



Match at First Site



Male or female? Smoker or nonsmoker?

Those two questions have long been the basis for the University of Arizona's roommate-pairing formula. But a year ago the university decided to give incoming students seeking deeper compatibility another option: shopping for their roommates on the Web.

Arizona is one of a small but growing number of colleges that have contracted with [RoommateClick](#), a service that lets students take the lead on a task that has historically fallen to campus housing officials by browsing and communicating with future classmates who have also signed up for the service. Students who have hit it off online can then request to bunk with each other.

"Our goal was to increase the number of mutual roommate requests," said Steve Gilmore, the assistant director of residence life at Arizona.

In a presentation last year to the Association of College and University Housing Officials International (ACUHO-I), Jon K. Coleman, now assistant director of resident life at Georgia Southern University, cited a limited 2004 study showing that students that requested roommates through a Web service were more satisfied than those who got paired up randomly.

"Students are actively seeking to control the process," Coleman said in his presentation. "They seek not only to be involved, but to counter the feeling of being at the 'mercy' of others."

Putting roommate-selection in the hands of students spares residence-life officials distressed phone calls before and after move-in day, Gilmore said. "When we release roommate information in July, historically that's when our phones start ringing off the hook," he said. "They go on Facebook, and suddenly they have real problems with who their roommate is."

The Web service also makes students less apt to blame the university for roommate friction. "It's putting them more in the position of resolving their own differences or their own conflicts," Gilmore said. "If we're making the assignment, we're the ones they're going to look to to fix it, because in their minds we're the ones who broke it."

RoommateClick, launched in 2006, this year began marketing its services directly to colleges and universities, and its modest higher-education clientele doubled. "Certainly we've only scratched the surface," said Bob Yingling, CEO of Lifetopia, RoommateClick's parent company.

RoommateClick looks to face competition in the higher-education market next year from RoomBug, a Facebook application operated by U-Match LLC. Similar to an online dating site, RoomBug allows a Facebook user to specify lifestyle preferences -- bedtime, neatness, academic vs. social focus, etc. -- and those he or she is looking for in a roommate. The application provides a list of compatible matches, with whom the user can then network via Facebook.

(more)

RoomBug plans to release a university-based product this winter, according to founder Robert Castellucci. Like RoommateClick, colleges and universities would pay RoomBug to provide the matching service to their incoming students.

Other institutions have developed homegrown platforms where students can search for compatible roommates, said Emily Glenn, corporate librarian for ACUHO-I.

Critics have warned that self-selection could promote insularity by encouraging incoming students to choose roommates that are just like them, contrary to the philosophy that college is a time and place for exploration -- a philosophy that has led some colleges, generally smaller institutions, to do personalized matching.

But RoommateClick executives argue that students will seek out or avoid the unknown based on their own personality, not their first-year roommate. "Getting a roommate that's different than you, that you spend a couple hours a day with, that's not going to automatically force you to open up your eyes to the world around you," said Yingling. "It's really the people you socialize with."

"The kids are going to segregate themselves by likes and dislikes anyway, eventually," added Lifetopia sales director Bill Schneider.

There is also the question of how many students are actually using the service to find potential roommates. At Arizona this year, only 14 percent of students who applied for first-year housing created RoommateClick profiles. The low rate of participation might be explained by the fact that Arizona opted to make students pay \$20 each to use the service, rather than subsidizing it. At Missouri State University's main campus, housing officials required incoming students to use the RoommateClick gateway to applying for housing whether they used the matching service or not -- then strongly encouraged them to use it. More than half of incoming first-year students signed up.

But not all students who used RoommateClick ended up requesting a roommate they met there. Only about a quarter of the Arizona students who used the service wound up submitting mutual roommate requests, rather than opting to be matched based on the the factors of gender and smoking status.

Gilmore, the assistant dean of residence, said that based on the high level of activity and the low rate of mutual roommate requests, he believes that users were using it more to network with future classmates than to secure a compatible roommate.

As for the danger of promoting insularity, Gilmore said Arizona's residence life office debated the point but ultimately decided that promoting diversity at a roommate level was less important than maintaining it at a campus level.

"The roommate relationship seems to be this huge thing, and it may not be such a bad idea for some students to be able to room with someone who's a little bit more like them," he said. "We weren't as concerned about diversity within a room as diversity in our facilities on the whole."