

ERIKA ETTIN INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT



Damona: Her services include writing unique profiles to help you get noticed, helping you choose your best profile pictures and writing one-of-a-kind emails to get someone's attention. She also plans dates, which is really exciting because I know for a lot of people it's very stressful.

Joining us now, the wonderful, extraordinary, knowledgeable Erika Ettin of ALittleNudge.com.

Damona: I read your articles on JDate, JMag, and I think you have a lot of great insights to share. I know like me, you also started out as an online dater and had your own experiences with this. You became what, a JDate success story, right?

Erika: I used JDate, yep.

Damona: So how did it work for you?

Erika: Online dating takes work and that was something I realized as I was doing it myself. Kind of outside the norm, I used to be an economist, that's my background, so for me, I always equate numbers with everything. The last time I did online dating, I said to myself, "I'm going to keep a spreadsheet and figure out my response rates and fix my profile and my email so that I can increase my response rate." Very nerdy, but it worked. Once I got my response rates really high, my friends started coming to me, "What are you doing? What are you doing?" I started writing all their profiles and from there it just kind of, it became clear, this is what I need to be doing.

Damona: A woman after my own heart. I always say it's kind of a non-romantic view of dating, but it's more effective when you kind of take that approach the same way you were in your professional life.

What are some of the most common online dating mistakes that you see people making?

Erika: The first thing people are going to see, they're going to see your pictures. That's the first threshold that you have to pass. As we all know, online dating and I guess people in general are fairly superficial, I don't think I'm saying anything surprising, so you have to make sure that your picture depicts your best self. You are marketing yourself and it's really important, you're not marketing a product, you're not marketing a service, you're marketing yourself, and if you're going to market something well, you should market yourself well.

The first thing is, people have pretty bad photos online. When I say bad, it ranges from blurry pictures where you just can't see somebody's face clearly, to cell phone pictures in the mirror, shirtless pictures.

Damona: Aren't those so creepy?

Erika: They're creepy. They're very, very creepy.

Damona: How does someone put them up and say, "Yeah, I look good in that."

Erika: I don't know. One person is saying they look good and that person is themselves.

Having too many pictures; less is more when it comes to online dating profile pictures. I recommend three to five, because I do believe Match allows for 26 pictures—26 pictures is a Facebook album, that's not an online dating profile. People are putting pictures of their trip to Paris and their dog and their landscape.

Damona: What they ate for dinner last night.

Erika: Exactly!

Damona: I've seen those, too, and I'm like, I don't know what that's saying about your dating life.

Erika: Right. You're trying to get a date, you're not trying to showcase your lifestyle for somebody. People want to see the person they're going to meet at the bar or at the coffee shop. They don't want to see your backyard and they don't want to see the Eiffel Tower. That's a main problem, putting up too many pictures.

Damona: I totally agree, three to five is what I recommend in my book, too.

Erika: Oh, perfect.

Damona: Yes, I say it's like curating your life story, you don't go to a museum and they don't put every single Picasso up, they only put the certain ones that are telling the story and leading you through the experience.

Erika: It's so true. That's true for both the pictures and the profile. I always say to people, if you could tell your life story in 4,000 characters or less, we have a problem. I'm hoping everyone's life is more interesting than that. The point is not to tell your whole life story, it's to just give the best parts.

Damona: I'm with you on that.

Let's talk screen names because this seems to create a ton of anxiety among my clients, so I'm sure your clients it's the same thing. In *Spin Your Web* I advise daters to choose something that actually means something to them without it being too corny and without giving too much away. What are your thoughts? What do you recommend when someone is staring at that blank screen saying, "How do I define myself in one word?"

Erika: I say the screen name is a chance to give someone one extra little tidbit about you before they click on your profile. If I, for example, came up with the screen name, "Erika123," that's pretty boring. That doesn't actually share anything else about me except my name, which I wouldn't want to share.

