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A speedy way to eliminate prospective dates

By **KRISTI L. GUSTAFSON**, Staff writer
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She applied lipstick; I pulled my hair back in my standard ponytail. We were a little nervous, anxious even, but excited. This wasn't just any first date, this was 14 first dates. We were about to go to the Van Dyck, a brew pub and music venue in Schenectady, to speed date.

My co-worker and I were "guaranteed" to meet -- talk with, listen to -- more than a dozen professional men, ages 32 through 44 (still in my 20s, this was a little out of my range, but some men like younger women, right?), over the course of the two hours.

This rapid meet-and-greet dating is not new -- it's been around since the late 1990s -- but it was new to us. Cupid, the company hosting the event -- for \$35 per person -- says its speed dating venues have more than doubled in the past year.

"When you meet people out at a bar, or most anywhere else, there's always this awkward situation," says Sue Deyo, co-author of "Speed Dating: The Smarter, Faster Way to Lasting Love." "You don't know who's single, who's looking and who's not."

As we drove around (and around, and around) Schenectady's snow-clogged streets looking for a place to park, my friend compared all the one-way streets to her love life -- "even though you know where you want to go, you can't find a road to take you there."

Bad omen.

Half the eyes turned to look at us as we made our way into the room. At 5-foot-10, my friend is the the shorter of the two of us. We don't blend in. We had an easy view of balding heads.

OK, call us (me) shallow, but this was a date, technically, and looks may not be tops on everyone's list, they do matter so yes, we were checking everyone out -- even the female competition. Part of me wanted to write this as a bit of an undercover expose, but to be fair to all participants (and an ethical reporter), I made sure the organizer announced I was a journalist, here to report a story, not find a date. Regardless, my competitive side took hold, and I got a little into the game.

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Ding.

The bell rings and I begin my first date. He talks about his job, his divorce, asks me whether I've done this before. He makes a joke I'd heard him tell earlier in the evening when everyone was standing around. She hadn't laughed. Neither did I. I felt my mind drifting toward the reruns I was missing on TV.

"The first date or first encounter is all about taking a 'kiss test,' says Liz Kelly, author of "Smart Man Hunting." "You don't have to kiss them in the first five minutes, but you can figure out if you'd want to."

With the ding of the bell six minutes later, I'd had my first official kiss test. The results: a definite no.

Dateless for a round because there were more women than men, I eavesdropped on the conversations on either side of me. More of what I'd already heard.

Looking around at all the red -- on tables, on name tags, in the wine glasses many people drank from, rapidly -- it looked like Cupid's arrow had struck every corner of the room.

Ding.

The round robin continues. I feel like a company representative at a job fair.

Ding.

My next date talks about what he got his son for Christmas, whips out his wallet to show me pictures of the boy, then shares how great it is to be a father. I'm not interested in him, but he's interesting.

Ding.

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