



# THE NEW RULES OF NETWORKING

**Don't work a room**

**Don't hand out business cards**

**Don't lean in**

**Don't EVER call it networking**

*Rebecca Newman talks to the women transforming London's networking scene*

*'Do you come here often?'*  
A Huddoi event where women exchange stories, advice and skills.



There are many lessons to come out of the phone-hacking trial, which concluded two weeks ago. One is the power of networks. The remarkable rise of Rebekah Brooks was fuelled not only by her qualities as a reporter and editor, but also by her symbiotic talent for building circles of support, drawing close the likes of David Cameron and Rupert Murdoch. There will always be insider groups, cabals of neighbourly millionaires who bond on horseback as they canter between their estates, but the way they are created has changed. A wider trend is happening, which has the potential to transform the way we do business and live our lives. Whereas Brooks' networking was egotistical, power-hungry and self-centred, today it's about softer skills: the exchange of ideas, mutual inspiration and, critically, helping others as much as helping yourself. The first rule of new networking is – you do NOT talk about networking.

I join this revolution on a recent balmy night in Fulham. The occasion is a HubDot gathering: one of a series of women-only events at which people gather to discuss their mindset, hopes and dreams, rather than to seek out

## WHEREAS REBEKAH BROOKS' NETWORKING WAS EGOTISTICAL, POWER-HUNGRY AND SELF-CENTRED, TODAY IT'S ABOUT SOFTER SKILLS

other useful contacts in corporate marketing. The evening's theme is 'art and creativity', the venue a chic, contemporary gallery. On arrival, guests choose a dot to stick on their lapel: blue, for example, says 'I'm here to socialise'; yellow, 'I have an idea, can anyone help?'; green, the most popular, 'I'm here to be inspired'.

HubDot is the brainchild of Simona Barbieri, 47, a Goldman Sachs events manager turned jazz singer and mother of three. 'I've always been a connector; I know people from all kinds of backgrounds. As a mother in Fulham I had an incredible group of friends,' she tells me. 'But some of them felt "stuck"; others had a dream but didn't know how to pursue it, and others were working mothers who felt guilty.' While she had always cringed at the idea of networking, hating its inherent one-upmanship and need to impress, Barbieri believed that all these women had something to offer one another.

'We created the dots so that, rather than saying who you were or what you did, you could describe your mindset. I don't care if you are head of whatever or a mum. I am the anti-Sheryl Sandberg: don't lean in, recline! We believe as long as you feel fulfilled, then you have a story worth celebrating.'

The initial get-together – a coffee morning at her house in 2012 – was such a success that Barbieri formalised the idea and at the first

HubDot night in February 2013, 400 people turned up. That evening many connections were made, including a singer who met an acting coach and, with her mentoring, is now on an MA acting course; four women who independently all wanted to set up a co-working space and are planning to start one together; a breast-feeding consultant and a doctor from The Gambia who met and are now going to run mobile breast-feeding clinics.

Without any promotion, word about HubDot continues to spread. Some 8,000 people have signed up; 48 volunteers help run it (so far the only funding is £10,000 of Barbieri's own money); and events take place in 27 cities around the world from Milan to Cheltenham, Portland to Luxembourg. There are even get-togethers in The Gambia and Senegal.

Back in Fulham, the feeling as guests arrive is apprehensive. Seeing me alone, a HubDot volunteer named Alice bounds over (volunteers often engineer introductions based on the profile you give the site), a cool twenty-something in a print jumpsuit with matching powder-blue glasses, who runs PR at Anthropologie. She introduces me to a young gallerist, who tells me: 'I came to an event and got talking to the person next to me. It turned out she helps people find art – and her clients have since taken work by several of my artists.'

Now that most of the 200 guests have arrived, Barbieri introduces five speakers. They each have one minute to share their tales. The first, Ann, was working in sales and had a two-year-old daughter when she was diagnosed with cancer. Doing art with her child helped her recovery enormously, and she started a company making books of photos of children's art, MyKidsArtBook. She ends her speech: 'Look up, and see what is important.'