Rather, what are your interests? Let's say your interests are, okay, my favorite is eating out, okay, so food, and let's say you play tennis—tennis foodie. That would be a really good user name because anyone who plays tennis or anyone is a foodie could see that user name and be interested, knowing that you have common interests.

I am on the cheesy side, so we may disagree there, but I think plays on words are good. One of the funniest ones I've heard was, it was something like "flashing my wits," which I thought was very cute. Plays on words or just really something to give someone just one little fact about you.

Damona: As long as they're not too hard to read. Sometimes people will use that web-speak and shorten words and then you're like, "I can't even read what this says."

Erika: I agree. Actually, web-speak is a real turn off for a lot of people, myself included. You are—like the letter U, the letter R—I would try to avoid those. Match lets you have 15 characters in your username; some of the other sites also limit your characters. Just count up, put what you can without having to shorten too much.

Damona: Great thoughts there. Let's say you made it to the first date. You've gotten your profile together—and yes, we're skipping a lot of steps ahead—but you make it to the first date. What are the rules that you tell clients when meeting someone for the first time, so that they can get to a second date?

Erika: The first thing is when you're meeting someone for the first time from an online dating site, only do drinks or coffee, I would never recommend dinner. The reason for that is you're really protecting yourself, you don't know this person, you don't want to necessarily get stuck in a situation where—sometimes you know in the first five minutes, sometimes you don't, if you want to be there with someone. But you don't want to get stuck ordering and having to talk and wait for the check and everything like that. My favorite piece of advice is, you can always add dinner, but you can't take it back. You go out for a drink, you're having a nice time, why not? Get dinner after, but you can't take it back if you start there.

After that, I would say just common sense. Be on time, if you are running late, you should've exchanged numbers with the person, it's always important to exchange numbers, just to make sure, if someone gets lost, someone needs to cancel, anything like that. If you are running late, have common courtesy and even better than a text would be a phone call to apologize, "Sorry I'm running late." Like you said before, technology is running rampant, which is fine, I think texting is nice for certain situations, but in other situations, if you have to cancel, anything like that, a phone call is the only appropriate way to do it.

Damona: Okay, I have a lot to say about this now. You have hit on a hot button issue when you said texting. Producer Natasha's ears perked up. I won't speak for you, but you have some thoughts about texting and dating.

Natasha: Yeah, I always say no if someone asks me out via text, I say no.

Damona: Can you ask someone out via text? I'm with you, I think there are some rules in terms of how you can use it, but there was not really texting when my husband and I met. What do you think? Can you text someone for a first date?

Erika: You can, but it doesn't really show any courage. I think especially younger people, say under 30, that's the norm these days. This is terrible, but a male client of mine, a 28-year-old guy, said he got a girl's number and he called her to ask her out and she said, "Why are you calling me?" Which is crazy; I fear that the younger generations, that's going to become the norm.

Damona: Why are you talking to me on this date?

Erika: That's ridiculous.

Damona: Send me a text, please.

Erika: I'm not telling someone not to ask someone out over text, but is it the preference? Absolutely not. It just lessens everything because it doesn't take any courage to text someone and I understand why people do it, I mean, rejection is certainly easier, you have time to think about your questions and responses. But it doesn't necessarily start you off on the best foot.

Damona: No, absolutely not. If you need advice, Erika Ettin is a great resource for online dating.

Erika, I have to get your opinion on, I feel like there might be a bit of a flake revolution happening. A lot of my clients—and again, this didn't happen to me very much when I was online dating [mumble-mumble] years ago, but I've been hearing from a lot of my clients that they're getting flaked on, having dates flake out on them, just not show up or cancel on them minutes before. Is this something you're seeing out there on the East Coast, too? Or is this like a East Coast/West Coast beef?

Erika: It is not an East Coast/West Coast phenomenon. My clients are also complaining about this.

Damona: What's going on?

Erika: I do think technology is to blame partly because it's so easy to send a quick text, "I'm canceling." It's extremely rude. It's funny because my male clients all say, "Oh, these women are such flakes," and then my female clients all say, "These men are such flakes," and I tell all of them, I'm like, "You're all saying that, just stop flaking out."

