

IN GOOD SPIRITS

Social clubs get newcomers mixing it up in city hotspots

BY KATE ZIMMERMAN

If you want to research the habits and behaviours of the urban Vancouverite, you could do worse for a resource than social convener Raj Taneja.

Taneja is president of three Vancouver social clubs, with more than 10,000 members. One thing he gets out of his role is learning which cues motivate a person to attend a social function. For instance, will promoting a speed-dating event online using terminology more naturally associated with a monster truck rally help attract more men?

The former Calgarian, who organizes the clubs with Frances Hui, also notices which kinds of shindigs attract which sorts of people. Engineers and middlemanagement types gravitate to the practicality of speed-dating. Entrepreneurs, extroverted and persuasive by nature, prefer cocktail parties. Such discoveries make running these clubs a great marketing exercise, he said.

"We're basically dropping the opportunities in people's laps," he said. How they react to those options is up to them, but, Taneja is paying attention.

He has learned that women tend to be quality oriented. They sign up for social clubs because they are looking for a stimulating time that may have lasting benefits in terms of finding friends or a partner. Men, on the other hand, are more likely to be quantity oriented, he said; they'll go to nightclubs in search of an immediately gratifying experience because they have less interest in continuing relationships.

Taneja's groups include Urban Mixer (www.urbanmixer.com), whose 10,000 members are apprised by a weekly newsletter of goings-on around town, whether they are official Urban Mixer functions or simply interesting things to do. There's also Social Empire (www.socialempire.com), whose 1,000 members — busy professional people, who can be single or "dynamic duos" — are invited to a cocktail party once a month for a drink or two and what Taneja describes as "an intellectual conversation." Finally, he runs Executive Zone (www.executivezone.net), which currently provides 300 locals with business networking events.

Despite the large memberships of these clubs, gatherings are never enormous. One of the larger congregations thus far was 250 strong, a merging of Urban Mixer and Social Empire members at a Valentine's singles dance.

Anybody can join the 2 1/2-year-old Urban Mixer, and there's no fee. Events vary widely and include boot camps in Stanley Park, indoor rock-climbing, and meeting other members to dine at hip restaurants.

People craving admittance to the five-year-old Social Empire fill out an application form and have a screening interview with Hui. A \$35 initiation fee and a friendly personality get you in the door there. Executive Zone also requires a screening process and a fee, based on the size of the company.

Taneja feels his clubs provide a service to the community, especially to newcomers who haven't yet penetrated Vancouver's reserve. He moved here a decade ago and agrees with this columnist, also a former Calgarian, that Vancouverites, while friendly to a point, are ultimately standoffish. It's difficult for a person to break into a native Vancouverite's intimate circle without being made to feel like an interloper. "There are a lot of people who are new in town ... that really don't understand socialization here," he said.

A social club makes the process less painful. Members don't have to make the commitment and investment to throw a party themselves; they just have to show up at the club's soiree, assured that everybody in the room is looking to connect.

Taneja, who also runs the venture technology firm SSID, hasn't benefited romantically from his second pastime. He remains single and makes it a practice not to date his organizations' members. On the other hand, he said, "I have the opportunity to be at the centre of a social club

which I think is great.”

Checking out local hotspots and forging relationships with their owners are also key to the job's appeal. Taneja's next move? Finding his clubs sponsors and advertisers who want to appeal to a sociable urban crowd.

Please send your tips about unusual nightspots, night-time events and intriguing potables to katezimm80@hotmail.com.



Raj Taneja runs three social clubs — Urban Mixer, Social Empire and Executive Zone — totalling more than 10,000 members and says it's great being at the centre of it all. PHOTO BY PETER BATTISTONI/VANCOUVER SUN