The next, Beatrice, was a City litigator who picked up a paintbrush for the first time on maternity leave. She quit her job, and she now sells her work and runs a gallery. 'Don't let fear of failure inhibit you,' she says. Uplifting and motivating, the speeches are like more immediate, much faster TED talks.

Then comes Robin, who wants to create a textile company to create jobs for the women she used to work with in mental health support: a place 'to rebuild the confidence life has taken away'. Barbieri asks who in the audience might be able to give Robin marketing advice; ten hands shoot up.

When the speakers have finished, any reticence has evaporated. The atmosphere pulses. From graduates to the recently retired, from

## OLD-SCHOOL NETWORKERS

Below left: Sheryl Sandberg and Hillary Clinton at a gala, 2013.

Below right: Prince William and Rebekah Brooks at a charity event, 2008



## DON'T LEAN IN – RECLINE

*How to network in 2014*

**1 Relax** Don't talk about what you do but who you are and what story you'd like to write for your life

**2 Listen** Use 'What is your story?' as an ice-breaker

**3 Share** Don't let your ego get in the way of sharing your best ideas

**4 Ask** Everyone you talk to will have some small piece of wisdom or inspiration for you

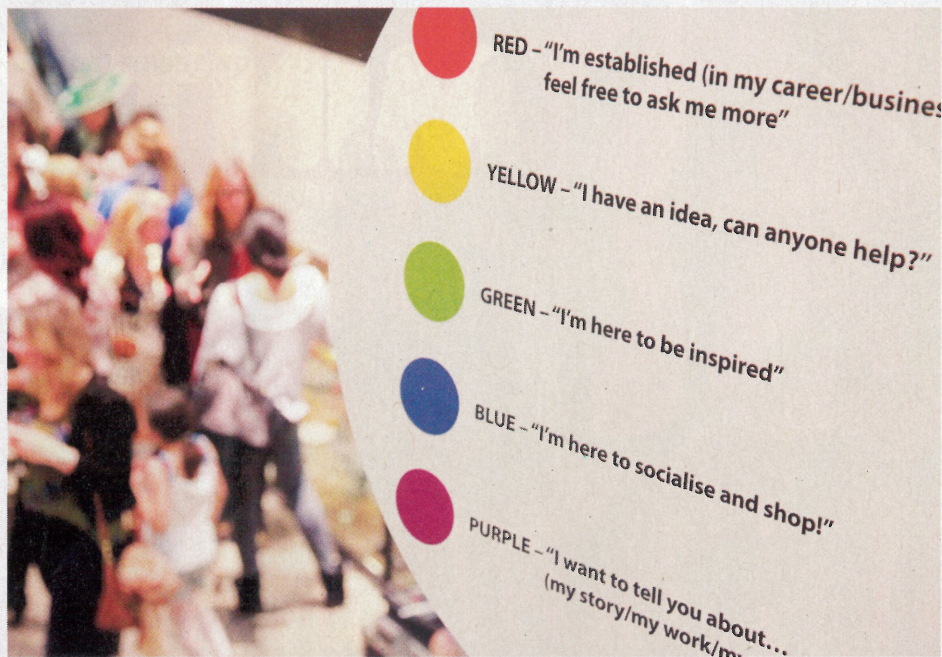
**5 Help** Aside from altruism being the surest route to happiness, you may find another person's good fortune will lift your own

batik-clad hipsters to Kate Middleton types in wrap dresses, there's a pitch of excited conversation, advice being given and numbers taken. You simply turn to the person next to you and enquire about their dots.

'The first time I came I'd cut my own hair says Robin, 'and I met someone who gave me a free haircut. Tonight there are people I hope will mentor my business.' An older lady, Ni who gilds glass, tells me: 'If you are feeling bit out of the swim of things, maybe as a mother or in your career, talking to someone who is bit ahead can make you realise there is light at the end of the tunnel, and help you to move forward.' Some hours later I whirl into the night with a bushel of new Twitter handle websites to look at and a feeling that everything is possible. It later turns out that some books by an illustrator I met will now, via Alice be featured on the shelves of Anthropologie.

