

Vox

Why 1.5 million people are on a dating site called Farmers Only

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Caption: Chicken being held

flickr Editorial/Getty Images

Dating sites like OKCupid and Match.com are great if you live in a city,

where you go on dates with matches and never seen them again if it doesn't work out. But what if you live in a town with, say, 8,000 people?

Rural towns often tout the perks of being a community where everybody knows everybody, but that can be a real drawback when it comes to expanding your dating horizons. And OkCupid, while solving the "new person" dilemma, often matches farm folk with city folks who just didn't get it. So Jerry Miller thought up a better way.

Miller created the dating site Farmers Only, which now boasts 1.5 million members — a number doubled in the last year — and 70-80 percent, he tells me, are in the agriculture industry now.

"We're in every state. It's amazing how spread out it is," he said. "I thought for sure we'd be real strong in the Midwest and what's known as the "Cornbelt," and I was amazed how many people we had from California, Texas, Florida and New York State.

Farmers Only (<http://www.farmersonly.com/>) is one of the more successful niche dating sites that have cropped up in the last few years, and are just hitting their stride. I talked to a couple of founders, who are fine with being the little guy in the world of Match.coms, OkCupids, and EHarmonys.

Efficiency, specificity, and deal-breakers

Miller explained to me that the reason he started Farmers Only in the first place was because of a female farmer he met. She had trouble meeting someone new, and created an online dating profile whereupon she was contacted by city guy after city guy. The hardest part of going into a Sears of dating, was that everyone was already there and those people stood in the way of finding someone you might connect with.

"It's just so much easier than to go through a million profiles to find someone like you," Miller said. "Imagine if you threw a party ... and they all had a similar outlook on life. Same lifestyle. It's so much easier to meet somebody," he added.

Farmers and people who work in agriculture have unique lifestyle — days are long and a lot of time is spent in rural communities — and finding someone that is accustomed to that rhythm is something that can't be

compromised. "There is a different living in a rural farmland communities ... They [people living in the city] don't understand the lifestyle of a farmer. It's Monday through Sunday," Miller told me.

"Lifestyle" is a word Miller repeated often. And perhaps that's perhaps one of the problems about bigger dating sites, and why the demand for niche dating sites continues to rise — bigger dating sites haven't found a way to properly weigh the importance of certain aspects and features of someone's life. For example, someone's superficial disgust for eggplant or the smell of sun screen may be given the same weight as someone's vegetarianism or a farmer's outlook on life.

"For many vegetarians and vegans, it's a lifestyle," Dave Rubin from VeggieDate (<http://www.veggiedate.org/>), a site that connects vegetarians and vegans said. He continued, stating that there are values like having a compassion for living beings and future plans, like raising children may be vegetarian, are really important to vegetarian and vegans. "I would want a partner in life who shares my values," he added.

Values can also mean being a big fan of someone else's credo or beliefs.

"Over the years I formed many friendships with others who found them equally inspiring. Some of these people I had met at summer conferences, for fans of her writings," Joshua Zader, the founder of The Atlasphere told me. (<http://www.theatlasphere.com/about>) The Atlasphere connects fans of Ayn Rand with each other.

"So many of us were attending these conferences with the hope of eventually meeting our soulmate, someone who loved Rand's novels as we did. Wouldn't it be great, we realized, if there was a dating service — so we didn't have to wait for annual conferences?" For Zader and many the 17,020 members of Atlasphere who have created dating profiles, an appreciation for Ayn Rand is one of those make-or-break lifestyle musts.

Is there such a thing as too specific a niche?

"If you define your niche too narrowly, I'm sure it could backfire," Zader told me. "We think we've found the perfect niche, though, because fans of Ayn Rand's novels have so much in common — often including artistic, ethical, political, and spiritual values," he continued.

A look around the niche dating site pool, and you find things like Trek Passions (<http://www.trekpassions.com/>), OkComrade (<https://www.facebook.com/OKComrade>), and GlutenFreeSingles (<http://www.glutenfreesingles.com/>)— enough sites to make you wonder if Zader is right. Setting up a website is getting easier and easier these days. And if the niche is popular and broad enough, you can really take off.

SCRUFF, a gay, location-based dating app (<https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/scruff-gay-app-for-chat-dating/id380015247?mt=8>) which was inspired by gay men with facial hair (and their admirers), has a user base of 6 million worldwide — quite a feat considering another app, Grindr, had a stranglehold on the market. (<http://www.queerty.com/study-grindr-has-more-than-6-million-members-20130327/>)

Part of that success was making itself distinct. "SCRUFF is somewhere in the goldilocks zone of gay dating, which is one reason why I feel we are successful," Johnny Skandros, the app's Co-founder, said. Skrandos explained that the app's balance between diversity and niche — it was first the first gay app to add a transgender search option and has options to search for all kinds of men — is one of the reasons its become popular. "With that said, we will always lean scruffier, and that makes us unique."

But getting big isn't necessarily something that all sites are looking for or need.

"We're not going to compromise our core just to try and get more people [on the site]," Miller said. "They say opposites attract. Opposites do attract and a lot of times it's fun. But you can waste a lot of time searching or dating somebody opposite."