

Matchmaking, business style

By Cathy Goodwin

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When you hire a plumber to fix your sink, you can get referrals from the family next door. After all, your sink probably works on the same principles as your neighbor's.

When you hire for outcome, you can ask about results: "Did he really help you increase sales?" If the answer is, "No, but he had a lot of interesting ideas," you keep looking.

But if you want to find a new career or assess your life's meaning, you are entering an open-ended relationship. Whoever offers a referral will play the role of matchmaker. If you've ever suffered through a dreary evening with your best friend's brother's roommate, you know where this is going.

You probably learned a long time ago to keep your blind dates short, inexpensive and public. You didn't trust referrals -- you sought first-hand evidence. Similarly, when evaluating coaches, take their classes, read their books and articles, and sign up for introductory and short-term sessions.

When a matchmaker is involved, beware!

First, anyone who sets you up on a date -- or recommends a resource -- can't predict how your chemistry will mesh. You can ask for life history data for dates ("Served time in jail?" "Holds a steady job?") and delivery systems for coaches ("Met deadlines?" "Showed up on time?" "No surprises on the bill?" But that's only the beginning

Second, when you join a dating service, you're meeting others who chose to pay a fee. When one resource sets you up with another, ask if you're getting a friendly fix-up or if money is changing hands. Referral fees are more common than you would expect.

Recently a resume writer offered to "trade" referrals with me. She wanted a hefty percentage of all fees paid to me in this lifetime. At that point, she's running a matchmaking service, not helping her own clients find the best resource.

You probably feel differently about a blind date recommended by your best friend and one arranged by a dating service. Think how you'd feel if you discovered your date had paid your friend a hefty fee for introductions -- and you hadn't! Get the numbers up front.

Third, if you're being set up on a date, you want to know if you're being steered to the matchmaker's eldest daughter or youngest son. There may be a little bias at work.

Amazingly, people refer clients to their friends, relatives and fellow dog-walkers. One consultant refers clients to a web designer -- his cousin -- but fails to disclose the relationship. Even when people are satisfied with the designer's services, they feel cheated when they learn about the relationship.

There's no reason to hide your buddies. I have a friend who's a superb graphic artist and I am happy to refer clients to her -- but I say, up front, she's a friend and I don't get a fee for referrals.

If you're like most of us, you suffer through some bad evenings and unfortunate business connections. By asking the right questions, you can avoid more in the future.

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