



Plenty of Fish founder Markus Frind met his fiancée, Annie Kanciar, at work. He hasn't been single since, but brokering online love isn't about being single anyway, he says. "It's more of a math problem"

Mr. L♥NELLY HEARTS

How a computer nerd from northern B.C. revolutionized online dating (and got filthy rich) without even trying

BY DEE HON

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MARKUS FRIND GOT UP AROUND 9 this morning—but hey, who's keeping track? Things were quiet until the phone rang at 10: workers arranging to swing by his Coal Harbour condo to see about the tile deck. While Frind waited for the tile guys, he did the following: "Surfed the web," he recalls. "Looked at different things. Sat around. Had something to eat. Watched some TV."

Around 3, he pocketed his BlackBerry and strolled the few blocks to his office, which happens to be the headquarters of the world's largest Internet dating site. PlentyofFish.com occupies space on

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the 26th floor of a downtown office tower. An unmarked entrance leads to the main room, where the company's freshly hired staff of 11 sit in rows behind computers. Clear glass separates a bathroom-sized corner office and another room that's empty but for a chair.

Today's tranquil pace is typical for Frind, the 31-year-old multimillionaire founder, CEO, and sole owner of Plenty of Fish. He works as little as he desires—he's been quoted as saying he works about 10 hours a week—yet he has all the material goods he could care for. And all this thanks to a company that he started out of his apartment in 2003 and that he ran part-time from home, alone, until 2007.

Over that time, some things have changed. Plenty of Fish now has 16 million users, earns tens of millions of dollars a year, and is growing at the pace of 80 percent a year. Web analytics firm Alexa ranks Plenty of Fish the 35th most trafficked website in Canada and the 100th in the United States. It serves up an astonishing 2.4 billion page views a month.

Yet some things haven't changed at all. The site itself retains the appearance of a barely tamed DIY project, full of quirks and imperfections that would make most designers quake. The faces of would-be daters appear squished or stretched because Frind only recently bothered to add software that allows users to crop or resize their pictures when uploading. And it's baldly apparent he has never thought to hire a copy editor. In bold letters, a banner atop the site's home page shouts:

*Do You Know What You "REALLY" Want?
Take our new psychological
assessment HERE!*

Spelling errors compound grammatical ones. Capitalization rules seem borrowed from the LOLcat style guide. Yet despite such cosmetic flaws, Frind has, in his own energetically efficient way, succeeded where much-hyped and heavily financed giants like Facebook and Twitter have failed: he's built a Web 2.0 company that earns profit. The last time Frind publicly revealed his bottom line, back in January 2008, he said he expected to net \$10 million for the year. In doing so, he has single-handedly rewritten the rules about how to

succeed in the Internet age, besting corporate titans with billions of dollars at their disposal and armies of managers and geeks working 80-hour weeks. To top it off, he has helped revolutionize the way people use the Internet and the way people search for love.



MARKUS FRIND IS NOT THE KIND of man who would stand out in a crowd or, indeed, as a suitor on his own site. His round, boyish face is topped by neatly cropped dark blond hair and punctuated by rectangular glasses. He speaks softly in short sentences, measuring and rationing precisely how much energy he needs to expend to get his point across. You could mistake his manner for shyness, but his words are invariably blunt. It's as though he doesn't see the need for the tact and politeness most people use to lubricate conversation.

"Everyone is a liar," he answers immediately, when asked what his site has taught him about dating. And: "If you're a short guy, you're going to have less chance of success. Period."

Frind looks young for his age. He was born on May 28, 1979, in the Bavarian town of Donauwörth. His parents, Erika and Eduard, soon moved the family to a farm near Hudson's Hope in northern B.C. The Frinds lived a rustic life, with Markus growing up alongside his brother Andreas, two years younger and now a mechanic in Alberta. They had no electricity on the farm in the early years, and his left arm still bears awful scars from a burn he got when the snow they were boiling for water spilled all over him. One of his few recollections of that time is waking up in hospital screaming. He was five years old and could barely speak English.

