POST BETTER PHOTOS

If a photograph's worth a thousand words, use these expert tips to ensure the ones you post in your dating profile say all the right things to your matches.

By Debra Kent

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Cornell University researchers Jeffrey Hancock and Catalina Toma have scientifically confirmed what many of us would only sheepishly admit to others, if at all: our dating profile pictures aren't always accurate. To put it another way, they're sometimes a little *too* flattering. Hancock and Toma met with 54 straight singles in the flesh to verify that the photos they'd posted in their online profiles were accurate representations of each person's physical attributes. In doing so, they discovered that about one-third of the photos were judged to be inaccurate representations and most of those photos belonged to women.

It's not that people digitally smoothed out their wrinkles or superimposed their heads onto supermodel bodies (although one woman in the study did fill in a missing tooth). Most of these photos were inaccurate because they were too old. That's tantamount to lying to a potential date, asserts Hancock — "and once the other person shows up and sees that you've lied, it's game over." At the very least, your date is going to be disappointed and that won't be fun for either of you. "You run the risk of any long-term potential if you don't look the way you appear in photos," notes Lori Bizzoco, a dating and relationship expert who met her husband on Match.com.

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Assuming you're not using an old picture, is it really cheating if you post a flattering shot of yourself? Absolutely not — unless you consider wearing makeup or a great outfit cheating, too. You simply want photos that *accurately* reflect you at your best, explains Merav Knafo, co-founder of LookBetterOnline.com, a network of photographers specializing in profile pictures for online dating. Incidentally, Knafo hears from people who have the *opposite* problem — their dates are pleasantly surprised to discover how much better they look in person compared with their profile pictures. But that kind of inaccuracy isn't a good idea, either. "Think of all the people you didn't attract to your profile by posting a less-than-flattering image," says Knafo.

If you're tempted to skip your photo altogether, consider that profiles with photos typically get up to 15 times more attention, according to Match.com research. "A photo is absolutely what makes the other person decide to read your profile — or not," says Dale Koppel, Ph.D., author of *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Online Dating: And She Lived Happily Ever After*. Koppel was largely drawn to her online sweetheart because of the abundance of pictures he posted: "It's what attracted me to him. Had he not posted those photos, we wouldn't be together today."

What if you'd rather not reveal yourself from the neck down? Depending on how you describe yourself, that could also be construed as posting an inaccurate

:: QUICK POLL

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- Actually going on dates instead of "hanging out"

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representation of what you actually look like because it excludes the rest of your body. "Some people — mostly women — will post only head shots and check 'slender' or 'average' as their body type when, in fact, they're overweight. That's why I recommend, both in my book and in the workshops I teach, that people absolutely have to post more than one photo: a head shot and at least one full-body shot — no matter what their body type," Koppel says. "But I absolutely believe that you can — and *must* — have flattering photos that really look like you. Just like writing the perfect profile, it takes time to come up with the perfect photos."

For her own profile, Koppel recruited a male friend — after all, who'd know better what guys find attractive, right? — to take and judge about 50 snapshots before they chose the four best to post: one head shot and three full-body photos of Koppel in jeans, a cocktail dress and "tastefully revealing" yoga gear. "Yes, I was taking this very seriously. All online daters should," she says, adding that if you don't own a decent digital camera, it's well worth the investment.

We all have that photo that we think it just amazing.

But if you're not quite ready to pay for a professional photographer, here are some tips to make your profile photos accurate *and* appealing:

Good lighting makes for great pictures.

"Nothing is more important than good lighting," asserts Knafo. "If the lighting is off, your nose seems bigger and bags under your eyes look worse. A good photographer knows how to use lighting so you look your best." Indirect lighting is better than harsh sunlight, and a soft pink or golden hue is better than the greenish tint given off by fluorescent bulbs.

Don't take your own picture in the mirror.

"It's a turn-off," says Koppel. "When I look at one of those mirror photos, two questions immediately pop into my head: Don't you have any family or friends with a camera? And secondly, are you too cheap to buy a camera with a timer and a tripod?"

Angle your shot.

Pictures aimed head-on at eye level will distort your features. Similarly, profile shots "never make you look good… unless you're a model," says Koppel. "Always go for an angle. A good photographer knows to shoot down at the subject, even if he or she has to climb up on a ladder to do it."

Watch for phantom body parts.

We've all seen these shots — the disembodied arm around a shoulder or a ponytail where someone's whole head used to occupy space. Cropping other people out of a shot isn't just tacky, it makes you look like a modern-day Henry the Eighth, decapitating former spouses so you can make your next move. "We all have that photo that we think it just amazing — or it would be, if only the ex weren't in it," says Bizzoco. "But no brunette wants to see blond tresses peeking and men don't want to see a half-cropped black tuxedo or bare chest resting against someone's body." So unless you're sure you can do it seamlessly, don't slice anyone out of your photos.

Skip the baseball cap.

In the interest of full disclosure, go hatless if your hairline is receding, says Koppel: "Attention, older men! Don't you think we know that baseball cap is hiding varying degrees of baldness?" Eventually, that hat's going to come off when you meet someone and start dating anyway.

Say cheese (or whatever makes you smile).

"You should look casual and upbeat. Nobody wants to date someone who is cranky," says Knafo. "People want to hang out with people who are happy, and the indication of happiness is a smile. So don't get your picture taken after you've partied all night or had a fight with your mother. You want to be feeling optimistic."

Writer Debra Kent is the author of the Diary of V *book series.*

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