



July 13, 2006

By Mary Awosika

Online matchmaking isn't just for romance

It seems appropriate that someone who met her fiancé on the Internet would develop a Web service to suit her specific career needs.

Genevieve Thiers wasn't quite majoring in baby-sitting, but it was while attending Boston College and working part-time as a sitter that she got the idea for SitterCity.com, a site that links parents with baby sitters like an online dating service.

"We're like Match.com of child care," Thiers said.

She said investors didn't take her idea seriously because of the dot-com bust of the late 1990s, but she was certain her idea would work.

"In launching the company, everyone underestimated the value of baby sitters," Thiers said. "I went to investors, and they laughed me out of the room."

In 2000, she established SitterCity.com with 200 sitters in Boston. Today, the site is stocked with 150,000 active sitters ages 17 and up nationwide, including Southwest Florida, where there are more than 100 sitters profiled.

Thiers' site isn't the only successful Web database service that's emerged in the past five years. Thiers' competition includes GoNannies.com, eNannySource.com, OurSitter.com and BabySitters.com.

"It's like so many other things," said Steve Lampert, president and founder of eNannySource.com. "The Internet has just changed the way we do so much in our lives."

Including finding a baby sitter.

But the question among parents is, are these sitters and nannies trustworthy?

That's up to the parent to find out, Lampert said. These Web sites are essentially a digital catalog for parents to peruse, so it's up to them to narrow down the information.

"References matter," said Lampert, who based his site on his nanny agency business. "They're dealing with the raw, unfiltered world. That's the nature of the Internet."

However, if a sitter or nanny receives complaints or a bad reference, or is caught using bad language on the site, the webmasters on the site will yank the sitter or nanny profile and block the person from using the site in the future.

"We have to continue our focus on quality," Thiers said.

That quality assurance, from an authentic background check, comes with a fee that's included in the cost of a parent's registration or membership to the site.

Upon registration on eNannySource.com, there's a 30-day free trial period, but it only includes a search. To receive a "nanny success kit," background check and unlimited access to contacts, a parent will have to pay a fee of \$98 for 30 days or \$149 for 90 days.

On SitterCity.com, the parent pays a monthly fee of \$9.99 plus a one-time \$39.99 registration, or a monthly fee of \$7.99 billed annually with no registration fee.

Usually nannies or baby sitters seeking jobs, like Cody Lee of North Port, post their profiles at no cost. Lee is using several Web sites to promote her skills, including SitterCity, eNannySource and GoNannies.com. She found a summer job baby-sitting in Fort Myers through eNannySource.

"It's so much easier for me with school and making a schedule," she said. "I've gotten calls from parents through the sites based on my schedule."

Lee, 19, said most parents are looking for full-time professionals and have prerequisites.

"Some families have an application with their own questions," Lee said. "I've had to show my CPR card, and I know they look up driving records."

The biggest mistake a parent can make is not doing proper background checks on potential hires, said Monta Fleming, creator of the Texas-based GoNannies.

"You're bringing someone into your home, so you want to be diligent," Fleming said. "If (parents) don't have the time to do the interview and background checking, then a (Web search) is probably not the best route for them and they should use an agency."

But using an agency can be expensive compared to the minimal cost of a Web site registration. An agency can cost a family up to \$2,000 for its services, Lampert said.

"A nanny agency does an extensive amount of searching and research," Lampert said. "They even turn down a lot of people. It's an expensive process to go through. There's so much responsibility to get it right."

Barbara Figlow, a mother of three from Sarasota, was surprised at the going rate for a baby sitter starting at \$10 an hour, compared to when she baby-sat as a teenager. Some

contacts she made through SitterCity have asked for \$100 for one night. The Web site offers information she otherwise won't have access to.

"When you work full-time and live in an apartment complex, it's not like I'm getting out often to meet anyone," said Figlow, marketing director for Archaeological Consultants Inc.

"There's got to be other mothers like me, who don't know anybody."

Even though the Web sites have simplified the search for a qualified care provider, it's up to the parent to scrutinize the candidates, Fleming said.

Figlow's so fond of using services via the Internet that she's planning on doing her grocery shopping that way, too.

"It's a hassle to take three kids to the market," she said. "(The Internet) is there to benefit us and makes life easier."