

In NY, Money Can't Buy Love But Gets a Foot in Door

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NEW YORK (Reuters) - For \$50 an hour, Meredith sips cocktails with well-heeled men who dream of getting lucky. But Meredith is no escort and certainly no prostitute: She's a "wing woman."

Meredith, 28, works by day at a top investment bank in New York. But for the past few months she has also been moonlighting at a different trade -- accompanying men, too busy or too shy to meet women, to bars to make connections.

Meredith works for Wingwomen.com, a three-month-old service aimed at men who are tired of trying to figure out the best way to approach that attractive female across the room. For a fee starting at \$150, they offer the company of a girl whose charms might help attract others.

That may sound like a lot of money but in hectic, career-obsessed New York the company says there has been plenty of demand and many repeat customers.

"Normally, you might go out ten times before you meet one girl," said Brandon, a 28-year-old investment banker who has used the service several times. "With Wingwomen, I met four girls and went home with two phone numbers in a single night."

The wing woman title comes from the military aviation term "wing man" for a second pilot who flies behind first plane as a backup. The name became slang for men who prowled bars in pairs to pick up women.

Meredith said she works as a wing woman because she could not think of a better part-time gig to earn extra cash. Others who work for the service are actresses and students with odd schedules, some free time and not enough cash.

"You get to meet tons of people and feel like you're doing a nice thing for somebody," Meredith said.

BALL IN HIS COURT ...

Her job is to start up a conversation with any woman the client wants to get to know. Then the ball is more or less in his court. If things are moving along smoothly, wing women are experts at leaving the chattering pair alone.

At a recent after-work cocktail party at Bogart's, a bar in midtown Manhattan, Meredith was hard at work helping a client find that special someone. The client spotted a group of good-looking prospects and Meredith worked her magic.

"Hey, do you guys know if there's a private party in the back?" she said nonchalantly to the women. "Are you part of that group?"

With the conversation under way, Meredith went in for the kill. "I'm sorry, this is my friend..." she said, introducing her client. In an instant, the ice was broken.

Some might argue that paying to meet women is only a step away from prostitution, but wing women beg to differ. After all, single men know all too well how tricky it can be to meet women. Pick-up lines can sound trite, the bar scene can feel sleazy and being shy can be a disaster.

The company insists it is not some shady escort service and that patrons should not expect anything beyond an encouraging ally in their meanderings through the singles scene. It has not kept tabs on whether its introductions have led to any relationships.

Manhattan escort services by comparison charge about \$300 an hour for their services.

HONEST RELATIONSHIP?

But while the Wingwomen service is certainly more innocent, is it honest to begin a potential relationship with a lie, and one that costs money to boot?

"Most men don't think that way," said Meredith.

Brandon said he did eventually tell one of his dates about Wingwomen and, while she was a little taken aback at first, she eventually laughed it off.

There are two main kinds of customers, according to Meredith -- the introvert and the overachiever.

The work of a wing woman is made easier, of course, when the man is somewhat personable and can pick up the thread of conversation after the introduction.

But even if he is not a social butterfly, having the company of a friendly female could be just what the man needs to get him a leg up in the flirting game, she said.

"If a guy goes up to a girl in a bar, it's pretty clear he's coming on to her," she said. "But when I begin the conversation, it's a lot less intimidating for the woman and they are more open, which ends up boosting the guy's chances."

Founder and president Shane Forbes said he never really had trouble meeting girls but got the idea for Wingwomen after going out with a couple of female friends and seeing how much attention they garnered.

"As the night moved along, I ended up meeting four girls," said Forbes. "This got me thinking about all the guys out there that would enjoy and benefit from such a service."

Forbes says he has pondered expanding the service to help women who are having trouble finding Mr. Right. But for now, he's too busy with his existing service.

"I have given the idea some thought, but currently I have my hands full with providing the service for only men," said Forbes.