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Adultery Incorporated — The Infidelity Industry

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“Monogamy, in my opinion, is a failed experiment.” That is the declaration of Noel Biderman, a Toronto businessman who wants to sell you an adulterous affair. As the current cover story of *Bloomberg Businessweek* reveals, Mr. Biderman is doing a great deal of business.

The magazine describes AshleyMadison.com as “the premier ‘dating’ website for aspiring adulterers.” Biderman says he came up with the idea after serving as an agent for professional athletes. That job required him to negotiate around the adulterous affairs of his clients. Biderman came to the conclusion that adultery could be big business.



Now, Ashley Madison grosses \$60 million in yearly revenue and produces \$20 million in annual profits. Biderman himself is making millions of dollars a year, and adultery appears to be a growth industry.

The idea behind Ashley Madison is easy enough to understand. Biderman’s plan was to create a website that would appear to cater to women seeking an adulterous partner, while actually attracting men seeking the women for an adulterous liaison. Clients of the site establish a personal profile, check off their “availability status,” and mark their personal preferences. The real money flows to the site when men connect online with women and then have to pay rather steep fees for the privilege of continuing the conversation. If all goes according to plan, adultery soon follows.

Businessweek’s reporter, Sheelah Kolhatkar, describes Noel Biderman as “a lone genius — possibly evil and certainly entrepreneurial.” He serves as chief executive officer of Avid Life Media, the parent company for Ashley Madison. He is also the married father of two young children. In his office the computer monitor flashes his company’s promotional message: “Life is short. Have an affair.”

Biderman’s wife, Amanda, seems unconcerned about both the business and her husband’s chosen role as the captain of the adultery industry. In a statement of almost complete moral evasion, she says: “Really, the business itself doesn’t match who he is as a person — it’s not our lifestyle or value system or any of that.” Well, here’s a clue: if you conceive, establish, and run the business, it *is* your value system. When “Life is short. Have an affair.” is your motto, adultery is “who you are as a person,” even if you never have an actual affair.

She went on: “I mean, yeah, I’d love it if he were working on a cure for cancer. But it’s a business, and that’s how we look at it.”

The same could be said for a house of prostitution, of course, and at least some observers suggest that prostitution is basically what Ashley Madison is all about. After all, though almost all of the men registered at the site are married, about 20 percent of the women are not.

Interestingly, since adultery has now been transformed into a major business, certain metrics become available. Reporter Sheelah Kolhatkar explains that 20-40 percent of heterosexual married men and 20-25 percent of heterosexual

married women will have an affair during their lifetime. She cites University of New Hampshire economist Bruce Elmslie, who claims that men and women commit adultery at about the same rates until the ages of 35 or 40. After that, women are more reluctant to have an affair, and the men surge on.

Biderman explains that women are most likely to have an affair in the workplace with a “work husband” or with the husband of a friend. Men commit adultery under a far wider range of circumstances. Ashley Madison is “drowning in husbands,” Biderman reports.

Biderman launched the site in 2010, but he founded the company back in 2002. He named it Ashley Madison by combining the two most popular names for baby girls that year. He claims just to be meeting a need and rejects the idea that he is actually expanding the numbers of affairs. Nevertheless, anthropologist Helen Fisher accuses Biderman of “preying on human frailty.”

At least in economic terms, Biderman’s idea is paying handsomely. Ashley Madison has already made him a millionaire several times over. David Evans, publisher of *Online Dating Insider*, remarked that Biderman and his company “certainly own that cheaters’ market.” He added, “It’s quite lucrative and successful.”

Amazingly enough, Biderman actually complains that his business is the target of discrimination. After all, Fox turned down his proposed Super Bowl commercial. As a matter of fact, Biderman seems to complain rather constantly about the opposition his company engenders. On the other hand, some suspect that he is also fueling the opposition, stirring up his own publicity.

Sheelah Kolhatkar describes the company in these terms:

What Ashley Madison does is legal. It’s also illicit, in that it helps users violate their marriage vows and engage in deception and secrecy. This presents enormous branding challenges as well as financial ones: How many fund managers want to go home to their wives and announce, “Honey, I found the perfect investment opportunity!”

It is hard to imagine how this company and its founder would *not* face “enormous branding challenges.” With understatement, Kolhatkar expresses the obvious: “He is running a budding empire built on an activity that most people would say is wrong.”

That last statement is revealing in more than one sense. It does seem that most people believe that adultery is wrong. Even so, it is rampant. It seems that many human beings will abandon their moral principles when faced with the opportunity to commit adultery. Ashley Madison exists to create even more of those opportunities.

It undoubtedly says a great deal that *Bloomberg Businessweek* chose this topic for its Valentine’s Day cover story. Why did they run a cover article on a man who declares, “Monogamy, in my opinion, is a failed experiment”? Does this represent the magazine’s agreement with Mrs. Biderman when she says, “. . .it’s a business, and that’s how we look at it”?

I am always glad to hear from readers. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com. Follow regular updates on Twitter at www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler.

Sheelah Kolhatkar, “[Cheating, Incorporated](#),” *Bloomberg Businessweek*, February 10, 2011. [Warning, the article contains sexually explicit language.]

