



FAST FORWARD

# SPERM DONATION 2.0 — AN OLD SIDE HUSTLE WITH A NEW TWIST



Sperm Donation 2.0 — An Old Side Hustle With a New Twist

## WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

Because making babies is important — and potentially profitable.

By Zara Stone

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*In this original week-long series, The Evolution of the Side Hustle: How Gigs Are Killing the 9-to-5, OZY charts the past, present and future of the side hustle. Do you have a unique side hustle that OZY should know about? Let us know at [sidehustles@ozy.com](mailto:sidehustles@ozy.com) and we might feature your gig.*

There's a palm-size centrifuge filled with semen on my kitchen table. It whirs as it spins, isolating and quantifying the volume of sperm in the sample. Five minutes later, it spits out a result, filling a calibrated testing strip with white fluid like a bastardized pregnancy test. The higher the number the fluid reaches, the more desirable the sperm — key information if you're into baby making for progeny or for profit. If it all sounds weird, know this: There's a global shortage of motile swimmers, so sperm banks are desperate for more of the sticky stuff. People's payloads are paying off.

Sperm banks in the U.S. have been around since 1952, and their modest fees for deposits have inched up with inflation. Today, the going rate is \$70 to \$100 a pop. Typically, banks require donors to be between the ages of 18 to 40, pass a number of health tests and abstain for at least two days prior to delivering a **sample**. These days, however, many donors find the conventional business model overly complicated or have aged out (older sperm declines in quality). And the markup that banks slap on deposits — 3,000 percent or more — strikes some on the deliverables side as a ripoff. So it's no surprise that

vendors are looking to cut out the middlemen by finding alternate distribution channels and selling directly to consumers. Facebook is the favored medium, along with a sprinkling of Craigslist posts.

## WHEN YOU GO [FOR A SPERM DONOR] ON A FACEBOOK PAGE OR WITH A RANDOM GUY OFF CRAIGSLIST, YOU'RE GAMBLING WITH LIFE.

FREDRIK ANDREASSON, CHIEF FINANCIAL OFFICER, SEATTLE SPERM BANK

Next-gen home diagnostic tools are helping to make it all happen for procreation entrepreneurs. The recently introduced Yo Sperm Test iPhone attachment (\$50) analyzes semen at home. My \$199 centrifuge from health-care startup Sandstone Diagnostics is prosaically named the Trak Male Fertility Testing System. It even has an app for tracking sperm changes, Fitbit style. “Consumers are recognizing that sperm are important and thus demanding better ways to test and manage their reproductive health,” says Greg Sommer, the company’s co-founder and chief scientific officer. “In Fitbit’s case, the end goal is typically improved personal fitness. In Trak’s case, it’s fatherhood.”

The gear could boost income for suppliers like Joe Donor (his online pseudonym), a Baltimore-Washington-area internet entrepreneur who gets requests for product through several Facebook groups. Donor says he’s created more than 80 Joe Juniors over the past decade via artificial insemination and natural insemination — otherwise known as having intercourse with hopeful mothers-to-be. “The first line in the Bible [is] go forth and multiply,” Donor says via a Facebook chat. (For the record, it’s actually this: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the Earth.”) “Sperm donation allow[s] me to do that in a more socially responsible way.”

He’s currently offering to create “free anchor babies to Muslim women” in response to Trump’s travel ban; normally, he charges \$180. Donor is emphatic that sperm banks aren’t the only place to get quality material. “Sperm banks want you to think you’re going to catch a **disease** if you don’t [use them],” he writes OZY, “because of the medical testing they’re supposedly doing.”

Fredrik Andreasson, chief financial officer at the Seattle Sperm Bank, vehemently disagrees. “When you go on a Facebook page or with a random guy off Craigslist, you’re gambling with life. If [prospective mothers] want to save \$600, imagine the medical bills and trauma if the baby is born with HIV. Babies will die ....” At his bank, donors receive a flat \$70 per sample — \$50 on the spot and \$20 when it gets final approval. Andreasson sells the sample for \$450 to \$635 a unit. Enthusiastic donors can make around \$1,000 per month, but he says most average \$3,000 per year. “We don’t pay more if they look like Brad Pitt or have a Ph.D.,” he says. “Ninety percent of people check donor ethnicity first. Then it varies from height to weight to athleticism and IQ.”

Some prospecting parents claim that Facebook helps them feel more connected to donors since they can check backgrounds and interests. It personalizes the process, and top donors provide tests for sexually transmitted diseases to put their clients’ minds at ease. In the U.K., Nick — he asked OZY not to use his last name; online he’s “Intelligent Sperm Donor U.K.” — gets five to 10 requests per month and says confirmed pregnancies are in double figures over the past three years. He started offering donations on Facebook after sperm banks rejected him for being over 40. “I feel strongly about doing this to help people,” he tells me via a Facebook chat. “I know what a blessing children are.” Facebook confirms that it’s OK with people seeking donors on its network.

Yale sociologist Rene Almeling isn’t surprised that sperm sellers have turned to social media. She spent years studying the industry for her 2011 book, *Sex Cells: The Medical Market for Eggs and Sperm*. “There’s more discussion of online sperm donors [today],” she says. “Men who sign up [are] bypassing the infrastructure of commercial sperm banks.” And there are hundreds of Facebook sperm donor groups, including Best Sperm Donors, which has almost 10,000 members. Almeling says it’s possible these groups could circumvent the discrimination she’s seen in some sperm banks, where lab technicians ruin samples if they feel the donor is “creepy.”

The new home tech and online marketing channels may lead to more deposits, but Andreasson from the Seattle Sperm Bank urges donors to work with an official bank. “Raising a child costs a lot over the years,” he says. “If people can’t afford [sperm], they should think about that. Don’t give it away for free — you’re not helping anyone.”

*Correction: An earlier version of this article mislabeled certain sperm bank employees. They are lab technicians.*

# LIVE CURIOUSLY

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