His interest in computers began

when his school bought some late in his time there—1993 or '94, he figures. There weren't many options for a teenage boy living in that part of the province. "You either go logging up there or work in the oil patch," he says. "Or work on the hydroelectric dam." When the computers arrived, he figured they were as good as the alternatives. "I might as well do this," he thought.

He's not one to look too far ahead; instead, he weighs and grabs opportunities as they come along. "Applied at a bunch places," he recalls in his economical manner of speech. "Got accepted at BCIT. Said, 'Hey, go to BCIT. Big city. More opportunity.' 'I kind of went with the flow. Kind of applied at a bunch of places and just went with the flow.'"

After his graduation from BCIT in 1999, Frind flowed into a series of programming jobs. He became a fixit guy. He has a way of using the word "optimizing" a lot, and that's what he would do to companies' glitch-laden software. Everyone else does things so inefficiently. Other people's software is always so bloated and infested with bugs. If operations get bogged down with sloppy code, their solution is always to buy faster, more expensive gear; Frind, on the other hand, would transform other people's software into something more like himself.

Then the dot-com bubble burst. Frind hopped from one company to the next as they gutted their workforces. In what would be his final job, he was hired in December 2002 by a Vancouver firm specializing in virtual tours of real estate. By the following February, half his coworkers were gone and Frind had begun to worry.

It was around this time that Microsoft's new programming language, ASP.net, was gaining popularity. Working in the evenings over two weeks, Frind built a website to teach himself the language. He chose to make the project a dating site, because he thought it would be the most challenging to build. A dating site is a continually changing organism. People upload and change their profiles and chat and exchange messages. ASP.net is a language designed to handle such complex tasks cleanly and efficiently. Frind launched Plenty of Fish from his home computer; within a few weeks,

it had 40 members. His was hardly the world's first dating site, but it had one unique element: it was free. By the end of March 2003, the site was growing an astonishing two to five percent per day. Plenty of Fish had gone viral.

Still, Frind had no way of making money off his site, which beckoned:

*Bait your hook and test your luck
fishing at PlentyofFish.com!
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and best of all its all FREE.*

Then, in June, Google launched AdSense, a free program that pays web publishers to display Google ads on their sites. In his first month using AdSense, Frind made \$5.63—modest, yes, but a clue that there was money to be earned. He spent his evenings adding features and optimizing the code on his site. By October of that year, he was pulling in \$4,000 a month. He bought a server and quit his job.



THESE DAYS, FRIND IS BLASÉ about his rise to fortune. Plenty of Fish's user base of 16 million long ago dwarfed that of Lavalife, its closest competitor in Canada. More recently, it passed its biggest U.S. competitor, Match.com, in traffic. The flood of cash keeps swelling. But to Frind, it doesn't seem like a lottery win. "It's just everyday life," he shrugs.

Frind had once been boastful enough to post a picture of his first big Google cheque online—worth nearly \$1 million. That earned him press in the *Wall Street Journal* and a spot on the *Today* show. As recently as January 2008, he told the *New York Times* he

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was netting revenue of \$10 million a year from the 1.2 billion page views his site was serving up. But now, with double those page views, Frind refuses to reveal what he's earning. "What's the value in it?" he asks.

"PR doesn't really help me grow or do anything anymore," he explains matter-of-factly. "It's on such a scale now that, you know, if you get a million people visiting the site a day, an extra 20 or 100 from reading an article is not going to matter. I just don't feel like getting out of bed to do an interview."

Frind's earnings have bought him

here for a few days," he says in Plenty Of Fish's headquarters. He will come in and fiddle with the site, tweaking and optimizing bits of code, trying to coax more users to join or to add a few points to members' dating success rates.

"You look outside every now and then and you see what kind of impact it has on the world," Frind says of the millions of lovers he's connected over the years. "But on the computer screen it's just a bunch of numbers. And you're trying to make this column go higher than that column."

Frind has never been single during



"There's nothing to compare against anymore because I am the biggest. Now I just invent it as I go along"

his 2,800-square-foot condo. He drives a little BMW 3-series of a vintage he doesn't recall. He takes the occasional vacation to places like Hawaii and Cuba with his fiancée, Annie Kanciar, whom he met as a coworker before starting his site. But more conspicuous consumption doesn't attract him, even though many in his position would be collecting Ferraris or yachts. "There's no real need to buy huge expensive things," he says, quickly dismissing the mere thought. "What's the point? Travel gets boring after a while," he adds. The people closest to him seem similarly level-headed. Kanciar still works as a freelance graphic designer. Parents Erika and Eduard have electricity now but haven't moved from Hudson's Hope.

