



With new apps like Grindr and dozens of websites devoted to dating, why isn't it easier to find a match? BY DAN ALLEN

IN THIS POST-GRINDR WORLD, meeting new men is supposed to be virtually effortless. Dating — there's an app for that! But how much can that kind of hook-up turn out to mean?

Enter Grant Wheaton, who has spent 25 years bringing together men of similar tastes, interests, values and relationship-goals in a different way via his matchmaking service ManMate. Technology may have changed dating drastically in the last quarter century, but the premise behind ManMate has remained constant: Some men truly want to find long-term partners, and Wheaton truly wants to help those men find their perfect matches.

"When I first started ManMate in the summer of 1985, basically the only venues for gay men to meet for dating were bars, clubs and personal ads in newspapers and magazines," says Wheaton. "The phone lines hadn't even started up, and there was no dating through the web."

At the time, even the concept of long-term same-sex relationships seemed far-fetched to many. "There wasn't a lot of support or affirmation from society or the media for gay relationships then," Wheaton explains. "Gay partnerships and couples have become more and more visible publicly and through the media. Full-fledged relationships have become much more prioritized by a large percentage of gay men, and these are the guys that I tend to work with."

Wheaton conducts a comprehensive interview with each new client at his Rockefeller Center office. "We complete a thorough profile together," he says. "Where he is in his life, and especially the men he's most interested in meeting." From there, Wheaton dons his best Dolly Levi chapeau to figure who among his clients would make the best match. The pair is then set up on a date. It doesn't always work the first time, but it often doesn't take long.

Just ask Mark Strong and Craig Partin, a ManMate success story. When they were introduced in October 2007, Strong had only been a member for about a month. Partin was just his third date. "The other two men I met before Craig were good picks, but no love connection," he says. Partin, meanwhile, had attended a couple of Wheaton's "Dinner for 8" evenings (a ManMate service that brings together an octet of eligible men for fine dining), but Strong was his first one-on-one. Nearly three years later, the couple now share a Chelsea apartment "with our highly-clichéd blond French bulldog named Izzy," right across the street from the restaurant where they first met.

Strong and Partin are good examples of the type of men who make use of ManMate. Strong, 38, is an ad agency exec and gay life coach, while 41-year-old partner Partin is the general manager of a luxury Manhattan hotel. "The men I've worked with over the past 25 years tend to be professionals on a career path," says Wheaton. "They're typically successful, fit, attractive guys, and usually the other areas of their lives are in good shape."

So what makes these men turn to ManMate? "I was tired of dating online and wanted to try something different," says Strong. For Partin, using a dating service made smarter time management sense. "I felt like leaving the process of meeting and dating to a professional would certainly increase the opportunities for success," he says, "and also save me lots of time kissing a lot of frogs."

"A lot of gay men these days are frustrated and disenchanted with the results of quick, iffy online hook-ups or clubs and bars," says Wheaton, who's also the author of *The 7-Day Dating and Relationship Plan for Gay Men* (published by Alyson). "On your own, it's very difficult to sort through who is serious about something more substantial, who is just into a fantasy, who has no intention of following through with a meeting, or who's just looking for a sexual encounter — or even who has a boyfriend stashed at home."

As for Grindr, Wheaton doesn't view the app as any greater matchmaking competition than any other in the long line of dating fads — from personal ads to party lines — that came before it. "To be honest with you, I haven't spoken to a single guy who's used Grindr," he says. "It's simply another method where there is no middle man or screening process to facilitate honesty and follow-through." ■