

I'LL PAY YOU TO BE MY FRIEND

Money can't buy happiness. Why people are sharing their lives with strangers.



ALL ALONE IN A NEW TOWN

Rachel grew up in New York and went to school in Chicago, but by the time she moved back there, her friends had scattered. After her nearest and dearest came to her wedding in August 2009, she realized what she was missing.

Rachel Bertsche didn't have friends in her new home of Chicago. So she logged on to rentafriend.com and paid a woman named Stephanie to join her for lunch and a trip to the museum. "It felt normal," Rachel tells *In Touch*. "Two 28-year-olds spending the afternoon together."

While exchanging money for companionship has been around since Biblical times, the services Rent a Friend provides are purely G-rated: a chance for lonely people to spend time with new pals for an hourly fee.

Though it may seem odd, Rachel doesn't see it that way. "I've always been the kind to have a lot of friends," she explains. But when the freelance writer moved from New York to Chicago to be closer to her boyfriend (now husband), she found herself missing all the friends she left behind. "I wanted someone for girl talk. To rehash an issue 10 times over while getting pedicures," shares Rachel, who says she did everything from taking improv classes to volunteering in order to meet new people to hang out with. At one point, she relates, she even left a note for an especially nice waitress.

But no luck. For the first time in her life, she found herself feeling lonely. "Rent a Friend was the most out-there thing I did," admits the writer, who's been chronicling her search on her blog mwfseekingbff.com. "But it wasn't a stunt. I really wanted to meet someone." And though Rachel doesn't have the cash to make Stephanie her best friend forever, she still found her girls'-day-out money well spent.

Business is booming

She isn't alone. Launched in 2009, rentafriend.com has been doing swift business, allowing pals-for-hire to post photos and list activities they'd enjoy doing. At the bottom of the friends'

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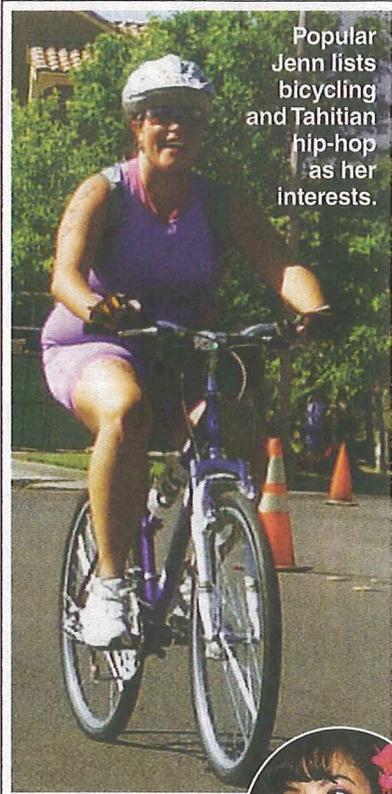
FROM LEFT, COURTESY RACHEL BERTSCHE; OLIVIA BARR; LAURA RAUGH/AP PHOTO; COURTESY JENNIFER MORRISON (2)

BE MY FRIEND

uy hap piness, but apparently it can buy friendship!
 eople are shelling out \$25-an-hour to "rent" a buddy

profiles, they name a fee, which can range from \$10 to \$150, but averages at about \$25 per hour of platonic companionship. In turn, friend-seekers pay \$25 a month for access to the profiles. For some, like traveling businessman Christopher Barton, it's worth it. "I'm in different cities all the time," he explains. Paying for Rent a Friend, he says, is like "getting a tour guide" when he's in unfamiliar locales. "It's a better experience than going around by yourself," he says.

Do rented friendships ever turn into real ones? It's rare. According to Rachel, Stephanie, a social worker who needed to supplement her income, was interested in only one thing: "It was weird. I was shoving 20s into her palm." So, much as she enjoyed the company, Rachel's going a more traditional — and less expensive — route for now. "Who knows where your best friend can come from? Totally random places," she says.

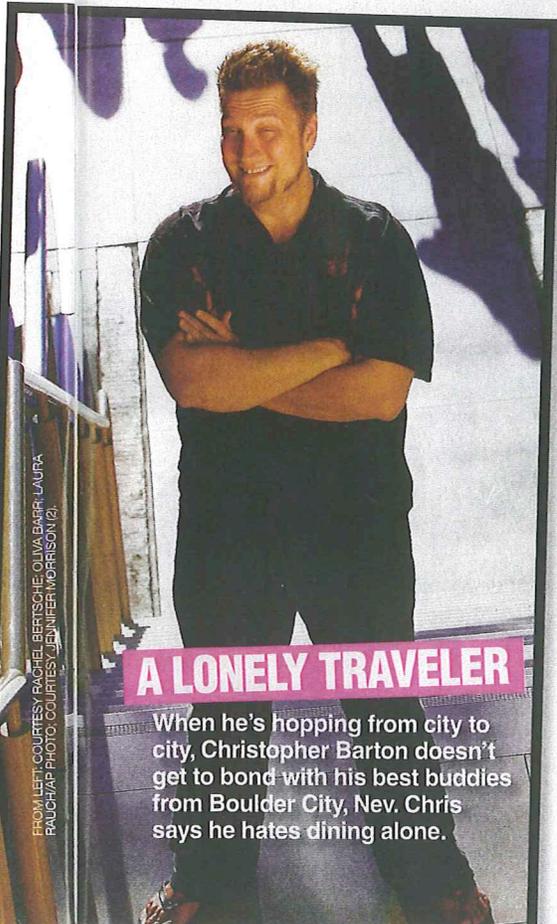


Popular Jenn lists bicycling and Tahitian hip-hop as her interests.



The most popular "friend" ever?

While hundreds of thousands of Rent a Friend profiles wait for customers, it seems like everyone wants to rent Jennifer Morrison. The mom from Las Vegas wasn't sure about the site at first, but with a little reassurance that it's purely platonic — and the blessing of her husband — Jenn has cashed in on several successful friend dates. "I had a really great experience with the site," Jenn tells *In Touch*. Although she'll get the occasional creepy invitation, Jenn has done well with screening out weirdos. And her most outstanding meetings were the simplest ones. "I met a grandma for a *Twilight* movie, and we talked about the books. It was fun!"



A LONELY TRAVELER

When he's hopping from city to city, Christopher Barton doesn't get to bond with his best buddies from Boulder City, Nev. Chris says he hates dining alone.

FROM LEFT: COURTESY RACHEL BERTSCHE; OLIVIA BARR; LAURA RAUCH/AP PHOTO; COURTESY JENNIFER MORRISON (2)

WHAT WILL THE CO-HOSTS SAY ABOUT THIS?



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