



The phenomenon of speed dating has really taken off over the past few years, proving that the concept is more than just a fad. Having started in - where else? - America in 1999, it is fast becoming the most successful method of commercial dating in the UK, writes our reporter.

For the uninitiated, speed dating offers the opportunity to have up to 30 'mini-dates' in one evening. Daters assemble at the venue, usually a bar or restaurant, and each woman is assigned to her own table. The men move round from one woman to the next, spending three or four minutes chatting before a bell rings to signal the end of each 'date', and at the end of the event everyone fills in a 'scorecard' indicating which person(s) they would like to see again.

It might sound a tad shallow - trivialising or even commercialising the romance of dating by effectively turning it into a game - but the idea was dreamed up as an ideal solution for professional people with busy lifestyles and work commitments who simply don't have the time or opportunity to meet that 'special someone'.

It can be very difficult to make a connection in a busy bar or club, at work or within an existing circle of friends, but speed dating enables you to break the ice in a safe and controlled environment, in the knowledge that everyone there is single and seeking a relationship (although the evening also offers the

opportunity to make new platonic friendships).

Of the many speed dating companies that have sprung up since 1999, Xpress Dating Services is one of the major success stories.

Company director Jane Carter and her friend Dawn Hollyoake were inspired to set up the business in May 2004, after Dawn discovered how difficult it was to find the right kind of speed dating event to suit her requirements. The pair decided to use their backgrounds in event organising, psychology and customer services to found Xpress Dating Services, with the aim of bringing together professional people in discreet and upmarket venues.

Due to its highly efficient and friendly approach, Xpress ▶

Dating Services - now run by Jane and her husband Brent - enjoys an enviable reputation and an enormous client base, and can boast a number of matchmaking successes: "We have had several weddings already and there are two more this year, and 'our' first baby was a year old in December!" says an excited Jane, who genuinely wants her clients to find happiness.

Jane invited me to attend a speed dating event locally and write about the experience, so I asked a couple of fellow singles to come along for the ride. Of the three of us, I was the only one who had tried speed dating before - with a different company - and that experience had been far from successful due to poor organisation, vastly unequal numbers of male and female participants, and the presence of more than a few weirdos. Jane assured us that Xpress Dating Services always does its best to ensure there is an equal number of men and women at any event, give or take a couple of unexpected no-shows on the night, and we were happy to see that this had indeed been achieved. We were pleasantly surprised at the sheer number of people milling about when we arrived - this was a 'closed' event so everyone there was a potential match.

It was interesting to note that instead of taking their first sneaky peeks at the men on offer, most of the women were glancing at each other as if to check out the competition (or maybe make sure they had worn the right sort of outfit - smart casual seems to be the order of the day)!

Upon registering with the evening's 'hosts', we were each issued with a badge bearing our first name and a number, plus the all-important scorecards. These have two sections - one where you fill in the name and number of each date and tick 'yes' or 'no' to indicate if you want to see that person again, and another with space to make a few notes. The first part is handed in at the end of the night, while the second is kept for your own reference.

This particular evening was described as a 'double event', meaning that two age categories - 25 to 35 and 35 to 45 - were operating simultaneously in adjoining rooms. The tables had numbers matching those on our badges and, after everyone had got a drink from the bar, Jane asked all the women to take a seat at the relevant table and the event began.

It would be unfair of me to identify any of the participants by description or name, so I'll just say that there was a real mixture of people - all shapes and sizes, a full spectrum of ages within the boundaries of the category, and even a couple



of familiar faces (one of the risks when you're speed dating on your own doorstep).

Most people seemed friendly and chatty and there weren't many awkward pauses, perhaps because I can talk for England, but also because three minutes goes by in a flash - in fact, each date seemed to be shorter than the last! By the end of the evening you might well be losing your voice from all the chatting, although there is a break in the middle when you can get another drink and mingle at the bar.

Some people worry about what they will talk about, but once you've got the introductions out of the way, made a note of your date's name and number and commented on how the evening is going so far (most conversations tend to start like this), there's often only time to discuss one more subject, and people usually take the opportunity to find out what their date's interests are.

There are exceptions; some participants begin by asking the most unusual question they can think of, and others might go off at a tangent. Xpress Dating Services has compiled a list of suggested questions, but in my opinion you're unlikely to need them. If you're a sociable sort of person then you shouldn't have any trouble, and you'll enjoy chatting even if you're not physically attracted to your date.

The most awkward thing is trying to scrawl a discreet note about each date as he leaves your table and the next one arrives - but it's worth doing because by the end of the night you will have seen 20 or 30 people and even a couple of words (their hair colour, style of shirt or what you talked about) will help to remind you who was who.

My friends and I had approached the event with the attitude that we would have a fun evening and if we should meet someone special, so much the better. Most of the people I talked to were of the same opinion, and some were hoping to make friends as well as find partners - in fact, several participants had been speed dating with Xpress a number of times before, and seemed to know both the hosts and some of their fellow daters.

I should point out that not everyone brings friends along, although it's probably less daunting if you do. If you are there alone, the Xpress hosts will look after you and introduce you to other people so that you're not standing around on your own. ▶

For those daters at the high end of the younger category or the low end of the older one, there was an opportunity to form a small crossover group after the first part of the evening had finished - I joined this group along with my older friends and all of us found that the more mature daters seemed more relaxed and easy to talk to. The event is all about choice and so we were pleased to be given a few 'extra' dates!

At the end of the night, the scorecards are handed in to the Xpress team, who then check if any daters have ticked each other. These 'matches' are relayed to the participants via email or text, by noon the following day - you will only be given the name and mobile number of the person(s) you matched with, if any, and then it's up to you to get in contact and arrange another date. Xpress can also let you know how many ticks you received, but they won't give out personal details unless a match occurs.

The success of speed dating lies in the fact that it's a safe and fun way of meeting a large number of genuinely single people in just one night. Three minutes is long enough to tell if it's love at first sight; it's certainly long enough to know if you never want to see that person again - and for those dates somewhere in between, it's just enough to let you decide if it's worth taking things further.

Xpress Dating Services is so confident that you will meet someone you'd like to see again that if you don't tick anyone on your scorecard, you will be invited to attend another event absolutely free.

Jane says that the majority of speed daters repeat the experience, but if speed dating isn't really your cup of tea, Xpress also offers a variety of Stylish Singles Events such as black-tie balls, themed parties and summer barbecues - these are less structured and allow guests to mingle as they wish. The next event is a Black Tie Ball on May 27 at The Baraset Barn, Stratford upon Avon.

Both my companions enjoyed their first experience of speed dating, enough to want to try it again in the future, and I would say that most people are more confident on their second go as they know how the whole thing works and what to expect. I was very impressed with how well the event was run - especially in comparison with the last one I'd been to - and Xpress Dating Services clearly pays attention to every last detail to ensure clients are happy.

Even if you don't meet Mr or Ms Right at a speed dating event, chances are you'll have had a fun evening of socialising and chatting to a diverse range of new people - and you never know where it could lead...

Xpress Dating Services runs many speed dating and Stylish Singles events at upmarket venues in the Midlands - for a complete listing and full information about how the events work, visit www.xpressdating.co.uk or call 01527 877677. ■

Dating with a difference