The point is, I mean, sometimes cancellations have to happen but like I was saying before, own up, call the person, and if you are really interested in that person, as a woman, if a man cancels at the last minute, he should be rescheduling, he should say, "I'm so sorry, but can you reschedule for X-date?" If he doesn't, I would move on because he clearly doesn't value your time as much as it should be valued. I'd say that's true of the other way around, too.

Yes, I have found that more people are flaky lately, but I don't just find that with online dating, I even find it in my own life with people answering emails, people don't answer emails sometimes, people don't return phone calls, and I honestly just think it's a generational thing, it's a terrible generational thing.

Damona: Chivalry is dead and communication is dead, too.

Erika: Yeah. I don't think it's limited to online dating.

Damona: I'm with you, I'm with you on that.

Do you feel like the rules, the dating rules have changed? We were talking earlier about chivalry? Do you think that people need to manage their expectations differently in this cyber world?

Erika: I say yes and no. It's funny, I was listening to the earlier part of your conversation and there was one thing I disagree about, it was the article about the end of courtship. I do think that things are different in this day and age, just like you said, we're communicating differently in all ways, so why wouldn't dating be different? But on the other hand, I think you get what you allow. As a woman, if you allow someone to keep texting you and asking you out over text and not telling them that your preference is a phone call, then you're just perpetuating that and the guy thinks it's okay.

I do think you're able to—in your own relationship—manage the way you communicate, but because not enough people are saying, "I need that phone call," they're just texting back, it's this cycle that people think it's okay.

Damona: But I also feel like—I agree with you, you get what you deserve—not what you think you deserve, but you know, you get what you think you deserve, that's really what I was trying to say.

I feel like also, sometimes people are so focused, they're kind of hungry for a relationship that they ignore the signs and they try to make this person, especially with online dating, because you've created this image of somebody that may or may not exist because you've just met them online. Then when you move to the date, you want them to be something so badly you almost ignore all the other signs that tell you no, just so you can get to a yes. Do you see that, too?

Erika: I do. You're absolutely right. With online dating, you're learning about the in-person version of this person. You meet Match.com Guy123 online and he's witty and he went to a great school and he's a doctor and he's all the things you think you want.

Damona: He's a doctor?

Erika: He's a doctor! [But then once you meet each other, you know all these amazing things about him, but I agree that you can rationalize yourself into and out of pretty much any situation or person you want. So you see all those things on paper and you want to fit everything else into the mold. I think that's part of the reason that it's so important to meet people sooner rather than later. Don't have email chains for weeks. You and I may disagree on whether to have a phone call or not before the date—I say no.

Damona: Yes. Ah! Why?

Erika: To me, there are so many obstacles to the first date, right? You got to like each other's profiles, you have to email each other, you have to set up the date, you have to find a date that's mutually free for both of you—why throw another obstacle in there of the phone call? Some people are great on the phone and some people are terrible. I like to think I'm one of the good ones, but what if I wasn't? What if I just wasn't good on the phone?

Damona: But what if you don't like the sound of their voice and you could not sit across from them for another hour to hear it?

Erika: I mean, I see what you're saying, but what if they're a wonderful person?

Damona: A wonderful person with an awful voice.

Erika: You just can never gauge chemistry until you're sitting across from that person. I don't want to throw the added time and effort into talking on the phone.

It could go either way, obviously. You could have a great phone call and then meet in person and have no chemistry or you could have no chemistry on the phone and meet in person and it could be wonderful. So I'd rather not know.

Damona: I do like a phone call but I think it should be very short because you don't want to like wear out your welcome and have that phone call really be the substitute for your first date but just getting the communication offline, I think is kind of—for me, it's a necessary step. I will say when my husband first emailed

me online, I wrote him back right away, I was like, “When can we meet?” Then I was like—“Oh wait, I have to make sure you’re not a psycho, can you call me?”

Erika: That’s why you meet in a public place.

