

Well connected

The day of the fast-and-furious networking breakfast is gone. **Feargus O'Sullivan** introduces you to the world of sociable contact-making in the highest echelons

No matter how great your business ideas are, they will only gather dust on your hard disc if you don't have the contacts necessary to make them a reality. While standard business meetings with existing clients and collaborators offer the occasional opportunity to build relationships, it's hard to escape the nagging feeling that the people you really need are out there somewhere beyond your grasp.

It is this hunch that propels many entrepreneurs to haunt breakfast networking meetings, PR meet-and-greet sessions and other network-building jamborees. While they have their uses, there's no denying that such events can sometimes be grim, futile experiences. No matter how well-prepared you are, you can still find yourself thrown into a scrum of bores and fakers, half of whom are wasting your time business-wise, while the other half are wasting your patience by blowing their own dubiously impressive trumpets.

Nonetheless, if you discriminate carefully about the places you choose, the networking scene can still turn up a fair amount of wheat hidden among the chaff and get your name known in the right circles. London's Adam Street private members' club, which targets entrepreneurs and freelancers as its core membership, hosts two superior business networks – The Supper Club and the Mandrake Club – which both attempt to offer an antidote to the pushiness and blind alleys of their less successful competitors.

It was the low calibre of participants in many contact-building events that drove Duncan Cheattle to found the exclusive Supper Club three years ago. His former position as director of not-for-profit networking organisation The Glasshouse gave him sound experience of the pitfalls of networking events.

"I got frustrated by the low quality of attendees at our events," he

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explains. "There were too many accountants and lawyers, even life coaches, toying with the idea of setting up as entrepreneurs rather than people already running their own projects."

Determined to forge a network that had less talk and more trouser, Cheattle decided to set the bar for the Supper Club's membership high. Membership is only offered to CEOs, founders and directors of enterprises with annual sales exceeding £1 million, and is barred to lawyers – dubbed "doom mongers" by Cheattle – and consultants.

To avoid the promiscuous scrum of other networking bunfights, Cheattle also limits attendance at each monthly event to eight members, all of whom are introduced to each other by email before meeting in the flesh. This meeting takes the form of a dinner at Adam Street, where there is a strict policy of cross-table talk only, to ensure maximum meaningful 'face time' between attendees. These dinners are chaired by Cheattle himself, so he can steer conversation towards topics of mutual interest and away from Alan Sugar-style hot air.

"Of course there's a strong social element," he shrugs. "We let the conversation float, but some people, shall we say, enjoy the sound of their own voice a little too much, and I sometimes gently suggest that they might like to move on...What our members value so much is the way our dinners work as a place to offer and receive advice that is genuinely disinterested. The club is people talking to a peer group, not to a professional adviser who is selling his or her own time, so you're more likely to get the short answer than from a paid-up consultant."

So far, members have been recruited gradually, through personal introduction, ensuring a network of reasonably close acquaintances. The slight whiff of haughtiness around the Supper Club's strict self-regulation is somewhat off-putting to those not yet able to meet the admission criteria. Like a little halo of razor wire snaking around the very tip of the greasy pole, the membership rules could appear as if they were keeping those just beneath away from grabbing the final prize of high-level contacts and peer recognition. However, it is the club's strict exclusivity that accounts for part of the project's success, and with the club's coterie of 100 members growing steadily, and Cheattle looking to spawn other clubs around the country, it is clearly destined to be more than a top-drawer version of the masons.

While the membership's calibre is impressive, fees are relatively



SARAH McVITTIE

CEO 82ASK, AN INTERNET AND SMS SERVICE THAT PROMISES TO ANSWER ANY QUESTION YOU CAN POSE.

McVittie joined the Supper Club two and a half years ago, soon after founding 82ask, an email and SMS service that promises to answer any question you may have.

"When I first joined, I was a lot greener as an entrepreneur, and it really helped me avoid the pitfalls of a new business, learning which mistakes to avoid from people who had been in the same situation. At first meeting there were talks about skills-sharing, but when we started to take off as a company, we began working with a number of people from there, mainly in marketing and PR."

Networking

modest and contribute to the club's success in attracting the high-powered: 70 per cent of invitees join after attending their first meeting, while the reasonable £150 joining fee, subsequent £40 monthly dues, and average of £65 per dinner, neatly stave off nagging member questions about value for money.

Cheatle claims that many productive partnerships have come out of the club's strictly cross-sector meetings, generating business to the tune of roughly £250,000. Nonetheless, the Club is as much about sharing experiences and pooling advice as about making the deal.

"I always found that the standard breakfast networking events were just too pushy and short-term to be really helpful," he says. "We're more interested in building up relationships over time that are going to be genuinely durable and useful."

While the Supper Club confines itself to the upper ranks of the country's entrepreneurs, the Mandrake Club, another Adam Street networking stalwart, operates a different form of selection for its salons. Though not restricted to CEOs or founders, it nonetheless prioritises entrepreneurs and 'go-getters' over the more staid ranks of bankers and lawyers, in an attempt to ensure that its soirées maintain a degree of buzz and dynamism.

Founded by Channel Four chairman Luke Johnson and overseen by Charlie Hoult, CEO of branding company Loewy, the club, as you would expect, has a more media-oriented member base, with marketing and consultancy strongly represented. With around 600 members about 60 usually attend their monthly gatherings and the club focuses discussion through talks from an impressive roster of guest speakers, who have recently included tycoon Rocco Forte, Travelex chairman Lloyd Dorfman and MP Clare Short.

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But for many members it's the opportunity to meet and socialise informally after the talks that is the club's star attraction, opening up a rich furrow of like-minded, potentially helpful acquaintances away from the first-day-at-big-school stiffness and best behaviour of more business minded, less socially inclined schmooze sessions.

Clare Connell, an independent management consultant who has been attending Mandrake Club meetings for almost a year, feels the club strikes a good balance between business and socialising: "I've set up meetings as a result of chats at the club and forged an alliance with another company after initial contact there, but for me it's also about having another bunch of interesting people to meet up and have drinks with. If you overstress the business side in a club, you end up with a load of total bores pushing their business cards on you all night."

Clearly this new breed of events use careful selection to ensure their members get what they want. If you can walk the tightrope between social lion and deal broker and put your best foot forward without stomping on people's toes, you may just find that there is a niche in the networking scene that will get you the advice and contacts you crave.



Lawyers are banned from the Supper Club. Duncan Cheatle, front right among a group of Supper Clubbers, writes them off as 'doom-mongers'. Consultants are blacklisted, too.

SCOTT PIELSTICKER

FOUNDER, BLUEBACK, A PRIVATE CAB HIRE COMPANY

Pielsticker, who has been a Supper Club member since its inception, treats the club like a masterclass for business problem-solving. "Every entrepreneur needs help, you can't be a master of everything," he says. "That's why organisations like the Supper Club are so useful: they're great ways to hear what other people are grappling with, be it fundraising, recruitment or whatever. For me the club is primarily a network of friends and advisers – it's not such a sales-y environment as breakfast collaboration meetings, it's more relaxed – but we do use other members' services and they use ours, so, yes, it has helped our business."

BEN HART

CEO, THE GLASS PARTNERSHIP

As head of a design and interactive marketing agency, Ben Hart has met many of his clients at networking events such as the Mandrake Club. "What makes the Mandrake different for me are the nuggets of insight you can glean from their guest speakers. It helps give the events a focus and makes them more than just standing around drinking someone else's sponsored booze. I enjoy the social aspect of the club but, for me, the networking opportunities are the thing – and we are currently pre-closing contracts with companies we made contact with there."