

# FEATURES

[ TECHNOLOGY ]

## 300 dates in 24 hours? No sweat

*Francesca Salcido doesn't let the grass grow under her feet. Her encounters with aspiring beaus happened online at SpeedDate.com*

BY IAN SHERR  
AFP, SAN FRANCISCO

Francesca Salcido went on 300 dates in 24 hours without breaking a sweat. Her encounters with aspiring beaus happened online at SpeedDate.com, a US start-up built on a belief that it need not take more than 90 seconds to find a life partner.

"We may be using Web cams and Internet technologies, but you're still trying to find that chemistry," SpeedDate co-founder Dan Abelson said. "And if it isn't there, you just move on to the next person."

The Web site and its competitors apply the latest Internet technology to speed dating, a phenomenon that started a decade ago with men and women darting from table to table to chat in rapid-fire succession at a time keeper's signal.

"If people decide they don't like someone, they usually know within 30 seconds," said Stephen Stokols, chief executive of SneedDate rival WooMe.com.

"If you meet someone you like, three minutes isn't long enough. If you don't like them, 30 seconds is too long."

Automated timers at SpeedDate and WooMe cut off online video chats after as little as 90 seconds or as long as three minutes. Those that felt romance kindling during curt exchanges can later reconnect to fan the flames.

The speed-dating formula differs dramatically from the format of most dating Web sites, which require users to detail their lives and interests in intricate profiles or extensive questionnaires.

Love seekers on those sites are matched based on their profiles and then chat via e-mail before deciding whether to meet in person.

"We're more like dating in real life," Abelson said. "If you see someone you like in real life, you don't go up to them with your resume and compare. You just talk."

Instead of sitting at a coffee shop or a bar, speed dating Web sites let potential mates meet using Web cams and microphones.

"I wanted to be a little ridiculous and put myself out there," Salcido said.

"My mom said the more places you put your resume, the better chance you have of finding a job. I figured I'd do the same thing with dating."

When SpeedDate went live a year ago, it hosted 1,000 dates its first night.

Now it is a setting for from 100,000 to 120,000 virtual dates daily, with most of those online encounters orchestrated by Web applications in profile pages of social networking Web sites MySpace and Facebook.

SpeedDate boasts users in nearly 200 countries. WooMe.com reports that 1,000 to 4,000 registered users are logged into the site at any given time.

Stokols says that while users of SpeedDate.com are trying to find romance, most WooMe.com users have learned that true love may be fleeting but real friends are forever.

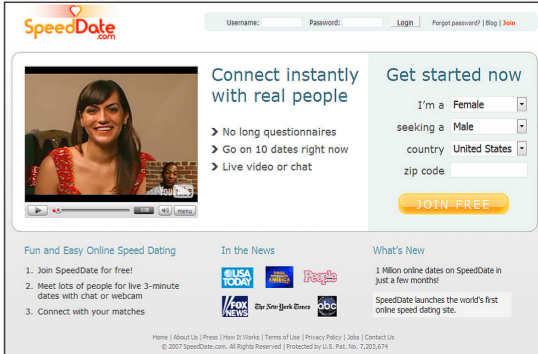
"Eight to 10 percent of our users have been to real dating sites," Stokols said. "We're more about meeting new friends, not necessarily meeting new dates."

In this spirit, WooMe sent two of its users on a US road trip to meet in the flesh 1,000 of the new friends they made on the Web site.

The duo's bar-filled adventures are being memorialized in text and video on the aptly named WooAroundAmerica.com.

"The dating stories are good to hear, and we've got plenty of them," Stokols explained.

"What interests me are the stories that are unique to our platform where we've come up with a new way for people to extend their social network."



This undated image taken from the Internet shows the home page of SpeedDate.com. PHOTO: AFP

## Coffee: friend or foe?

*With a myriad contradictory reports about coffee's affects on human health being published, it's difficult to know what to believe*

BY JANE E. BRODY  
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

When Howard Schultz in 1985 founded the company that would become the wildly successful Starbucks chain, no financial adviser had to tell him that coffee was America's leading beverage and caffeine its most widely used drug. The millions of customers who flock to Starbucks to order a double espresso, latte or coffee grande attest daily to his assessment of American passions.

Although the company might have overestimated consumer willingness to spend up to US\$4 for a cup of coffee — it recently announced that it would close hundreds of underperforming stores — scores of imitators that now sell coffee, tea and other products laced with caffeine reflect a society determined to run hard on as little sleep as possible.

But as with any product used to excess, consumers often wonder about the health consequences. And researchers readily oblige. Hardly a month goes by without a report that hails coffee, tea or caffeine as healthful or damns them as potential killers.

