

Online Dating Association: “Dating 2024”

Executive summary

The Online Dating Association is now five years old. In that time dating services have become part of everyday life for millions.

The ODA has demonstrated its important role in

- raising standards and building regulatory, lawmaker and other stakeholder trust
- ensuring media coverage and other comment is informed and fair.

We are now looking at where the association should be in five years. We would like to hear what the industry thinks.

We believe we need to:

- Demonstrate the distinct nature of dating within the sweep of internet providers
- Maintain an inclusive approach to developing standards and other materials
- Ensure the benefits of the ODA are recognised and taken up internationally.

The Association will focus on those policy issues and regulatory activities that directly affect the sector and its users. Data protection, privacy and internet safety and consumer protection law are prime examples.

A broad membership is critical to this strategy and to the Association's ability and capacity to operate. To represent the industry, to be able to inform and influence politicians, media, regulators and others, and to persuade them we are a sector that takes our responsibilities seriously, we need to have widespread industry support.

We are keen to hear your thoughts on the strategy, activities listed and to have your support as we go forward.

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1. Introduction: the next five years

The Online Dating Association is now five years old. This document is to promote discussion with the dating industry on where the association should be in five years' time.

The challenge: businesses and industries operate under increasing public and political scrutiny. Where they are not seen to hold themselves to a high duty of care to their customers the pressure to regulate mounts. Where that pressure is not met, events can take over.

The #MeToo revolution has changed business practices across the world. Public scrutiny of all industries is intensifying. This is particularly so for digital businesses and ones where customers can be put at risk. Both apply to the dating industry.

It would not take a great deal of invasive regulation to undermine the sector's ability to operate.

The sector needs to protect its reputation and to demonstrate that it meets a high duty of care for its users. Not just now, but in the future.

Our solution: the dating industry needs to keep winning the argument that it is not like other "internet companies", which increasingly face political scrutiny and public backlashes.

To do this, we must show the dating industry is:

- **Inclusive:** it is not enough for a small group of firms to set high standards. The industry needs to show widespread support for minimum standards of care
- **Distinct:** while we share many common characteristics with the "internet giants" that are under so much scrutiny, we need to show how as a distinct sector we have a relentless commitment to protecting our users
- **International:** just as dating services cross boundaries, so the standards of how to treat customers should be *minimum standards* regardless of where they are delivered

2. Vision for 2024

Five years ago, the dating industry was still in its infancy. While increasingly popular, it was still a niche activity and not yet a “normalised” behaviour. It was besieged by the media and seen as a hotbed of scandal, fraud, safety issues and online abuses.

At that crucial time the Online Dating Association was set up to demonstrate to its critics that the industry took its responsibilities to its customers seriously.

That job is as vital now as it was then. The pressure to prove it, day in day out, will only intensify over time.

If that's where the ODA was five years ago, where should it be in another five years?

Very simply, we need to demonstrate that the sector can be relied on to deliver responsibly and safely, and hence that it should be treated accordingly.

Mission

The association will continue to support dating services in building a trusted and growing market in which operators can invest and innovate.

Strategy

We will do this by focusing on common, pre-competitive, issues which improve the operating environment for the whole industry.

Delivery

This means in the next five years we will aim to deliver:

- **Industry-wide standards:** our set of standards will be comprehensive, well-structured and the recognised norm across the sector and in all markets
- **Positive safety messaging:** our safety messaging helping customers have great, safe dating experiences should be recognised across the industry and markets
- **Reducing risk:** evidence of progress in reducing the risk of scammers harming users will be critical for dating services to be seen as a better way of making relationships
- **Responsible behaviour:** we will have addressed concerns over charging, advertising, use of data and any business model issues that might provoke concern
- **Responsibly connected:** we will be known and understood by policy makers and regulators. Without “unwanted surprises” we can get on with our businesses.

Outcome

Doing this effectively will leave individual businesses free to concentrate on what makes their services different, and how to support their customers.

That is our aim.

3. Building for the future

We cannot build for now. We need to think about what areas the ODA could operate in, and focus tightly on delivering the most critical in the coming years.

