

# JOIN THE DOTS

Hubdot started in a Fulham kitchen and has quickly become a global phenomenon. *Absolutely* meets **Simona Barbieri**, the woman behind it

Words **PENDLE HARTE**

**N**etworking. Why does even the thought of it inspire so much dread? Simona Barbieri finds the idea of networking repellent, yet she heads up Hubdot, an organization that arranges fairly large-scale events designed to help women connect with each other. But not by networking. At least, not formally. Because, for one thing, Hubdot never happens in a conference centre; and for another, it never defines women by their jobs (or lack of them).

Barbieri is sitting at her kitchen table in Fulham surrounded by a small group of enthusiastic women. It is half term; her children are about to set off for the park with the nanny and her house is a hive of activity. This is Hubdot HQ, a comfortable domestic space that's at the heart of a growing international movement. Hubdot started out with

●● *People can meet, INSPIRE, SHOP connect AND DO WHATEVER they WANT TO DO* ●●

one single coffee morning in 2012 and now it has 15,000 members all over the world. It's an undeniably impressive phenomenon, especially built as it is on the idea of not networking.

Italian-born Barbieri sees traditional networking as a deeply un-female thing, though she is convinced that women fundamentally connect with each other, that 'throughout history women have always shared wisdom through storytelling.' Describing herself as 'very anglicised', having lived in London for over 18 years with her British husband and children, she has always felt that London lacks the community found on

the 'piazza'. So she set out to recreate something of the space where 'people can meet, inspire, shop, connect and do whatever they want to do', because even when she had a high-powered city job, she still found networking 'cringing' and intimidating. You'd never guess that to meet her, however - she's warm, smiling and talkative. 'You'll have to stop me if I talk too much,' she rushes.

In 2012 she had given up her job at Goldman Sachs and spent six years looking after three children while spending evenings singing in jazz clubs. 'I felt very lucky to be with the kids but when somebody once told me that I was very lucky to have made everything work, I thought, there must be a way of making things happen for people. I decided to open my house and see what happened.' She sent an email to her entire address book, inviting them to come to a coffee morning, to forget whether they were CEO, mother or artist, to stop thinking they had nothing

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to give and to come and pick a dot with a colour that expresses their mindset. 'That email went viral and 98 people turned up at my house; I only knew half of them. The energy was incredible. The last people left at 3.45 in the afternoon.' And that single morning inspired such a flurry of queries from people wanting to come to the next one that she realized she was onto something and felt compelled to do something about it.

Now Hubdot gatherings happen all over the world: in Athens, Barcelona and Berlin as well as Barbieri's native Naples. There are meetings in Portland, Houston and Washington as well as in the Gambia, and her inbox is overflowing with new enquiries. She has tapped into an important flow of female energy by creating an environment where 'everybody feels relaxed and we can talk about breast cancer as well as business and all sorts of ideas because that's how women engage. It's almost primitive, the sharing of stories.'

There are five coloured dot stickers; everyone chooses one and wears it all evening as an icebreaker; nobody ever utters the dreaded words: 'What do you



do?'. Red is 'I'm established'. Yellow means 'I have an idea, can anyone help?' Green is 'I'm here to be inspired'; blue 'I'm here to socialise and shop', purple is 'I want to tell you about... (my story/my work)'.

Many London events happen at King's Road concept store Anthropologie, a

span all areas of life. And as a result of what Barbieri calls 'dot alchemy', countless fruitful connections have been made in people's work lives as well as their private lives. 'We are experiencing something very powerful and very authentic,' she says. Has it taken over her life? 'Completely.' ♦

large space where several hundred women can chat, shop and meet while listening to brief speeches from a vast variety of different women telling stories that

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The next Hubdot event is Dot Supper Club at The Imperial, 577 King's Road, SW6 on 22 September, followed by Hubdot's Journey of Motherhood on 30 September at Anthropologie in Marylebone High Street. Book tickets at [hubdot.com](http://hubdot.com)