Damona: Yeah, but I don’t want to waste my time on a psycho. It turns out he wasn’t psycho, I checked him out, he was okay, but not a great phone conversationalist, and he still isn’t. A lot of guys, being on the phone is not really their deal.

Erika: Exactly. So what if you had talked to your husband on the phone first and you said, “He can’t have a conversation.”

Damona: I did. I did, I just kept it 10 minutes though and I was like, “Yeah, good enough, I’ll see you on Monday.”

Erika: Okay. Because I think a lot of people are saying, “He can’t have a conversation, I don’t want to meet him.” I would say, “Try to look past that.”

Damona: I hear what you’re saying. We agree on most things.

Erika: We can agree to disagree, that’s all right.

Damona: We have to take a little break, but when we come back, I’m curious about your answer to a question that I’m always asked by my clients: When it comes to the first date, who should pay?

Erika: The man.

Damona: Done. Done and done. Okay, we’ll move on.

Erika: I can qualify that. I am all about equality, I think women should be emailing the men on online dating sites.

Damona: Yes.

Erika: If the woman wants to, she can ask the guy out. However, I don't think chivalry is dead and for that reason alone, the man should pay on the first date. Should it be assumed? No. The woman should offer, an offer is always nice, the man will appreciate that.

Damona: But it's a fake, phony offer.

Erika: Yeah, totally a fake, phony offer and he better say no.

Damona: I've been hearing there's like also a revolution of going Dutch now, so all my clients are like, "I'll offer to pay," or he'll be like, "Where's your credit card so we can split it," or he'll go and get his coffee first so he's sitting there like, "Oh, do you want to get yourself anything?" Is this happening for your clients, too?

Erika: It is, and it's a huge turn off for the women. I get emails, actually someone did that the other day to one of his clients, he bought his coffee first, she said it was completely awkward when she walked in and, "So I guess I'll get something," and he didn't make a motion, so she just bought her coffee. It's a turn off.

Damona: Then she walked out the door, right?

Erika: No.

Damona: That would've been so good.

Erika: It's only going to be coffee or a glass of wine or a drink or something like that, it's not going to be \$100 meal or anything on the first date. Just to show a sense of chivalry, it is important that the guy pays on the first date. The woman should be appreciative, she should never assume it, she should still obviously say thank you and the offer is always nice. Even if you don't like each other, I know a lot of people say, "Well, if we didn't like each other, then we can split it because we're not going out again." It's still a date. It's still a date.

Damona: You might run into them again in the grocery store and then it's awkward.

Erika: Well, you probably will run into them and maybe that date is perfect for one of your friends. You want to leave on a really positive note and splitting the check is not a positive note.

Damona: Yeah, I also hear from guys a lot of times they're a little hesitant about online dating just because of the volume of dates that you're going on. They're like, "Well, I don't want to do online dating because women just want a free meal and I'm going to go broke." That's one of the reasons that I think—it's not one of the reasons, but if you're only doing drinks—which is what I recommend in my book as well—then it's a \$3 coffee. Are you going to go broke on \$3 coffees?

Erika: Exactly, because you're not going to be asking the people out for dinner that you don't want to take to dinner.

Damona: I once had a date—this is totally like off-topic—I met him at speed dating, this is right before I met my husband and this guy took me out to dinner at some kind of like B-rank place at the Santa Monica Promenade. It was fine, it was fine with the dinner and then we were walking around the Promenade and he stopped in front of like the A-list steakhouse and he's like, "Well, when I get to know you better, then I'll take you there." I was like, "You are such an asshole, you are never going to take me there." I could not believe he would say that. Guys, guys. But they make too much of a deal out of the whole who's-paying thing sometimes, I think.

Erika: I agree. I agree. I would say, and I'm afraid I'll get backlash for this, but I would say even the second date, it's not going to be a steak place, don't invite someone to a steak place on the second date, it's too soon for that anyway. I do believe that the guy should pay on the first two, again, with the woman offering. I also think it's fairly uncomfortable to put two credit cards in, it just makes things a bit awkward. It's always easier, as the woman, if you want to say, "Oh, I'll get it next time," or "Why don't I get the tip?" or "Why don't I buy us ice cream or drinks after?" That way it's not awkward and you're actually sealing in either a second part of the date or another date.

