

Just don't call it networking

Want to start a business, get over a break-up or just chat and shop? A Hub Dot party may be for you, says Bridget Harrison

It's a wet Wednesday night on the Kings Road in London and dozens of well-heeled women are filing into the Anthropologie store. If you were passing you would assume they were there for a late-night shopping event. Instead of heading for the clothes, however, they each pay £10, choose a coloured dot to stick on their top and grab a glass of prosecco.

Much merriment follows as everyone compares their dots, which are chosen to represent their "mindset": red for "I'm established"; green for "I'm here to be inspired"; blue for "I'm here to socialise and shop"; purple for "I want to tell you about..." and yellow for "I have an idea, can anyone help?"

Maria wears red and purple — she's a marine biologist but dreams of opening a B&B in Italy. Rebecca wears yellow — she has just been made redundant from a digital company and is thinking of setting up her own consultancy helping brands promote themselves on YouTube. Another woman wears green — after discovering her husband was having an affair she simply wants to be "inspired by a bunch of great women."

I pick blue — friends have been telling me for months I should come, but I've always felt intimidated by the idea of a room full of women I don't know. I needn't have been. The atmosphere is like a giant drinks party, but one where you don't feel bad about turning up on your own.

This is Hub Dot, a word-of-mouth women's event that has gained 7000 members since it launched in London a year ago and is now branching out across Europe and America. The idea is to bring together women at all stages in life for evenings of story swapping, contact making and mutual encouragement. Just don't call it networking.

"The moment you say 'networking' there is that expectation that you have to impress," shudders Simona Barbieri, the force behind Hub Dot. She is a former events manager for Goldman Sachs and now a stay-at-home mother; her children are aged five, eight and ten. "You feel terrified about who else will be in the room, then you listen to some hot-shot speaker and think, 'Oh, my God that



Women at a Hub Dot event, including Alison Criado-Perez, top right, and Nell Gifford and Lulu Guinness, bottom right. Below: Simona Barbieri

“You don't have to be anybody, you don't even have to have a plan

will never be me', and you go home feeling inadequate. The idea with Hub Dot is that you don't have to be anybody, you don't even have to have a plan.”

Barbieri, 47, gave up her job in 2004 when her first child was born but “kept herself sane” by singing jazz gigs in pubs. She came up with the idea of a non-networking event for women after a coffee with fellow mothers in Parsons Green, southwest London, many of whom had talked about feeling “stuck”. Some, like her, had given up big professional careers; others dreamt of starting businesses or breaking into different sectors, but lacked the confidence or connections to make it happen.

At about the same time a fellow musician had given her a lift home after a gig in Brixton and had been surprised to hear she lived in Fulham and was married to a banker (she met her husband at Goldman Sachs). How many women get held back by being stereotyped, wondered Barbieri? Why

can't women have dreams outside their everyday roles and jobs?

So she invited everyone she knew to a coffee morning at her house. She got everyone to wear a coloured dot sticker representing their “mindset” as an icebreaker. “The idea was to ask ‘What’s your story?’ instead of ‘What do you do?’” she says. “Ninety-eight women came and the energy was incredible. My neighbour brought fabric samples she’d never dared show anyone before and met a friend who did PR for interiors. An acquaintance decided to invest in a food business my Mexican friend was trying to launch.”

Realising she was on to something, Barbieri, who was born in Naples and moved to the UK 17 years ago, got her friends to pool their address books and formally launched Hub Dot in January last year. She cold-called fashion broadcaster Caryn Franklin to speak and invited other women she knew to talk for just one minute.

More than 450 women attended and since then Hub Dot has held eight more events, including gatherings focused on food, fashion, children and entrepreneurship. It recently launched in Milan and Naples, with Paris, Luxembourg, Berlin, Istanbul, Barcelona, Los Angeles, Portland, Houston and The Gambia to come this year. In 2015 it will launch in New York, Sydney and Shanghai.

Speakers have included designer Lulu Guinness, Gifford’s Circus founder Nell Gifford and Silvana Fucito, a campaigner against organised crime in Italy. None is paid. “At Goldman Sachs we’d pay speakers thousands of pounds only for them to disappear into a taxi the moment they got off stage. We wanted Hub Dot to be about ordinary women with extraordinary stories who would stick around afterwards to chat.”

Anthropologie as a venue was a deliberate choice too. “We wanted to recreate the atmosphere of an Italian piazza where women meet, have a drink, do some shopping and talk. That is the way women connect, one minute saying ‘I love your earrings’, the next talking about a passion or a job. Women like to mix it up.”

At the Kings Road Anthropologie event we are celebrating Hub Dot’s first birthday. Four hundred women clutch their prosecco glasses in among the clothes rails, listening to Medicines Sans Frontières’s Alison Criado-Perez, a former stay-at-home mother who, in her fifties, divorced and retrained as a nurse. “I really



never intended to work in a war zone, so I had to ask myself a couple of years ago what on earth was I doing on a converted ferry just about to dock in Misrata at the height of the Libyan conflict. What I was doing, in fact, was following my dream,” she says, to claps and cheers. “The next speaker is Hattie Hasan, who ran away from an arranged marriage, put herself through university and launched Stopcocks, Britain’s first network of female plumbers. “I was born into a poor Muslim Cypriot family. Education was my way out. My family didn’t expect me to go to university. Most people don’t expect to see a female plumber.” Many women dab away tears.

The one-minute speakers follow, among them Catja Thum, a banker turned homeopath who built a hospital in The Gambia with the help of women she met at the first Hub Dot, and Amanda Harrington, a Hollywood make-up artist who shares what she thinks is the most powerful tool for women’s inner confidence: “It’s fake tan!” The atmosphere is like a fevered AA for women. The result is that even reserved types like me suddenly feel inspired to chat about themselves to women we don’t know.

“The positive energy at Hub Dot is unlike any other women’s event I’ve been to,” says Thum. “The sentiment is ‘How can I help?’ rather than ‘What can you do for me?’” Milly Walters, 27, an actress, met theatre director Anna Ostergren at a Hub Dot. Ostergren encouraged her to apply to RADA and helped her prepare for the auditions. “If I had seen Anna’s name on an email, I wouldn’t have had the courage to approach her,” says Walters. “but the moment we got chatting we had chemistry. Going to that event changed my life.”

While insisting it will always be about meeting new people face-to-face, Barbieri is now working on taking the project into the virtual world. The plan is to create a “digital piazza” that will connect Hub Dotters from city to city and be a “talent bank” and a marketplace where women can sell their products. “It will be a mix of TED talks, Etsy and LinkedIn,” she says.

The hope is that this will sustain the venture financially. So far Barbieri has done everything with £8,000 of her own money, relying on a network of friends working for free to help her organise events. Yet even as she dreams of making Hub Dot a household name, she is wary of corporate sponsorship: “I wasn’t ever in this for the money. I don’t want to be Richard Branson. I just want Hub Dot to do incredible things for women.”

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