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INTO THE LYONS DEN

STORY BY JOHN YATES IMAGES BY KEVIN PARKIN

IT STARTED OUT AS A SMALL GROUP OF LIKE-MINDED BUSINESS PEOPLE GOING OUT FOR A PINT AND A CURRY AND HAS GROWN IN TO ONE THE MOST SUCCESSFUL OUT-OF-OFFICE SOCIAL GATHERINGS IN THE SHEFFIELD CITY REGION

When the Lyons Den grew to 50 members, its parents had palpitations. When the hundredth person signed up, they were beside themselves with joy. Now, less than three years since the fertile minds of Kevin Parkin and Alan Lyons gave birth to the Den, its membership has grown to over 1,500. 'It has exceeded our wildest dreams,' says Kevin, who first came up with the name back in the days when he was the Managing Director at DavyMarkham, and Alan was his contact at the business development agency, Creative Sheffield.

'We talked about how stuffy a lot of events were in the region,' said Kevin. 'You go out dressed up in your black tie and have dinner with the ten or so people sitting round the table and you don't get chance to meet anyone else.' The Den is the polar opposite of this – informal, convivial, friendly, unstuffy and a great place to meet other people in the business community. When I suggest that it is one of the most successful networking groups in the patch, however, Kevin bristles.

'Let's just dispel one myth at the outset – this is not a networking club. There are many, many networking clubs in the region that I am sure perform excellent services to people who haven't already got a full and

active social network. The Den is for people who like going out and enjoying themselves in an informal occasion; people who are not there primarily for business purposes or to better themselves. It is for those who would not normally go to a networking event because a lot of those events are false, stuffy, and dare I say it, synthetic,' Kevin says. For Alan, the success of the Den is that it harks back to a time when people would meet, almost by chance, on a Friday afternoon at a local pub and get into conversation – it was a natural, almost spontaneous event. A networking event, by contrast, usually involves you having to stand up and say who you are, what you do, and what your company does. 'It puts you on the spot. That's not how the Den works,' says Alan. 'Quite simply the Den started from the idea of coming out for a pint – and it could be a pint of beer or a pint of orange juice – and then someone asking whether anyone fancied going on for a curry.' It is from these humble beginnings that the Den was born. 'It is for people who want to come out, have a bit of fun, let their hair down, and then drive home – but it is also about giving people the chance to meet people who they would not ordinarily meet,' Alan adds, explaining how he and Kevin work to ensure that those who turn up to the Den's events not only enjoy ▶

FIVE VOICES FROM THE DEN...

'Lyons Den's appeal and success is because there is no hierarchy and it is not profit or motive driven – the new, the old, the rich, the poor, the large, the small all meet and mix effortlessly in a totally relaxed, informal, friendly atmosphere over drinks and a meal.'

Chris Hudson of Chimo Holdings

'The Lyons Den has been the best thing to hit the business community in the last three decades. The ability to meet in a very informal way has been of great benefit through the recent tough times. To see the next generation coming through and to watch their confidence rise as they mix with those that have got the T-shirt is especially rewarding. Long may it continue and its founding father be given the credit he deserves.'

Vincent Middleton of Newburgh Engineering

'Lyons Den is a networking group which isn't really a networking group, if that makes any sense! You get to see familiar and friendly faces but also have the chance to meet management/director level business people who you wouldn't normally meet. Notwithstanding Kevin's best attempts to curtail the number of attendees through the deployment of the Parkin Joke Book, membership continues to grow and as a result, there are always new people to meet at each event.'

Ben Hendry Nabarro LLP

'Lyons Den has been a breath of fresh air for the business community in Sheffield. The ability to go somewhere and not be badged up means you have to make the effort to talk to people without pre-judging them by the company they work for. Whilst I have fallen foul of the 'no business talk' rule, I have taken my punishment in good spirit! However, do not expect to come once and secure business. Come often, enter into the spirit of things, contribute on LinkedIn, and then you might see a pay-off. Business is about people after all.'

Melanie Parker Irwin Mitchell

'Not only have we found the events to be fun – something that can't be said for all networking groups, but informative too. We have found that Sheffield is very much alive and kicking, a vibrant hub for a variety of businesses and filled with more talented people than it appears on the surface.'

Jane Townsend

Marketing Manager, Rollem Ltd

themselves, but are also able to develop more meaningful relationships with other people in the Sheffield city region business community.

Kevin, however, is clear. 'We are absolutely fanatical about business not being done at these events. So much so that if we catch people undertaking transactions or business we name and shame them. We had one chap who came to an early meeting and he was selling mobile phone contracts and we caught him at it. When we pulled him up on this he was embarrassed and understood that is not how the Den works. Next morning he rang me to say thanks for a great evening and mentioned that six people had contacted him for business after the event.'

