sullivan, old-fashioned matchmaker.

They've now been on nine dates in less than three weeks.

A realtor, Milissa says she turned to Sullivan because she wanted to find love again – but not with an industry colleague or a friend of a friend's cousin. Plus, she wanted more discretion than online dating offered. Sullivan's highly personalized business met those needs and thus was well worth the money.

"Some of us, I guess, are romantics at heart," Milissa said. "Even though I was married before and it didn't end up in forever, I still want that. ...Why wouldn't you try to use somebody who's going to find you that right person?"

### **'You should charge people'**

Sullivan's first (official) foray into matchmaking came when she was working as a national executive recruiter for the air, space and naval industry.

Then, a recruiter reached out to her: Would she be interested in working for a matchmaking service?

"I always gave date advice and coaching," Sullivan said. "My friends would call me at 3 o'clock in the morning...and my mom said, 'You should charge people.'"

She told the recruiter, "Yes."

Sullivan soon found she loved the act of bringing people together – just not the way that particular matchmaking business was run.

They'd take clients over the phone, often without even seeing photos. Some matches were made with a quota in mind, not with care – like that time the mechanic "with grease under his nails" was set up with an M.D.

There wasn't an image-consulting component to the business, either, which sometimes led to unnecessary heartache. Like that time a woman in need of a little guidance (think chin hair and sloppy dress, Sullivan says) got stood up.

And worst of all: She wasn't allowed to speak with clients after that first date. No keeping in touch.

So Sullivan began working with some clients on the side, on her own. Then she got some referrals. Soon after, Lasting Connections was born.

In her first year, Sullivan says she made \$35,000. The second year: \$135,000. Her third: \$195,000. This year, she's on track to do more than \$500,000 in revenue.

Sullivan now has two other full-time matchmakers and offices in Portland, Seattle and San Francisco.

### **A 'wing woman'**

Another of Sullivan's clients is a 63-year-old CEO (who requested his name not be used) who's been divorced for three years. He'd tried the traditional routes – introductions through friends, meeting people on his own – and he even gave online dating a try. Nothing clicked. And it was time-consuming.

After some online searching, he saw that Sullivan was based in Portland, where he lived. He gave her a call. He liked the more confidential way of navigating the dating world that a matchmaker offered. He now calls Sullivan his "wing-woman," and the quality of the dates have gotten exponentially better.

Part of that, he says, has to do with the post-date recap. After each date, they discuss it. If there wasn't that spark, Sullivan asks for specifics. The practice helps him refine what he's looking for, and it helps Sullivan find women who are a better fit.

"The first time we did it, I felt uneasy about it," the client said. "She said 'Tell me the top three reasons you don't think this is going to work.' So I had to sit down and think about it...go through and articulate it."

The result: "The quality of connections keep getting better and better," he said. "I wish I'd done this a long

time ago."

### Reading between the lines

Sullivan has two master's degrees: one in education administration and another in adult psychology. The latter, she uses on a daily basis.

When she meets with clients for the consultation, Sullivan asks about their relationship history, what they've been through. When she asks about their interests, she's watching their mannerisms. She's also studying the way they talk.

It's a lot like dating itself: reading between the lines.

The background in psychology also comes in handy to detect "the crazy people," she says, those who breed dysfunction, those who are aren't truthful. And there have been a few, all of whom she cut ties with.

Sullivan says she's extremely careful about who she works with – from their personalities to their expectations. She's a matchmaker, not a miracle worker.

"If you're 60 years old, and you're looking for a relationship, I'm not here to find you a 20 or 25-year old girl," Sullivan said. "Any guy in his 60s that says 'I want somebody less than 40,' I'm like, 'Get out of my office.'

"But," she adds, "if I have a man who's 60 and have an amazing 40-year-old who I think would be an amazing fit, then I'll definitely match them. But not when they ask me."

Some end in marriage. Others have been together for years now. And some are dating – and it's going swimmingly.

Sullivan recalls one client, a 70-year-old woman whose husband and son died 15 years ago in a plane crash. She'd remarried, but to the wrong guy. It lasted only four years. And she ended up paying alimony to him.

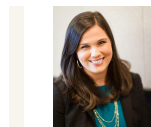
"She came to me and said, 'Sameera, I just don't know where to find the men. I used to be really glamorous and look great. I don't have that anymore. I don't get any attention,'" Sullivan recalled.

So Sullivan got to work. They updated the woman's hairstyle and color. They revamped her wardrobe, which hadn't been updated in about 20 years. Then Sullivan introduced her to the wonderful world of Spanx.

Soon after, she started getting compliments. Then she was getting asked out at church. With just a little bit of help, she got her confidence back.

"When we were done with the whole process she said, 'I'm actually visible now,'" Sullivan recalls. "'I'm not invisible anymore.'"

*For more from Bizwomen.com, sign up for our free email newsletter.*



**Caroline McMillan Portillo**  
Bizwomen reporter