

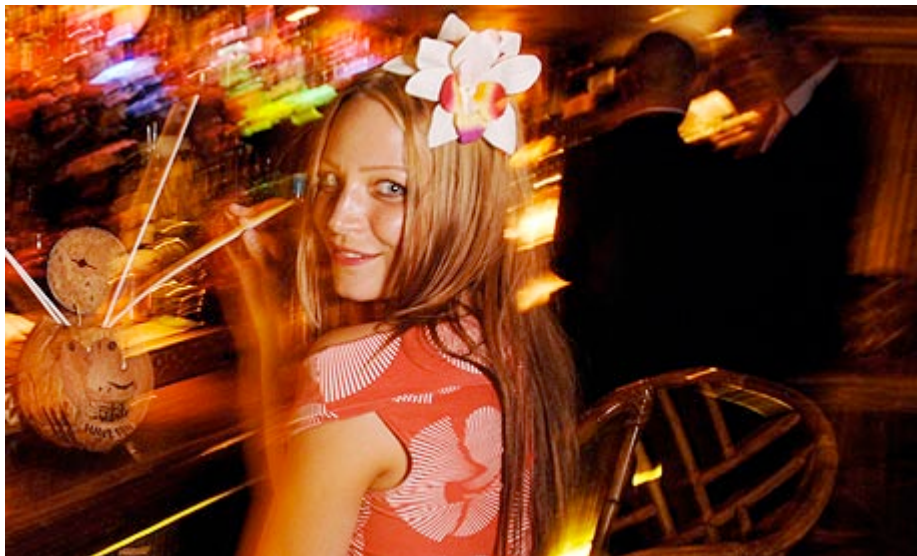
guardian.co.uk

How to flirt: lessons for women

After a recent surge of male 'pick-up schools', one has now started for women. Helen Croydon hones her seduction skills in the busy bars of central London

Helen Croydon
guardian.co.uk, Monday 8 February 2010 07.00 GMT

A [larger](#) | [smaller](#)



A striking accessory could be a conversation-starter. Photograph: Roger Parkes/Alamy

Five of us sit huddled round a notebook and a bottle of pink cava in a quiet corner of a busy bar in Leicester Square, central London. It is 6pm on a Friday and it is starting to fill with men and women in office attire.

"So who are you targeting, Helen?" Gulp.

"Erm, well, I haven't looked around yet."

I am immediately chastised. Concentrating on immediate company and not looking over shoulders to scan rooms is, in flirting school, a D minus.

Sue Ostler, a flirt coach and the author of four relationship manuals, has started a weekly learn-on-the-job flirting tour of the heaving bars of London's West End.

During our briefing, we are warned of our male rivals who operate in the same territory. The so-called Pick-Up Artists crawl Friday night bars in small tuition groups with a guide to talk them through pulling tactics. The phenomenon caught on in the UK after the success of Neil Strauss's memoir, *The Game*.

"You can smell them when you enter a bar," Ostler says. "They home in on anyone without a male by their side and come up with cringeworthy lines. We won't do that. We are focusing on our personalities and developing a sense of warmth and likeability."

Tonight, we are told, is not about getting a date, but about practising. It doesn't matter who we approach or if they are our type. We just need guinea pigs on whom to test Ostler's theory, which she is now explaining over a second glass of fizz.

Apparently, it's all about exuding a lively, approachable vibe. "It's Friday night, look like you're having fun!" we are told. Sitting down is not allowed, as that "puts us out of reach". We have to smile a lot and look confident, yet relaxed. We should take in our surroundings in case we want them to be conversation openers. Is there a jukebox? Is anyone drinking a cocktail that we can comment on? We should never embark on a night out without an accessory that could invite someone to open a conversation - a hat or a striking necklace, for instance.

Most importantly, we need to make plenty of eye contact: "We instinctively look away when our eyes lock with a stranger. Tonight you are going to hold it for five seconds, smile, maybe even wink, and see what happens," Ostler instructs. I am absolutely terrified.

At crowded bar number one, Ostler unleashes us into the crowd: "Go!" She follows behind to observe our amateur tactics.

Instead of staring straight ahead, as I would usually, I smile at a man to my left. Disastrously, the crowds prevent me from continuing forward, so I am stuck awkwardly next to him and don't know where to look. My smile worked, though, because he opens a conversation. I lean back, away from his vodka breath.

"No!" growls Ostler in my ear. "You need to lean inwards. Think friendly, warm, welcoming persona." I obediently endure three minutes of his slurring. It's practice, remember.

In the next - thankfully quieter - location, I select a clean-cut business type as my practice piece. He is deep in conversation, so I walk straight past. How can I infiltrate that?

Ostler is unimpressed: "You should have made a detour to walk past him. Why did you

walk around that other guy? You could have tapped him on the shoulder, smiled and said excuse me and gently squeezed past. Go back."

I protest on the grounds that he has obviously seen us conspiring. But I am forced. Despite my flirting being under duress, it works again. On my return journey, the clean-cut suit stops his conversation and asks: "Are you looking for your friends?" Cue a conversation.

Ostler has a formula for the conversation stage: A-E-I-O-U. A is for ask lots of questions. E is for ears to listen, rather than talk. I is for the essence of 'I' - making sure your personality oozes out. O is for Oh my God - showing some animation and a human side. U is for you - the person you are talking to - making them the focus of conversation.

The theory behind girl flirt school is very different to the equivalent male camp. Groups such as puatraining.com, which teach wannabe Romeos on the ground in real bar settings, draw their technique from that described in Strauss's book. The core skill seems to be sickly sweet one-liners, and success is judged on getting a girl into bed.

I witnessed this theory put into practise when we bumped into a suspected group of trainee pick-up artists in our final bar. No sooner had I taken off my coat than a guy who looked about 12 approached me: "Your shoes match the colour of your dress exactly - I'm impressed." It was said with laughingly manufactured charm, but it was so assertive it was hard not to respond, so there must be something to the tactic.

Thankfully Ostler came to my rescue. "He's one of them. Stay away." The 12-year-old shrugged and moved on to a nearby brunette.

Ostler claims that learning to flirt should have a far higher-reaching aim than getting someone's phone number. "It is about lighting the spark to your personality and letting people see it shine through. Flirting opens yourself up to new people and opportunities. What I teach helps ladies socially and in work situations."

It seems then that flirting is more about learning to be liked, not learning to be fancied. From what I saw, the pick-up theory for the boys is far less advanced.

• *Sue Ostler runs the Flirt Schmooze and Shimmy Tour every Friday in central London, £30. Book via flirtdiva.com*