

Looking for a sperm donor?

...It's no longer shot in the dark

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At first, she was horrified at the idea of picking her child's father from a catalog.

But with her 40th birthday behind her and no boyfriend on the horizon, Jan B. mouse-clicked her way through sperm donor profiles offering details that years of dating might not have unearthed: the length of his eyelashes, the size of his inseam, the sensitivity of his skin. She learned who had controlling mothers, who aced the SATs and who could repair bicycles.

Only a couple years ago, women seeking sperm donors learned little more than hair color, height and ethnicity. Now, with each passing month, more and more sperm banks are offering baby photos, voice recordings, personality profiles, handwriting samples, personal essays, three-generation medical histories and a six-page analysis of facial features. Virtually everything but the guy's name and address.

"These days, people know much more about their donor than they do about their spouse or partner," said William Jaeger, vice president of the Fairfax Cryobank in Virginia, which supplies sperm to about 40 infertility doctors in New Jersey. "These are people who are making a very major decision -- who will be the biological father of their child? Unlike when someone's in love, they can make the decision very, very objectively."

In November, the bank – one of the largest worldwide – began offering photos of donors for \$100 that span from infancy to adulthood. In December, the bank offered to run personality profiles not only of donors, but, for another \$15, of the customer, too. For \$35, it will analyze the results to identify compatibility. This month, the bank also began offering, for \$100, donors who agree to reveal their identity to their offspring when they reach 18.

Experts attribute the industry-wide trend to a combination of factors: a shift in social mores, the Internet, a growing consumer revolution, the industry's clever marketing and its changing client base. The trend has major implications for New Jersey clients because the vast majority buy their sperm from the banks that have been swept up in the race to provide ever more information.

In the 1970s, when sperm donation took off, most clients were married women with infertile husbands, many of whom didn't want to know anything more than necessary about the source of the stand-in sperm. At the time, most infertility doctors simply selected donors themselves, often medical students or other hospital personnel picked for hair color, height or ethnicity. When a sperm bank in Southern California opened in the 1980s purporting to offer the sperm of Nobel Prize winners and other outstanding men -- and cataloging their looks, idiosyncrasies and accomplishments-- many in the industry pooh-poohed it.

But in the last few years, patients have become discriminating consumers, perhaps most of all in matters of fertility.

Consider the shift in adoption, where adoptive parents-to-be and pregnant women interview each other and jointly attend their child's birth.

Shopping on the Internet

The search has been made all the simpler by the Internet, which allows for sperm shopping all over the country and the world. Instead of relying on doctors to locate a man, patients now sit in their kitchen and compare donors. The more men to choose from, the more distinguishing characteristics the clients want. And with an ever larger proportion of lesbian couples and single women using banks these days, there are fewer male egos to appease.

"Customers kept calling to get more of the qualitative characteristics, saying it was odd to choose a donor based just on numbers like height and weight," said Marla Eby, vice president of marketing of California Cryobank. "People are more than just their statistics. So we responded aggressively. It's a whole different world from what sperm banks used to be."

That bank's "Power Search" engine now allows clients to sort donors by more than 15 characteristics, from race, eye color and blood type to religion (including agnostic) and occupation (222 careers from accounting, advertising and aerospace engineering, to zoology.) Its facial feature analysis reports on the angle of his brow, the height of his forehead, the shape of his nose, the thickness of each lip, the prominence of his chin and cheekbone, and the size of his teeth.

A few banks have resisted the rush to intimacy. BioGenetics, New Jersey's commercial sperm bank, offers detailed medical screening, but refuses to peddle audiotapes, handwriting samples, staff impressions or adult photos. Firm CEO Albert Anouna pooh-poohs those as marketing ploys that tread on donor anonymity and mislead clients, because they offer no real clues about how the child will turn out.

**"There's no science to it," Anouna said.
The interpretations are all so subjective."**

But customers don't only look at these details to build designer babies. For one thing, no matter how carefully they choose the man with the long eyelashes, broad chest and lovely temperament it's still a crapshoot whether the baby will inherit any of it. Besides, sometimes it's the subjective element that cinches the decision.

"At first, I would look through the physical stuff and think, 'This one seems cute,' but then I'd read the essays and think, Ugh!" said Jan, who works as a consultant in New Jersey. "After a while, I decided hair, height and ethnicity didn't matter. I wanted him to be someone who was soothing and mature, so that even if my child never met him, he or she could read his essay answers and hear his voice and think, 'Oh, I came from a decent guy.'" Jan is now nine weeks pregnant from California Cryobank's Donor 5440, a classical violinist born in New Jersey.

A couple years ago, Xytex of Georgia began allowing clients to submit questions for the donor, then listen in on the interview. As the interview proceeds, the client can interject questions, audible only to the interviewer. For this, the patient pays \$100; the donor earns \$50. The interview tape is another \$35. (Donors typically earn \$100 for the sperm. Men can donate up to nine times a month.) The bank may soon offer donor videos

"Nowadays," said Sheridan Rivers, director of sales marketing for Xytex, "the patients drive everything." Gossip about donors.

Several banks also now offer reports of "staff impressions," a kind of girlie-gossip note, because so many clients would call and ask confidentially, "But what did he seem like in person?" Thus, a counselor at Fairfax Cryobank describes Donor 1476 as "tall and muscular" with "sort of a baby face." He is, she notes, "a nice guy ... always seems to be in a fairly good mood and I gather that he is the optimistic type."

A counselor at Cryobiology Inc. in Ohio says that Donor 208 – a Protestant with straight brown hair and a penchant for movies and pizza – has "big eyes that are very emotional," which "immediately tell how he feels." Donor 208 also "mumbles one-liners, comical if you catch what he says." The report on another donor notes he is a nearsighted "stylish dresser" with reddish-brown thick hair and a "deep voice."

Perhaps most popular, and certainly most personal, are the donor essays. Some are lofty, others, baldly honest. Asked why he wanted to donate, Donor 3409 wrote "extra cash." Donor 3473 wrote, "I was blessed with a good mind, good looks and a lot of creativity. ...Why not pass that on?"

he loves spicy ethnic food, music, novels and films

Many are long descriptions of family life, or personal and professional aspirations. Some answer questions, as if fulfilling a schoolbook assignment: What is your most memorable childhood experience? How do you see yourself in 20 years? If you could pass on a

message to the recipient of your semen, what would that message be? The answers are part confession, part Dating Game.

California Cryobank's Donor 3581 is 33 years old, with brown hair and hazel eyes. He's an aspiring screenwriter who earned a 3.6 GPA in college. A "quiet homebody," he loves spicy ethnic food, music, novels and films, and dislikes sports bars, rap music and mornings. He is lousy at math and mechanical skills.

"If you choose me," Donor 3581 wrote, "your children will wear glasses, have lots of hair, and a good sense of humor. They might not play on the varsity team, but they will be sensitive and unusual and kind."