

Simona Barbieri, far right, runs a global networking business from her home in London



NETWORKING

JOINING THE DOTS

In an increasingly digital age, Simona Barbieri is championing the power of chatting. Natasha Lunn meets an innovator transforming the way women network

Photograph CHRIS FLOYD

IT'S A BALMY NIGHT IN JUNE, ONE OF THOSE GLORIOUS EARLY SUMMER EVENINGS THAT'S FULL OF POSSIBILITY. One hundred or so women are juggling glasses of wine and career anecdotes in a hip east-London courtyard. As the sun falls, laughter bubbles and rises in the air. Young fashion entrepreneurs share their hopes and dreams with venture capitalists, which wouldn't be quite so unusual except for the fact that, until tonight, most of these women were complete strangers. But there rests the magic of Hub Dot – a networking company that's transforming the way women all over the world connect.

It all began three years ago, when ex-Goldman Sachs event organiser, jazz singer and mother-of-three Simona Barbieri invited 98 friends for coffee – in this digital age, she wanted to harness the power of face-to-face friendships. As guests arrived, she encouraged them to choose one of five coloured dots to wear – green: 'I'm

here to be inspired'; yellow: 'I have an idea. Can anyone help?'; blue: 'I'm here to socialise and shop'; red: 'I'm established (in my career/business/motherhood)'; and purple: 'I want to tell you about (my story/work/charity)'.

Her goal? To strip away job titles and formalities in order to connect the dots between her friends. The coloured stickers broke the ice: as women put the world to rights over espressos, something clicked. At the next event, 480 people turned up; today, Hub Dot has 16,000 members in 13 cities around the world.

Impressive stuff, especially as many of us baulk at the idea of 'networking' – but Barbieri, 48, loathes the word, too. 'It reminds me of turning up to events with business cards and feeling under pressure to impress. I always left feeling completely inadequate,

like I'd failed in some way.' It's hard to imagine that. Barbieri has an Oprah-meets-Miuccia Prada air about her – she wears her warmth with both gravitas and an endearing lack of pretension.

At tonight's event, a sea of Hub Doters are vying for her attention: 'Simona!' one waves. 'Ciao, bella!' she replies with open arms, not for the first (or last) time this evening. She is a natural connector, but there's something special that marks her out from your average social butterfly: authenticity. Barbieri and her team are genuinely interested in ensuring the women in this room leave with a life-changing business card in their pocket. It's Hub Dot's USP, and I witness it first-hand when a nervous wannabe entrepreneur asks the room for advice. Her pitch is vague, but Barbieri steps in like a reassuring >>

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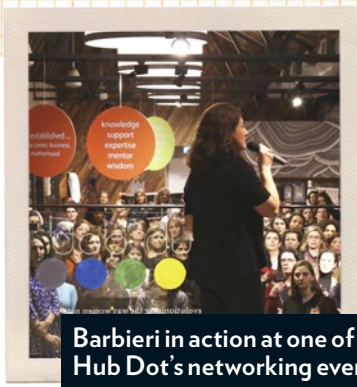
fairy godmother: 'Tell the room what you need and we'll find someone who can help you.' She turns to face the room: 'Ladies, if you can't help this woman, think of someone who can.'

By now, anyone who arrived with nerves or anxieties has shed them. The room fizzes with anything-could-happen energy, which Barbieri calls 'dot alchemy' – when 'two women wearing dots connect at a specific time, and a transformation happens'. She's not exaggerating – at one event, an entrepreneur secured on-the-spot investment of £100k, from a woman who fell in love with her idea.

What is it about Hub Dot, I wonder, that empowers people to let their guard down? To tell their stories to strangers? A week later, at her kitchen table in London's Parsons Green, from where she still runs the company, Barbieri tells me she thinks it's because Hub Dot encourages women in different industries and at different stages of their career to connect. 'Too often at corporate networking events we are glued to our job titles,' she says. 'But with the dots, those labels slip away. People laugh at me because I always say I don't want to "lean in", Sheryl

Sandberg-style – I want to recline the chair. I believe that if you decide to leave a job in the city because you know you'd be happier working in a bakery, you shouldn't feel any pressure not to do so.

'Society gives us these unrealistic role models, especially in business, which don't take into account that a lot of women don't want to be in a boardroom. We should celebrate all of their choices. I believe they can all help each other, from the waitress to the CEO.' And that's why so many




Barbieri in action at one of Hub Dot's networking events

women are drawn here – Hub Dot pulls these groups of women together, quashing the myth that we need to tread on each other to get to the top.

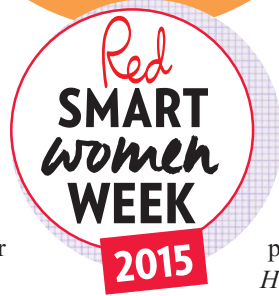
Currently, Hub Dot doesn't make a profit (its 43 staff are all passionate volunteers), but I get the impression that is about to change. The company has just secured a £150k investment and has its sights on an e-commerce arm and an online platform that will link up women who have attended its events all over the world.

From just one coffee morning, Barbieri has grown a powerful global network, and she is as surprised as anyone. 'Perhaps it's me!' she laughs. 'I mean, I'm imperfect. Maybe that makes everyone else feel like there's no judgement in the room. To be honest, I don't know what it is, I'm just thrilled that this crazy idea has touched the hearts of so many women.'

Wherever the 'dot alchemy' comes from, with all the challenges we face at work – the gender pay gap, deep-rooted sexism, the barriers stopping mothers from progressing – I leave Barbieri's house feeling happy that one woman has carved out a little space where we can learn from and lean on each other. And that's a pretty good place to start. 

Hub Dot's Transformational Journey of Motherhood event is on September 30th; hubdot.com

What Simona Barbieri doesn't know about networking isn't worth knowing, and she'll be sharing her insights in an exclusive event at **Red's Smart Women Week house on September 24th**. Book your place, and find out more about our packed schedule of Smart Women Week events, at Redonline.co.uk/SmartWomenWeek



SEPTEMBER 21ST-25TH

How to start your own network



When freelance journalist Phoebe Lovatt, 27, moved to LA from London three years

ago, she had to build relationships from scratch. 'LA is very spread out, and a lot of people freelance, so it can be quite a lonely place if you let it,' she explains. Instead of dwelling on the friendships she missed, Lovatt decided to create a space where women like her could connect, share ideas and inspire each other – and so The WW (Women's Working) Club was born. Its aim? 'To help women feel part of a support network,' says Lovatt. 'I wanted to provide a place for women to knock around ideas for work, or creative projects they want to get off the ground. And to shine a light on the innovative things women are doing.' That's exactly what the club has been doing since it launched in January, through a series of 'work parties' in LA, New York and, more recently, at London's Ace Hotel. These free weekly events, each with a panel of clued-up speakers, link together 50 or so creative women who might otherwise have been working alone at home. While the club has a digital presence (via podcasts and a blog), Lovatt believes its success is testament to the power of physical events: 'That feeling you get when you're in a room with other women is so inspiring.' She's right – sitting in front of her, hearing about the network she set up on her own, I feel like I can do *anything*. But where to start? 'Find your tribe,' Lovatt tells me. 'I truly believe that sharing ideas and inspiration with women like you, who have similar ambitions and attitudes, is the best way to build your personal network.' **NATASHA LUNN**
Find out more at thewwclub.com