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Darren Richards

Founder of DatingDirect.com

Lovelorn sceptics seeking proof that internet dating really can work need look no further than Darren Richards, the creator of Britain's largest dating service, DatingDirect.com. When Richards decided to try out the website he had created, he met the girl of his dreams on his second date. He says: 'We got on really well, so at the end of the evening I told her I needed to tell her something. She didn't believe who I was until I showed her my business card.' They were together more than five years before amicably going their separate ways.

Brought up in Worcestershire, Richards always dreamt of setting up his own business. He admits: 'I didn't really pay much attention to getting good grades and certificates at school because I was so confident that I would be working for myself I thought I wouldn't need to convince anyone else of my ability.' When he left school at 16, however, he ended up getting a job as a waiter in a hotel restaurant for several years before going to work as a holiday rep in Gran Canaria. He continued to dream about setting up his own business,



though, and was always coming up with potential money-making schemes, such as a loyalty card for high street shops.

He says: 'My mind was always elsewhere, even when I was waiting on tables in the restaurant. I tried so many different things that my friends would say: 'Oh here comes Darren, I wonder what new idea he has today.'

He was trying to make a living importing electronic toys from Japan when he hit on the idea of setting up a dating service while idly surfing the internet one evening at home. Aged 33 and single, having recently come out of a long-term relationship, he suddenly realised that the internet could be the perfect way of meeting other singletons in his area. But when he searched for an online agency to join he could only find companies based in America. Even worse, none of the sites seemed to take the idea of meeting a new partner online seriously, encouraging members to use silly nicknames such as Sexy Babe and Hot Pants.

He says: 'It was frustrating. I thought I couldn't be the only person who wanted to use the internet to find a serious date.'

Richards drew up a blueprint of what he thought a British online dating service should be like. Then he spent the next three months researching the market, conducting straw polls with people in the street and asking his friends for their views. Encouraged by their response he bought some software and a couple of website magazines. Then he built a simple site where people could post details of themselves.

He says: 'It was a very basic service and didn't work that well. But it was getting a lot of hits and it proved to me there were a lot of people out there who wanted to use it.' Inspired by the success of his prototype, Richards decided to create a fully fledged dating website through which members could contact each other directly.

The first few website developers he approached told him it could not be done but he eventually found someone able and willing to do the job. Richard gave the designer a 20 per cent stake in the company in return for creating a new interactive website and it was launched in 1999 at a cost of £2,500. Within three months it had 40,000 members.

But Richards still had a big problem. In order to start making money he needed to get people to pay for using his service and the only way they would do that was if they could pay online by credit card. Barclaycard, however, was not interested in letting him use its facilities. He says: 'It was a nightmare. I knew the company wouldn't survive unless we could take credit card payments. But we were turned down three times by Barclaycard because they felt that a dating service was a high-risk area in the same category as gambling and pornography.'

Refusing to take no for an answer, Richards drove to Northampton to see the man in charge of applications in

person and gave him a demonstration of the website. The man was so impressed that he agreed to grant credit card facilities on the spot. Barclaycard's decision changed everything. Richards gave up his job importing Japanese toys to concentrate on his internet dating business full time and started charging £15 a month for members wanting to contact potential partners through the site.

He soon discovered that a great number of people were prepared to stump up the money. By 2004, just five years after it was launched, DatingDirect.com had 1.5 million active members and a turnover of more than £10 million, generating a profit of several million pounds. DatingDirect had also chalked up dozens of marriages and babies from people who met via the website. It began supplying a dating service to other websites including Channel 4 and GMTV.

By January 2007 the business had 5 million active members and Richards sold it to French company Meetic for £30 million. Later the same year he started up another internet-based company, www.propertyindex.com, a portal

Fact File

Date of birth: 8 May 1966

Marital status: single

Highest level of education achieved: secondary school

Qualifications: five O levels

Interests: travel, sports cars, taking flying lessons

Personal philosophy: 'You only get one crack at a big opportunity so make sure you recognise it and grab it with both hands.'

for renting or selling overseas property. The website already has 150,000 properties registered on it and employs 30 people. Richards also spent some of the proceeds from the sale of DatingDirect.com buying three bars in Tenerife.

Now 42, Richards says he still cannot quite believe that in the space of just eight years he managed to create and sell a business worth millions of pounds: 'I was beginning to think it was never going to happen. But the moral of the story is, if you think you have a good idea then just keep going for it. You may lose some money and waste some time along the way but at the end of the day you have only got to find one idea that works.'