Services

Associations can provide a range of services to their members, large and small. We see the priorities for the ODA as:

Service area	Priority	Our offer
Standards	Critical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase take up across the industry • Extend across international markets • Share best practice and learn
Lobbying and representation	Critical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delivered in the UK, a testbed providing sharp intelligence for other markets • A common point of access to Government • Stronger sector voice on key issues • Relationships with critical stakeholders: Government (DCMS, Home Office), Parliamentary groups, regulators (ICO and CMA), ISPs, mobile operators, lobby groups, etc • Relationships with law enforcement bodies which inform how they address dating crime
Issues management and "reputational insurance"	Critical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delivered in the UK (also a testbed for other markets) • Insulating individual brands and the whole sector from direct media risk • Messaging that will travel to support on issues in other markets
International application	Critical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Standards and guidance apply across common issues (personal data, terms and conditions, auto renewals, fraud, safety) • Need to expand international application and capability
Public information	Critical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generic safe dating information which providers can piggyback and magnify • Disseminated to stakeholders and to users through the dating businesses • No resources for public-facing services currently
Industry information (Research)	Important	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An area we need to develop to build credibility and distinctiveness for the sector
Training and qualifications	Low priority for now	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We have delivered some industry training in key areas (data protection and privacy, rights of contract cancellation, safe customer service)
Social activity and networking for members	Low priority for now	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We provide occasional forums for members at present, mostly through meetings or occasional training

Self-regulation arbitration	Low priority	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Current focus on setting standards• In future, there may be a role but currently out of scope
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4. ODA goals

We will make it easier for our members to concentrate on what makes their services different, and how to support their customers.

We will do this by continuing to

- Build relationships with critical regulatory, opinion forming and enforcement audiences to protect and promote the sector as a responsible industry
- Show that the dating industry is **inclusive, distinctive** and **international**.

Goals

Inclusive: *expand the base and application of the ODA from a small number of individual members, to a critical mass of the broad base of the industry across all markets*

- **Establish standards as a sector norm:** build the range of standards, establish them as the sector norm worldwide. The standards should become the benchmark, not the gold standard: reassuring users they can enjoy dating services with trust and confidence
- **Secure broad industry commitment** to the ODA necessary for this to happen

Distinctive: *show how the dating sector differs from the rest of the “internet industry” so that it is not automatically exposed to the risks of one-size-fits all legislation and regulation.*

- **Demonstrate that the dating industry is responsible**
 - Identify those issues that are critical to the well-being of the sector
 - Engage with Government(s), regulators and others of influence
 - Ensure they understand us and take informed decisions on whether laws, regulations or other action is required
 - Show how, as a rule, the association and the sector can be trusted to develop sector-based voluntary answers
- **Continue to show a strong commitment to user safety and wellbeing**
 - Managing media interest and using this to better inform the public
 - Exploring how forms of harm can be reduced either through operator-based actions and processes or through action to inform and empower users
- **Carry out a campaign of positive stakeholder communications**
 - Build understanding and appreciation of dating services, their social significance and value
 - Show the commitment operators have to preventing harm and giving users what they want

- **Carry out and out-source research on user views of dating services**
 - Capturing trends in their use, identifying what they most value and what they would like to see done differently
 - This will help enhance our credibility with policy makers by becoming a source of data, well as helping members and other audiences
- **Engage strongly with the dating industry**
 - Building our understanding
 - Feeding back from Government and other contacts
 - Flagging media or other external activity of interest or which poses a threat
 - Making best use of our members and others so standards are “owned” and of practical use

***International:** over five years extend the application of the ODA across markets, and identify how common issues can be supported using the common experience*

- **Build out our international application and capability**
 - We will develop a clearer understanding of which elements of our services have the most international application
 - We will then plan how to help members globally build stronger and more productive relations with their critical stakeholders
 - We will work with members in those markets so they can also get the benefit of the credibility of our tried-and-tested standards and safety messaging

5. The next 12 months

While working towards these longer-term objectives, we will also focus on

- the immediate challenges that the industry faces in the UK
- extending our offer and services into new international markets
- building the sector support that the association needs for long-term credibility.

Immediate challenges

- **UK Government White Paper on internet safety legislation**
 - We will aim to ensure that this does not become a “one size fits all” approach and needlessly target dating or impose disproportionate burdens
 - We will respond to the White Paper and be active behind the scenes
 - We will engage, as needed, in work to keep children off dating sites
 - Clearly, it is critical that this work is supported by the sector, not just ODA members
- **Duty of care to dating service users**
 - To reflect the **UK Government's** approach in creating duties of care online, we will expand the coverage of our standards work
 - This will include new good-practice material on how services use tools to report harm and offence, at how those reports are acted upon and on how operators maintain records
- **Safe-dating messages and materials**
 - Greater harmonisation and consistency of voluntary messages has worked in other sectors (alcohol and gambling). It has won Government support and so reduced pressure to regulate. We will
 - produce new safe dating messages in common formats and language around core issues that can be used by all
 - market these messages to the **Law Enforcement Safe Dating Group** and to the **Home Office** strategy against violence to women and girls
 - encourage dating providers to use the material with their users and stakeholders
- **Develop our international capability**
 - We will actively explore with members operating in markets across Europe and beyond how to develop standards with them
 - We will engage with the European Commission and others when required
 - Members (and new members) in other markets will be able to benefit immediately from our universal safety messaging
 - We will explore when and how we may be able to provide issues-management support
 - Members (and new members) will also be able to draw on our extensive experience responding to media, political and regulatory interest
 - We do not initially anticipate having a physical presence in other markets