What about cashing out? "I don't really feel like it. I own 100 percent of the company. There's no other entrepreneur, really, that owns everything. I can write my own destiny." And what would he do with more time on his hands, anyway? Take more walks around Stanley Park? Watch more TV? Eat more? No, despite his rather casual approach to what most people would consider work, Plenty of Fish has become a toy Frind enjoys playing with. "When I get bored I come in

his time running the site, so he takes an analytical approach to helping couples match up. "It's not about being single or not that makes you better able to design things," he says. "It's really how users flow through the site and how does each user affect how every other user does something. It's more of a math problem."

Plenty of Fish has beaten its competitors in part because it's free, but also because compared to it, they are bloated and inefficient. Match.com has 340 employees and is burdened with all the committees and org charts and other roadblocks that corporate life entails. Frind can make changes to improve his site as quickly as he can type. Plenty of Fish is loaded with little features that make finding a partner easier. You can limit the age of people checking you out. You can see who's been keeping an eye on you. He has designed algorithms that track users' actions so he can predict what kind of people they would be interested in seeing. "Let's say you go on the site and you message 20 nonsmokers," he explains. "What's the point of me showing you smokers?" He has algorithms based on members' height, as well as other variables he prefers to keep private. Quietly, behind the scenes, his

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calculations optimize how people find love. And with millions of hopefuls on the site worldwide, Frind can instantly see how successful any new features or adjustments are. Sometimes he floats an idea, then takes it down within minutes.

What he doesn't do is consult users or anyone else for ideas, saying he has "far too much" feedback from users. "Is any of it useful?" he asks. "You've got 10 people saying this; you got 10 people saying the opposite. The only feedback that I really look at is data."

All the tweaking of his site has paid dividends. In the world of online match-making, users gravitate toward where the most potential mates are found. As the king of the hill, Plenty of Fish is only going to get bigger. What's more, Plenty of Fish spends far less money than other sites do. Sites like Match.com and eHarmony.com each spend \$100 million a year on advertising. They run thousands of costly servers even though their traffic is smaller than that of Plenty of Fish, which has only 11 machines.

Some might credit good fortune for his

achievements, but not Frind. "There's no such thing as luck," he says. "It's basically a combination of skill, especially being able to optimize, being able to debug things, and being able to constantly learn and adapt to change." His market share he stole, inch by inch, from the big boys, until a few years after he started, he had become the biggest of them all.

"When I was first starting I used them as a goalpost," he says. In a 2006 blog post entitled "How I Started a Dating Empire," he revealed his original plan of attack: "I spent every waking minute when I wasn't at my day job reading, studying, and learning. I picked out 'enemies' and did everything I could to defeat them, which meant [sic] being bigger than [sic] them. I refused to accept defeat of any kind."

"But now," he says, "there's nothing to compare against anymore because I am the biggest. So now it's a matter of, 'Well, I just want to optimize this more and get to the next level.' It's kind of like playing a video game. You want to get to the next level. But you don't really know

what the next level is. You just invent it as you go along." (The analogy is apt. Frind likes to play strategy-intensive games like Age of Empires and Command and Conquer, and owns a sizable collection of board games like Risk and Settlers of Catan. Plenty of Fish, of course, has the unique charm of being a game only he can play.)

The next level Frind aims to conquer is the world of "scientific" dating research. Companies like Chemistry.com, eHarmony.com, and Genepartner.com hire psychologists and scientists to design questionnaires and even DNA tests to help people find mates. Frind did hire a relationship psychologist to create "compatibility matching tools" for Plenty of Fish. Now he thinks he can do better with his own algorithms.

"The science of dating," Frind scoffs, "is all BS." Those much-heralded matching tools are only 15 or 20 percent better than chance. And does Frind think he can optimize and tweak his way to beat that score?

"I could double or triple it." **VM**

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