Damona: I love this, we are kindred spirits here.

Erika: I think we are, I really think we are.

Damona: I know, I totally agree with everything you're saying. A lot of times I get asked about what do you do for the first or second date. You actually plan dates for your clients, which I have a hard enough time keeping my schedule straight, so I don't do that, but I think it sounds fun.

How does that work? What kinds of things can people do beyond just dinner and a movie or coffee or drinks?

Erika: I only plan the first date, so I'm basically planning coffee or drinks, but for a second date, you're still getting to know each other, so you want to do something where you can still talk to each other. I do think activities are nice, whether it's, I don't know, miniature golf or a bar that has darts or pool or something like that where you're at least engaged in an activity, like you can still get to know each other.

I actually remember—this was many years ago—I had a great date where we went to a bar, they had board games, and we played Battleship and in between each guess of where's the battleship, we asked each other a question about ourselves. I have to say, it was creative and really fun, because we were occupied by the game and we learned about each other. So just something where you can get to know each other, but maybe in a more fun context.

Damona: Wait a minute. Girl, did you bring a game of Battleship to a bar or it was already there?

Erika: It was already there.

Damona: Because that would be weird.

Erika: Although knowing me, I would probably do that because I love board games.

Damona: It would definitely say something about your personality.

You mentioned miniature golf and this was like a defining moment actually in my relationship with my husband because I'm a little bit competitive and one of the

things that I kind of pride myself on is my miniature golf game. We played miniature golf and I was just determined, like obviously I was going to win because I am a premium miniature golf player.

Erika: Obviously.

Damona: Turns out, I didn't know this, but my husband, too, is a premium miniature golf player, so we played and he's a like by-the-letter kind of guy. There's no cheating, there's no "I like you, I'm going to give you a couple extra points." We were playing strict and we tied, exactly tied. I was so pissed! But so happy because I was like, "If this guy can match me in miniature golf, we have something special."

Erika: I like that and actually it shows his sportsmanship, too. I used to take second dates, we have a bar here that I really like that has ping-pong tables. Like you, I am fairly competitive and I'm an avid ping-pong player—you're learning so much—I actually found out on several dates who couldn't handle losing.

Damona: To a girl!

Erika: I know! One guy in particular, he basically sulked the entire rest of the date and I thought to myself, wow, I don't need this.

Damona: Yeah, that sounds like me on our second date, we played pool. He just beat me just mercilessly, like he had just had no regard for the fact that he was trying to get in my pants later. He was just like, "I'm playing this game and you suck and watch this pool ball go in." I was pretty pissed off. I mean, it still worked out okay for him, but I was just like, "Give me a do-over or something!"

But you know what? It said a lot about his character, like he is that guy that he's going to play by the rules no matter what he wants in the end. He's not bending the rules for little old me.

Erika: No, I think that's a good sign and as you go through the dates, second, third, you can start doing things that are a little more intimate. I do think cooking together is nice, but that shouldn't be something you do until you are pretty

confident that you like this person and you want to invite them into your home, because that's a pretty intimate thing.

Also, I don't know if we're going to go there, but I do tell my clients, I always get asked, sleeping with someone, when is it appropriate? There isn't a hard and fast rule—no pun intended—there isn't a hard and fast rule or anything like that but I would say we all know when you start sleeping with someone, you kind of lose the getting-to-know-you part because your relationship evolves into a physical relationship. Make sure you like this person enough to invite them into that physical relationship. Some people lose the getting-to-know-you part and just jump right to the physical, but you want to make sure you build a foundation and actually like this person enough to do that.

Damona: Yes. You get what you think you deserve.

Producer Natasha, do you want to throw out some of the questions that have come in so far?

Natasha: Yeah. Let's see, we've got two. "Hi, I'm wondering how often I should update my profile?" That's Julie from Nebraska.

