

Debate

Does AshleyMadison.com Encourage Adultery?

ISSUE: Should AshleyMadison.com have fewer business opportunities because the website offers its users opportunities to pursue extramarital affairs?

Life is short, have an affair.

That's the slogan for AshleyMadison.com, a dating website designed specifically for people in committed relationships. With over 9 million users, AshleyMadison.com describes itself as "the most successful website for finding cheating partners."

Named for the two most-popular girls' names when it launched in 2002, AshleyMadison.com is the star website of Avid Life Media, a company that owns six dating websites including cougarlife.com (matching older women with younger men) and establishedmen.com (featuring older and wealthier men). Avid Life's CEO Noel Biderman started AshleyMadison.com because he recognized that many people who use dating websites and newspaper ads are not actually single (experts believe 10-30 percent of online daters are in committed relationships).

How does AshleyMadison.com work? Users can join the site for free, and members are matched with local users. If members want to contact their matches, they must purchase credits in order to message or chat. Customers can then exchange contact information or meet others and engage in extramarital affairs if they choose. AshleyMadison.com even offers an "Affair Guarantee" that promises users will find someone to have an affair with within three months.

The controversy surrounding AshleyMadison.com has both helped and hindered the company's growth. Media attention has generated free publicity and spurred new memberships, but it has also opened the site to negative attention. Many people have criticized AshleyMadison.com, saying that it is morally wrong to promote infidelity and that the website has a negative impact on marriages, families, and society. Trish McDermott, who co-founded Match.com, accuses AshleyMadison.com of being "a business built on the back of broken hearts, ruined marriages and damaged families." Other people believe that the site also encourages prostitution. While 92 percent of male users say they are married, only 60 percent of female users are married. Profiles for single women often hint that the women are looking for someone who can provide them with financial benefits.

Because many people consider AshleyMadison.com to be unethical, Avid Life Media has been denied several business opportunities. The Toronto transit commission would not allow AshleyMadison.com to advertise on city streetcars. In 2009 and 2011, FOX television refused to air AshleyMadison.com advertisements during the Super Bowl because the commercials were too sexual. Additionally, in February 2010, the city of Phoenix rejected AshleyMadison.com's \$10 million offer to rename the Sky Harbor Airport to Ashley Madison International Airport, despite its own financial trouble. Avid Life Media has also struggled to get funding. Two deals intended to help the company to go public on the Toronto Stock Exchange have fallen through, and most private investors don't want to be associated with the site.

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Biderman believes that AshleyMadison.com is being treated unfairly. He says, “[If] you eradicate Ashley Madison, you’re not going to eradicate infidelity.” Today, approximately one in five adults cheats on their significant other. Biderman claims that AshleyMadison.com does not encourage infidelity but instead creates a platform for discrete affairs. He says, “No website or 30-second ad is going to convince anyone to cheat. People cheat because their lives aren’t working for them.” The company sees the biggest spike in new memberships on the days after Mother’s Day, Father’s Day, Valentine’s Day, and New Year’s Day, probably because people feel underappreciated.

AshleyMadison.com is rapidly expanding, and Avid Life Media expects that the website will generate over \$60 million in revenue and \$20 million in profit in 2011. AshleyMadison.com’s success indicates that the website is fulfilling the needs of the market. However, just because AshleyMadison.com is legal, is it ethical? Should the website have the same business opportunities as other companies?

There are two sides to every issue:

1. AshleyMadison.com should have the same business opportunities as any other company that meets the needs of a growing market.
2. AshleyMadison.com should be denied certain business opportunities because it encourages and promotes extramarital affairs.

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