

Brevity often a blessing in speed dating

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I am at Our Place, a small bar in a Boca Raton hotel, trying to decide whether or not I should order a soda or something stiff. I'm here for my first foray into speed dating, and it seems like alcohol might make conversation a little easier.

It's a Sunday night, though, and I don't want to seem like a boozehound, so I settle on a Diet Coke.

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There's a name tag stuck to my shirt. "Hello," it says, "my name is Fred 201."

I feel vaguely robotic — like I'm the new beta edition, "Fred 2.0" — but the nametags with accompanying digits are mandatory. The dating goes like this: eight "dates," each lasting eight minutes. You carry a score card, writing down each of your dates' names and their numerical codes. If you feel like you hit it off, you make a note to yourself on your score card.

Later, you log onto the company's Web site, www.8minutedating.com, and plug in your "scores." If you indicate you liked "Ellen 217" and she does the same, you've got a match. You receive Ellen's contact information, and

she gets yours.

Before the event, I'm elbow-to-elbow with "Marge 910" at the bar. We strike up a conversation. I find out she's an attorney from Boca Raton. It's her first time speed dating, too. "Just something to do," she says. "I can talk to anyone for eight minutes."

She asks if I see any hotties around the bar. I point out a brunette in a black top across the bar.

"She's a little old for you, isn't she?" Marge asks. And it's true — at 25, I'm probably the youngest one here.

"I bet she's more stable than most of the girls I've dated recently," I say.

A woman walks by telling us the hors d'oeuvres are ready. I excuse myself, grab several egg rolls and end up at a table with a group of guys. They're exchanging notes on different dating services, online dating sites (one guy belongs to three of them) and bars that are good for meeting women.

Being new in town — and a stranger to any type of dating service — I soak up everything. They talk about differences between girls from different area cities. Rule No. 1 seems to be this: Stay away from Boca girls.

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My first date goes by easily. I'm paired up with a Jamaican woman who does MRI scans. Conversation is run of the mill: Where do you live? What do you do in your spare time? What brought you to the States?

This, she says, is her first time speed dating, and that becomes something of a theme throughout the night. The guys I'd met earlier seem to do this all the time; most of the ladies claim to be newbies.

The event was organized by 8minuteDating, a Boston-based Web site. The company's brand of speed dating is just getting off the ground here, with local event coordinators working like mini-entrepreneurs. Hosts organize sessions near their homes and get a cut of the profits.

Cindy Knight of Stuart spearheaded the Boca event, and she's planning a second session at Carmody's in Stuart on Monday. Her goal, she says, is to host three to four speed dating events a week from Boca Raton to Jacksonville with costs for participants ranging from \$35 to \$50.

Speed dating, Knight says, is a good way to find out how a person thinks — and what they look like. (You can PhotoShop a picture, after all, but not your actual face.)

"You're talking to somebody for a few minutes," Knight says. "You don't have to be guessing, and you see the person — who they are — right then."

If you're not into "Amelia 444," for instance, you know you've only got a few minutes until you hear that sweet bell indicating that you're free to move on.

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Personally, I like to think that all of my "dates" found me charming, desirable, debonair and intriguing. In reality, I'm sure several of the women thought I was a yawner. Some of them certainly bored me. One kept prattling on about why she'd decided to try speed dating, as if she was trying to justify it to me. A second woman looked older than me, but acted about 10 years younger.

With most of the women, though, the bell seemed to come too early. I met up with Marge again on date No. 4. When I asked her if she'd found any hotties, she said it wasn't about looks. We both started laughing.

"That's very noble of you," I said.

I spent most of my time with her during the 20-minute intermission, at which point I finally spilled the beans, telling her I was actually already dating someone. I'd met a girl I really liked between the time I signed up for speed dating and the day of the actual event. I like to think Marge was crestfallen, but I'm doubtful of that.

At the end of the evening, Knight told us we were free to mingle at the bar for as long as we liked. When we got home, she said, we needed to log onto the Web site and make a note of whom we'd like to meet. We could indicate the terms of the meeting, too: a second date, friendship or for


business.

The next morning, I logged onto 8minuteDating.com, consulted my score card and clicked the "friendship" button twice, indicating two girls I thought I might enjoy hanging out with. One was, of course, Marge.

I felt a bit apprehensive when I clicked on the "View Matches" button. No worries, though. The site told me I had a match (and it didn't spare the exclamation marks). Apparently, Marge wanted to be friends with me, too. I now had her e-mail address and cellphone number. I typed up a message saying we should go skating sometime, and I sent it off.

I expected a quick reply, but it was a day before I heard back from her. She said she'd already been on one date, and she was attending another speed dating event in Delray Beach that night.

The two of us don't have definite plans, but we've agreed to let each other know whether something exciting is coming up in our respective towns. I'd like to hang out with her, but I'm being careful, even with my Friendship Heart. She is, after all, a Boca girl.

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