Damona: Oh, Julie, there's a little trick to this. I think you should update your profile regularly because you actually show up higher in online dating searches, on most sites, because you come up as new, as having some new information.

Also, you're always changing and evolving, so I like to think of the profile as a living entity that is always changing with you. What are your thoughts on that, Erika?

Erika: I agree with everything you just said. Even if you remove some punctuation, that counts as updating it and you do come up higher in the searches, so I agree. I'd also say rotate your pictures periodically.

Damona: Yes!

Erika: If you have a new main profile picture, you'll look like a new person. If you want to, change your username periodically. Okay Cupid actually charges you to

change your username, but the rest, it's really easy to change your username and that way you really look new and you can basically start fresh however often you want.

Damona: Yeah, but they don't charge that much. I'm putting Ok Cupid on blast, I like the site. I have a couple of clients that are on it and I told one of my clients, "Yeah, if you want to change your username, it's like \$9.99 a month for the premium." She logged in and she was like, "No, it's \$4 a month." Are they giving different prices to people?

Erika: That's interesting.

Damona: It was two women, but one was older than the other one. I was like, "What is going on with this?" I don't know.

Erika: I don't know, I'll have to check.

Damona: Yeah, we need to get to the bottom of this. If you're listening and you know the answer, I need to know what's up because I was a little bit surprised.

Do we have another question? Okay, one more question.

Natasha: Okay. "I have an odd question, though it probably shouldn't be. I recently went on a third date with a guy I met online and the STD subject was broached. He admitted he had herpes after I was cracking jokes about it. It was a very uncomfortable moment because I was upset that he didn't mention it before and kept wondering when he was going to tell me. As he was obviously embarrassed, needless to say there was no fourth date. My question is: How do we handle sexually transmitted diseases when looking for a potential mate? STDs are a deal breaker for me. Can I say that in my profile or is that along the lines of embracing the negative? On the flip side, when should someone who does have an STD inform a potential mate? I can't believe he wasn't going to tell me on date three. Thanks, Melissa from LA."

Damona: Oh my god, Melissa. This is a lot, I'm sorry, Melissa, this is kind of a lot of baggage here. STDs, you don't want to put that on your profile, right?

Erika: Definitely not. I mean, that does go on the negative side. I'm not looking for this, I'm not looking for that, and if you put no STDs, people will assume you have one because if you have to call it out, they know you've had experience with it.

Damona: Yes, but it pisses me off that I still have to tell people this, but like safe sex, people. I know there are some you can get, crabs or whatever, but it just shocks me actually, the number of people that still will have sex without a condom and then be like, "Well, it was just that once." That is all it takes.

Erika: Exactly.

Damona: Wrap it up, peeps.

Erika: Yeah. I will say, Melissa, and I'm certainly not defending him because I don't think there is a correct answer because it's such a personal topic, but if I were him, I wouldn't be telling people on the first or even the second date, because that kind of thing gets around—not literally.

Damona: No, but literally, yes, too.

Erika: Verbally, it gets around. He was probably waiting to see if you were someone he wanted to be intimate with before deciding to tell you. I wouldn't necessarily hold it against him that he didn't tell you up front day one, because I understand that. If he told every girl he ever dated, the whole world would know, but it is a really tough topic and I think it's completely a personal decision, 1) when to tell people; and 2) how to deal with it.

Damona: Yeah, like if he's not really going to be sleeping with you, he doesn't need to ruin the date.

Anyways, this is all really good, valuable info, Erika. I can totally tell, we are kindred spirits.

Erika: I think we really are.

Damona: I love talking about online dating and I cannot think of anyone that I would rather do it with than you.

Erika: Oh, I feel honored! Likewise.

Damona: To learn more about Erika Ettin, go to ALittleNudge.com or you can catch her articles on JDate.com/Jmag and remember, you don't have to be a member of JDate to read it.

Thank you so much for joining us, Erika!

Erika: Thank you for having me.