What, I ask Barbieri, is igniting this passion for the HubDot way? 'Cities can be very isolating – we live in our own circles. The people here are very open, and happy to share the experience or wisdom.' She pauses. 'I never thought it would be women-only, but our members strongly feel that men would change the energy. I grew up in Naples, where my aunt taught me everything. I never had that in London. HubDot goes back to this feminine way helping each other, and I think our success





Clockwise from far left: Simona Barbieri; the coloured dots worn at HubDot events; Julia Hobsbawm of Editorial Intelligence; listening to HubDot speeches

because this strikes a profound chord.'

The new ways of seeking mutual support are not, however, limited to women. Julia Hobsbawm – one of London's most connected, and the networking doyenne at London's Cass Business School – runs a company called Editorial Intelligence (EI). She differentiates the goals of EI from old-school networking by calling it a 'knowledge networking' business.

'These days there's a tsunami of information and social media. People increasingly want to be connected to a stream of good ideas, and to other people who will stimulate them. In the 1980s, networking was transactional, about making sales.' About elbowing your way to the top? 'Yes. People talk about Rebekah Brooks, the great networker with scores of A-listers. I don't think of that as networking, though. That is accumulating power.

'Today,' she continues, 'it is about connecting with smart people from whom you can learn and be inspired.' Hobsbawm affirms that working a room and handing out cards is vulgar, and that the watchwords for today are generosity and reciprocity.

At entry level, EI is a free-to-access aggregator of ideas: there's a daily digest of what to watch, read and listen to; while paid membership gets you invitations to, for example, a private view with other people whose ideas will inspire and stimulate you.

Like HubDot, EI revolves around the belief that access to wide-ranging groups of people gives you strength. Hobsbawm notes that whereas people used to want to meet peers within their own sphere, today they are looking much further afield; and that is where the sparks really fly. She believes our melting-pot capital is the centre of the (new) networking world, and is making a series for BBC Radio 4 on the subject. 'I think a big shift is coming, where instead of networking being a nice thing it will be a must-have for everyone, be they CEO or freelancer. It will be an essential part of boosting our productivity.'

There is broader evidence of this desire to share knowledge, to find quality thought and access other people from whom you can learn at events such as Mothers Meeting. Here, London mothers get together for forums on, for example, entrepreneurship with a session brainstorming each other's obstacles and goals; another might be on time management and branding; another with designers sharing fashion advice, or sexperts giving tips.

It has also impacted on London workspaces. Co-working space Central Working has blossomed in three years from a small space in Bloomsbury to two huge further zones in

Shoreditch and Whitechapel (with members including gaming app Angry Birds and oddjobman finder Task Rabbit, as well as Microsoft Ventures); it puts its differentiating factor entirely down to its sense of community.

Founder James Layfield tells me: 'Central Working is all about bringing people together: we make personal introductions between members all the time and run monthly soirées where they can meet each other.' Based on the premise that if everyone helps each other, overall growth and development are boosted, Layfield makes introductions that have resulted in Smithfield coffee shop Dose moving into the Google Campus, TaskRabbit meeting a connector who was able to boost considerably the number of oddjob 'taskers' on its books, and one lady with a sore back meeting an excellent physio. 'In the West we have lost that sense of community. If there is a place that fosters it, we jump right in.'

It is pleasing that the old idea of helping each other to help yourself finally seems to be manifest; that the facelessness of Twitter or LinkedIn is giving way to face-to-face contact; that inspiration can come from places you wouldn't normally think to look.

'At HubDot, the feeling is not "What's in it for me?" but "What can I do for you?" Everyone is very keen to give back. After all, you feel a million dollars if someone takes your advice.' **ES**