Can all these often contradictory reports be right? Yes. Coffee and tea, after all, are complex mixtures of chemicals, several of which may independently affect health.

### CAFFEINE MYTHS

Through the years, the public has been buffeted by much misguided information about caffeine and

its most common source, coffee. In March the Center for Science in the Public Interest published a comprehensive appraisal of scientific reports in its Nutrition Action Healthletter. Its findings and those of other research reports follow.

Hydration. It was long thought that caffeinated beverages were diuretics, but studies reviewed last year found that people who consumed drinks with up to 550 milligrams of caffeine produced no more urine than when drinking fluids free of caffeine. Above 575 milligrams, the drug was a diuretic.

So even a Starbucks grande, with 330 milligrams of caffeine, will not send you to a bathroom any sooner than if you drank 0.5 liters of pure water. Drinks containing usual doses of caffeine are hydrating and, like water, contribute to the body's daily water needs.

Heart disease. Heart patients, especially those with high blood pressure, are often told to avoid caffeine, a known stimulant. But an analysis of 10 studies of more than 400,000 people found no increase in heart disease among daily coffee drinkers, whether their coffee came with caffeine or not.

"Contrary to common belief," concluded cardiologists at the University of California, San Francisco, there is "little evidence that coffee and/or caffeine in typical dosages increases the risk" of heart attack, sudden death or

abnormal heart rhythms.

In fact, among 27,000 women followed for 15 years in the Iowa Women's Health Study, those who drank one to three cups a day reduced their risk of cardiovascular disease by 24 percent, although this benefit diminished as the quantity of coffee rose.

Hypertension. Caffeine induces a small, temporary rise in blood pressure. But in a study of 155,000 nurses, women who drank coffee with or without caffeine for a decade were no more likely to develop hypertension than noncoffee drinkers. However, a higher risk of hypertension was found from drinking colas. A Johns Hopkins study that followed more than 1,000 men for 33 years found that coffee drinking played little overall role in the development of hypertension.

Cancer. Panic swept this coffee-dependent nation in 1981 when a Harvard study tied the drink to a higher risk of pancreatic cancer. Coffee consumption temporarily plummeted, and the researchers later concluded that perhaps smoking, not coffee, was the culprit.

In an international review of 66 studies last year, scientists found coffee drinking had little if any effect on the risk of developing pancreatic or kidney cancer. In fact, another review suggested that compared with people who do not drink coffee, those who do have half the risk of developing liver cancer.

And a study of 59,000 women in Sweden found no connection between coffee, tea or caffeine consumption and breast cancer.

Bone loss. Though some observational studies have linked caffeinated beverages to bone loss and fractures, human physiological studies have found only a slight reduction in calcium absorption and no effect on calcium excretion, suggesting the observations may reflect a diminished intake of milk-based beverages among coffee and tea drinkers.

Robert Heaney of Creighton University says that caffeine's negative effect on calcium can be offset by as little as one or two tablespoons of milk. He advised that coffee and tea drinkers who consume the currently recommended amount of calcium need not worry about caffeine's effect on their bones.

Weight loss. Here's a bummer. Although caffeine speeds up metabolism, with 100 milligrams burning an extra 75 to 100 calories a day, no long-term benefit to weight control has been demonstrated. In fact, in a study of more than 58,000 health professionals followed for 12 years, both men and women who increased their caffeine consumption gained more weight than those who didn't.

### HEALTH BENEFITS

Probably the most important effects of caffeine are its ability to enhance mood and mental

and physical performance. At consumption levels up to 200 milligrams (the amount in about 0.5 liters of ordinary brewed coffee), consumers report an improved sense of well-being, happiness, energy, alertness and sociability, Roland Griffiths of the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine reported, although higher amounts sometimes cause anxiety and stomach upset.

Millions of sleep-deprived Americans depend on caffeine to help them make it through their day and drive safely. The drug improves alertness and reaction time. In the sleep-deprived, it improves memory and the ability to perform complex tasks.

For the active, caffeine enhances endurance in aerobic activities and performance in anaerobic ones, perhaps because it blunts the perception of pain and aids the ability to burn fat for fuel instead of its carbohydrates.

Recent disease-related findings can only add to coffee's popularity. A review of 13 studies found that people who drank caffeinated coffee, but not decaf, had a 30 percent lower risk of Parkinson's disease.

Another review found that compared with noncoffee drinkers, people who drank four to six cups of coffee a day, with or without caffeine, had a 28 percent lower risk of Type 2 diabetes.

This benefit probably comes from coffee's antioxidants and chlorogenic acid.

ILLUSTRATION: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE