

NETWORKING IT

If you're sick of the scene and want to meet like-minded professionals and creatives, private members' clubs could be just what you're looking for. Lotte Jeffs investigates

Think 'networking', think laminated name-tags, free USB sticks, tea and biscuit buffets, and lots of drab men in grey suits talking about their golf handicap. It's not the most glamorous of terms, and one we're more likely to associate with boring business events than some of the hottest lesbian soirees of the moment.

'Networking to me just means connecting people, whether that's for a business or social gain, or both', says Andi Schembri, director of Citypink, one of the UK's first networking groups for professional gay women, and currently the most popular. We were catching up over a whisky sour at Adam Street – the cosy members' club where Citypink hosts its monthly events. Women in designer suits and shiny brogues were busy shaking new hands and chatting with old friends. The vibe was relaxed and friendly. I went on my own and Andi introduced me to clusters of women who were all very welcoming, meaning there were none of those awkward standing on my own-where the hell are the canapés? moments.

There's definitely a knack to networking and the women at Citypink are experts. 'So what do you do?' Somehow the inevitable opener doesn't sound intimidating when these women ask, and they genuinely seem interested in the answer, asking all the right follow-up questions. If they're thinking 'so what can you do for me' they don't show it. I have to say it makes a welcome change from screaming platitudes over throbbing dance music at club nights. I like meeting new

people, and having actual conversations that I can hear, with women who don't think I'm trying to chat them (or their girlfriend) up, and I will happily admit that yes, in lesbian years, this means I'm old.

Christine Townsend, who runs Samphire, another London lesbian networking event, explains: 'I noticed the crowd at Lounge [a monthly lesbian night she also promotes] was getting younger and I was feeling out of place at my own club. I wanted somewhere to go that wasn't stuffy, but was more upmarket and classy than the mainstream lesbian scene. I wanted to socialise with women of my own age who like to go out but don't need a full-on clubbing experience – so I started Samphire.'

We met at one of her events in the fabulous St Martins Lane Hotel, which is all high ceilings and glaring white minimalism, offset with some amazingly grand furniture and quirky sculptures. The crowd seemed artier than at Citypink which is mainly white-collar – I had great chats with a photographer, a writer, and a lady who restored brass, or silver artefacts, or something, at the British Museum (I was listening – honest!).

As the champagne flowed, conversations turned from the professional to the personal and I wondered whether, in a room full of like-minded lesbians, romance really wasn't on the cards. I got talking to one woman who put it well. 'Networking?' she scoffed 'It's just flirting with women in the same salary bracket!'

There was an almost-flirty feel at Samphire, but it seemed more of a subtext. Despite eyes wandering, and people talking in that extra intense way that marks small talk from a sexually-charged verbal encounter, it was still business cards that were being swapped, not mobile numbers.