- **Research into dating service users**
 - We propose research on the sector and its users and their preferences, likes and dislikes
 - This will inform our works on standards and user messaging and to help us inform and influence policy makers
- **Communications support for the dating industry**
 - We seek to ensure any media reporting on safe dating is contextual and fair
 - We plan a communications campaign to build on current awareness of the sector, its social significance and the benefits it delivers
 - We stand ready too to deal with media and political criticism when cases of very serious harm occur, as they have and will again

Build sector support

So much of what the association does depends on its ability to represent the whole industry, not just a number of committed UK businesses.

A stronger and broader membership is absolutely critical to our ability to inform and influence others, and to deliver the services set out in this discussion document.

It is essential for the association to secure broader support for what it does.

6. Our first five years

In the past five years, the dating industry has matured. In that time, the stigma of using dating services has subsided and it is widely recognised as a normal way for anyone to seek a partner.

This achievement has been because of the extraordinary work across the whole industry to build new and innovative services, to promote them to users and to show the industry at its best.

But there have been challenges along the way, and they will continue to come. Reputations can be lost more quickly than they are built.

In our first five years, the ODA has helped address many headline issues:

- **2016:** the **National Crime Agency** reported a [600% increase in reports of rape](#) “originating” on dating services
- **2016:** a national media case of a serial rapist using multiple profiles to attract victims
- **2017/18:** a 22 per cent year-on-year increase in romance/dating frauds across the last two years reported by **Action Fraud**
- **2018:** dating services blamed for rise in sexually transmitted diseases in UK (and US)
- **2018:** Parliamentary and lobby group calls for mandatory ID checking
- **2019:** national print reports of children accessing dating services resulting in sexual assaults

Against the backdrop of supporting the industry in the light of these stories, and many others like them, the ODA has also been on the front foot:

1. Developing the industry code of practice and industry standards

We developed the initial code in 2014 for members of the association. Then in September 2018 we relaunched it as an industry standard, that the whole industry, not just members, could commit to

2. Working with law makers policy makers influencers

We have focused on those with interest and ability to affect our work and sector. This has included work with

- the Information Commissioner's Office on **data protection and privacy**
- the Treasury Solicitor's Department and Competition and Markets Authority on **unfair commercial practices** and **rights of cancellation** relating to **auto renewals**
- A range of stakeholders and regulators on **identity and age verification**

3. Influencing media and law enforcement

The media and influencers are closely inter-related in the UK. This is partly why the UK market is a useful testbed for managing issues globally.

The UK is a liberal market, with a febrile and sometimes ferocious press. The Government has pioneered internet safety legislation and plans to do so again. We have implemented European data privacy requirements in GDPR. These experiences have taught valuable lessons that other markets can learn from.

Negative comment makes news, and online dating services are often a target. We have

- helped **address misleading claims**, explaining the actions services take to **prevent harm**
- set up new working groups with **National Crime Agency**, **Action Fraud** and the **City of London Police**, enabling us to influence the tone and terms in which they report on dating
- taken a low-key and practical approach to looking at **how data can be shared**, **safeguards can evolve**, and **safety messaging** can get through

We work hard to achieve more balanced and informed media reporting. This includes media reports of **personal physical harm**, **frauds and scams**, **catfishing** and concerns over **children on services**.

We never blame victims or trivialise the distress or hurt or worse. We do, however, ensure that the **context is understood**, that the **sector's work on safety is recognised** and that we use with reference to "**Date Great Date Safe**" as a tag line.

4. Promoting safety messaging for users

The importance of safety messaging for users was enshrined in our initial 2014 Code of Conduct and is now included in our published good practice. We have also commissioned a series of audio-visual packets of advice on profiles, on sharing information online scam prevention and on personal safety on a date

This material is frequently refreshed and shared with law enforcers, **Action Fraud** and other critical audiences.

7. Industry consultation

This document is to promote discussion within the dating sector on the ODA's role in helping maintain a positive operating environment for the industry. This review will be conducted through mid-April to mid-May 2019.

Please do contribute to the discussion by contacting either George Kidd, the CEO, - or Duncan Cunningham, the Chairman - info@onlinedatingassociation.org.uk