And this is the really clever bit. While no business cards can be exchanged at these events, and each event appears to be a spontaneous gathering of friends, the reality is that behind the scenes Kevin and Alan are playing the role of matchmakers, using their unrivalled knowledge of who's who in the city region's business community to bring people together in a way that builds strong personal and business relationships. 'Professional services people are great networkers,' says Alan. 'But having lawyers talking to lawyers is missing the bigger picture. The Den gives lawyers the chance to get to know their counterparts in the banking community, and gives bankers the chance to talk to manufacturers. So there is this whole raft of second tier management who haven't got this interface across other sectors – by doing this in the Den we believe we are promoting cross-fertilisation of people and ideas. The sooner they get to know one another, the sooner relationships are formed and that will help keep business in the city region.'

But it gets better. Having set up the Lyons Den, the two men realised quite quickly that they were missing out on attracting the next generation of business leaders in the region. 'We have got the longstanding business leaders,' said Alan. 'But who is going to take over the reins when they retire? That's when we thought of the Next Generation Den, where we have the leaders of tomorrow meeting one another today so that when they do get to the helm they already know who the lawyers are, who the bankers are, who the IP attorneys are, and who the key people in the universities are. By the time they come to the senior positions they will be much more rounded and grounded people. Interestingly a lot of companies are now using the Lyons Den as a development tool for their staff, helping them enhance their social skills and to find out who's who, and what's what in the business community.' So is the Lyons Den just a laddish night out? 'Not at all,' the two men say. In an almost old fashioned way, Alan boasts that almost half the people who attend the Den events are 'ladies.' And while Kevin's jokes can be achingly bad, they are much more Sid James

than Sid Vicious. He tells me that one of the Den regulars is a fanatical bird watcher and has his private plane on standby to fly him to any rare sighting.

'We gave him a Den award last year,' Kevin says, 'for the man most likely to have a cockatoo.' The old ones are the best ones, of course. And if people find such humour offensive, Kevin has some polite advice – 'please don't come.'

But come they do, and in large numbers. More than 170 people turned up for the Christmas do – 'we could have filled the place two times over' – and the six-weekly gatherings of the Den regularly attract in excess of 55 people, with around 40 attending the Next Generation events. According to Kevin, the Den has sired more than a dozen offspring around the region, some smaller, quieter and more private meetings between like-minded business people first brought together in the larger Den.

When patent attorney David McWilliams established a new office in the city, it was the Lyons Den he turned to, to find his way around. 'The Lyons Den provided the best possible platform for us to meet and integrate with the real movers and shakers in the city region,' says David of Withers and Rogers LLP. 'Although overt 'marketing' is outlawed at the events, Alan and Kevin are passionate about forging great relationships within the Den. Alan in particular works tirelessly to make sure that the right people get a chance to meet one another. This makes the Lyons Den a truly unique networking initiative, at least from my perspective having worked in Leicester, Nottingham and the Birmingham area for the previous 10 years.'

For Alan the formula is simple. Bookings tend to be made on-line via LinkedIn – and people pay £15 a head for a meal. Everyone meets for a drink in a local pub at around 6.30 and then go on to a restaurant shortly before eight. 'There is no invoicing, no name tags, no seating arrangements, no formal speeches,' says Kevin. But the two men make sure that when people arrive, everyone is made to feel welcome. 'We don't let groups from one company sit together, what would be the point of that,' he adds. And while there can be some fascinating banter, no one is made to feel awkward or uncomfortable.

So, how would they describe the Den in an easy soundbite? For a moment, both men are lost for words. Alan fumbles around in his wallet and pulls out a card. 'It is networking with a difference,' he says, reading from the back of one of the Den's early business cards. Kevin shakes his head in disagreement. 'No, no, it's not networking.' Quite what to call it, however, he is unsure. Not that this matters, for, while the two men may disagree on whether the Den is networking, they and more than a 1,000 other business leaders in the Sheffield city region agree – it is most definitely working. ■



**LET'S JUST
DISPEL ONE
MYTH AT
THE OUTSET
- THIS IS
NOT A
NETWORKING
CLUB**

Previous

Lion tamer: Alan Lyons one of the founders of the Den.

Above

Lionesses at a Lyons Den - The Next Generation event: from right to left Emma Tiernan and Jo Dawson, both from Square 5, Jackie Cook (AVK UK), Dan Statham from Sewell Moorhouse.