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Dating voucher: Perfect or unwanted present?

Some take offence but others find it timely with more drawn to such events. -ST

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The Straits Times

THIS Christmas, two single friends will receive a helpful nudge - a \$20 dating voucher - from Mr Choong Chyi Kei, a director at an event-management firm.

Mr Choong, 34, hopes the unusual gift will encourage the pair - easygoing professionals in their late 20s - to take time from their busy careers to socialise.

"I am not asking them to go matchmaking and find someone, but to develop new interests," said Mr Choong, who is married. If they meet a special someone, then it is a bonus, he added.

Dating norms came under discussion last week after the Social Development Network - linked to the Ministry of Social and Family Development - announced a move to sell gift vouchers that can be spent at dating agencies.

These "gifts of love" are the latest attempt by the Government to play Cupid, but the idea drew flak from some singles who called it offensive - as it suggested that they could not find dates.

But headhunter Fiona Goh, 31, said there is no harm in getting a little help from dating agencies.

She bought \$100 worth of dating vouchers for a female lawyer friend, aged 30. "She isn't single because she is not eligible, but because there is no time or opportunity to meet other people," said Ms Goh, who is married.

Some feel the vouchers are not as intrusive and embarrassing as earlier initiatives, such as highlighting the single status of women graduates, and getting singles to attend government-organised events like mass speed-dating and barbecues.

Dating practitioners said selling vouchers also reflects a mindset shift among young singles - where using matchmaking services is no longer viewed as desperate or needy - even though they may not admit it publicly.

Seven agencies The Straits Times spoke to said they have seen a spike in the number of young singles below 25 years old signing up in the past three years. Ms Violet Lim, owner of dating company Lunch Actually, said young singles under the age of 25 started coming to her three years ago, with a 10 per cent increase each year.

Activities organised by dating agencies are also evolving from the utilitarian - such as mass speed-dating - to programmes with a learning element - such as photography workshops - which attract the younger crowd, said Ms Michelle Goh, a partner at dating agency Complete Me.

Ms Deon Chan, managing director of dating agency Love Express Services, said young people "know what they want and go all out to achieve it". The agency has 15 per cent of its clients below 25.

This mindset led Miss Carol Yeo, a 23-year-old account manager, to pay \$1,500 for a one-on-one matching service at Lunch Actually in September. "I don't stand around and wait for something to happen," said Miss Yeo, who has so far been on six dates.

"I spend so much time at work and hang out with the same crowd when I'm free, so if you calculate the odds of meeting one new friend, it is just about one a year."

But the stigma of joining a dating event will never truly go away or become mainstream as people prefer informal ways to look for their significant other, said sociologist Paulin Straughan. "Usually, if using a product shows results, customers will sing its praises, but not in the dating industry. Those who used the 'product' would be far too embarrassed to admit it worked for them."

True to form, singles quoted in the story - and those who receive the gift vouchers - have declined to be photographed.

Is Mr Choong worried that his friends may be offended by his dating voucher gift? He said they are long-time friends and have a sense of humour. "If not, I would not give them these vouchers."

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