MATCHES MADE ON EARTH

Through her agency Elite Introductions, Trudy Gilbert endeavours to find love—for others. Although there's no guarantee of a fairytale ending, this matchmaker knows how to work the laws of attraction

STORY ADELINE TEOH

PROFILE

NAME: Trudy Gilbert

BUSINESS: Elite Introductions, for executive matchmaking

CAREER TURNING POINT: Realising she could turn an interest into an occupation

MATCHMAKING IS A blessed occupation in Jewish culture; an old myth decrees that all honest matchmakers go to heaven. Although Trudy Gilbert, founder and director of Elite Introductions, does have a Jewish background, this wasn't the incentive for starting her agency. Instead, it was the simple fact that she was a 'people person'.

"I have always felt invigorated being around other people," says Gilbert. "I'm an only child and I feel that I grew up quite quickly because I was always in adult company, which contributed to developing a high level of emotional intelligence. I still embrace my childish innocence, but I think I'm a very mature 34-year-old."

Recognising her entrepreneurial nature early on, Gilbert says she knew she was destined for business ownership. She dreamt up several business ideas before settling on matchmaking, which she knew would suit both her interests and interpersonal strengths, but it was the thought of capturing a specific niche that clinched it.

"I read an article in a glossy magazine about a woman in New York who does matchmaking for New York high society. It's very exclusive and upmarket and I could understand why it would work because it was like meeting like," explains Gilbert. "I chose [the name] Elite because I identified a need in the marketplace for a high end introduction agency that was discerning and honest and had a lot of integrity, one which really cared for its clients.

"Niche dating is popular overseas; it's very accepted in the UK and the US to go to an introduction agency and to go to one that specialises in the professional area. Another term for it is executive personal recruitment."

Gilbert was the first to open an introduction agency of this nature in Australia, building the business from a home office until she was able to operate from an office in the Sydney CBD, more central to her clientele. The first major hurdle was the subsequent number of agencies that started to tout similar services. What sets her apart, she states, is the quality of clientele, which she has been mindful of, to protect and strengthen the Elite brand.

"We stick to our target audience, who are affluent executives and successful business owners. We will only take people on who fit that category. Other agencies will take anyone on and match CEOs down to truck drivers. That's fine, and that's great if it works, but that's not us—we match like and like," she says. "Since we opened in 2005, there have been other copycat agencies but none have been a serious competitor. We have emerged as the leader in our field."

Not that it was all smooth sailing. Like many business owners, Gilbert found the first 12 months hard. She recalls the early days when she would sit by the phone, frustrated when it didn't ring. Fortunately her husband, friends and family supported her. "No one said I couldn't do it. Everyone I mentioned it to, friends, family, thought it was a great idea. Some days I'd ring my husband and say 'it's not working, I haven't had any calls today' and he'd say 'just go for the ride, it'll get better,' and it did."

PRICE OF LOVE

While matchmaking doesn't require formal qualifications, Gilbert has degrees in social science and policy as well as psychology, which gave her credibility when she was unknown. To build a client database at the beginning, she also positioned herself as a relationships spokesperson. Not only did the media coverage attract new clients, it meant she could represent the brand in a way that would entice the right kind of clients. This set her apart by making her knowledge and experience the unique selling proposition in her business offering. Gilbert is now considered a dating and relationships expert who appears on TV, radio and in print.

Another key part of her business is honesty. Interested applicants register on the website (www.eliteintroductions.com.au), then Gilbert arranges an obligation-free interview to find out more about them and what they are looking for in a partner. After the interview, if she can't identify anyone who would be suitable, she tells them not to join.

"If I don't have someone to introduce them to, and if I don't feel I can give them value for money, I will say to them 'now is not the right time for you to join but I'd like to keep your details on file and call you when I do have suitable candidates for you to meet'," Gilbert explains. "It's an honesty thing, and it's about reputation. I will think about my members' best interests before taking them on as clients."

Apart from refusing business, Gilbert also has an unusual business model in that success for her means no repeat business. Instead, she aims for a high referral rate. "We have such a high success rate that our members quite simply don't need to rejoin. We're always meeting new people and always closing accounts, which is good because that's how we get the word out and maintain our reputation," she says. "If everyone rejoined, we'd only have the same members and we wouldn't have any new people to introduce to one another."

As for putting a price on love, Gilbert says it was hard in the beginning, but as her database grew and she realised the work involved, she could see the value she added to a client's personal life. Membership now starts at $1,495 for three introductions. Clients certainly get their money's worth, with Gilbert unable to turn off her matchmaking radar, even out of business hours. Even when out and about she often finds people for her clients and invites them in for an interview.

"I have a memory bank of all of my 500-plus clients and if I meet people through events or in the social pages, I'll ring them and say 'I have someone who would like to meet you, are you interested?' I'm always on, I never shut down," she says.

To share the load, Gilbert now has five staff, including another consultant like herself who interviews and matches clients. Even though Gilbert has invested her personality heavily in the business, she doesn't think that will detract from future success. As a good judge of character she knows that her staff have what it takes to maintain business operations while she changes hats and works on the business rather than in it.

Despite turning away 30 percent of applicants, Elite has tripled profit growth year on year, which has prepared the agency for expansion. The first interstate branch opened in Melbourne last month with other capital cities, and perhaps New Zealand, to follow eventually.

Profits keep the agency running, but they're not a priority, Gilbert says. Priority goes to bringing people together. "When you think about it, you're doing a beautiful thing and that's how I run my agency. I don't want to sound like an airy fairy person, but if you do the right thing it'll come back to you, it's karma." **DB**

TRUDY'S TIPS FOR SUCCESS

- Find something that complements your natural abilities, your interests and training.
- Realise that you have to work a lot harder than an employee. You need to have a different mindset, as you'll be working twice as hard—at least in the initial stages of the business.
- Get a mentor or someone who can give you support, like a partner or a family member to boost you when you feel things are slow and guide you through those down moments.
- Exercise. You need to de-stress.
- Read lots of business books. I like marketing books by Jay Conrad Levinson. *The E-Myth* by Michael E. Gerber is a must-read for business owners who need to be able to work on the business and not just in it.