

# How to network in a pandemic: Interview with Umesh Kumar, cofounder of Twist

Sounds impossible, right? But according to Umesh Kumar, now is actually the best time to be networking. Twist, which began in a South Kensington dining room and has now pivoted to kitchen tables around the world, wants to help you connect with new people authentically.

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Lockdown doesn't lend itself to forging new connections; in fact, it's likely the only authentic connections you've fostered since it started are with your flatmates/partner/dog. Meeting people through pure serendipity now seems like a world away.

But what if you could engineer that serendipity through a Zoom call? Designed to make participants feel 'purposefully uncomfortable', Twist's virtual supper clubs happen every Thursday and see ten people from around the world come together over a masterclass, a cocktail (or three) and good conversation.

*Maddyness* spoke to cofounder Umesh Kumar about a new type of networking that isn't just for 'guys in tech', and keeping people on their toes virtually.

[Maddyness] Can you tell me a bit about background leading up to the genesis of Twist?

[Umesh] I'm a serial entrepreneur. I've always been interested in creating new things, bringing them to market and seeing where they land. I used to run an innovation consultancy; a property development company; and an education company as well. All of those businesses I ran previously revolved around connection, network and relationship-building. It was very much connecting people – bringing people together and seeing what happened.

That led me to Twist. It was borne out of a frustration with traditional networking events. Particularly in London, where I'm based, it just felt like the same people hanging out at the same venues drinking the same sponsored branded drinks, eating the same sponsored food, chatting about the same topics. I just felt that there wasn't enough innovation, creativity and dynamism.

*I once went to a supper club event and realised that seven of the ten people there were my friends. We'd all seen the person, thought 'that would be good', but collectively could have had a fantastic night out together with the money we spent.*

From then on I asked myself: is there a better way of networking?

What did you learn about connection and how important it is within business through those startups that you

# mention?

I think connection and networking can be seen as dirty words. I think that's because you've got the image typically of people handing out business cards and saying 'let's connect' or 'let's go for a business lunch'.

I think we've lost what relationship building and connection is all about: genuinely finding out something new and interesting about another person, connecting with them on some level, and then seeing down the line whether there's some relationship benefit on your side and their side.

I think we've lost that soul around building new relationships. What I've found, going to events, is that it's been very transactional. The serendipity and the magic behind meeting someone, having a conversation, and seeing where it leads, has been lost. That's what we're trying to bring back.

## How does Twist do that then?

Twist is a supper club and a medium to connect authentically – as we call it. It is a way of creating serendipity and putting a 'twist' on traditional networking events. We don't tell the guests who is attending; we don't have a very strict agenda of how the event's going to go; everything we do is – by design – made to make the individual feel purposely uncomfortable. The idea is that we will take you through a process, it may not make a lot of sense, but we promise by the end that you will understand why you went through that journey.

## How would a typical supper club normally unfold?

Well, there are the supper clubs that we did before lockdown – and those that we're doing now.

The first iteration started with 14 other people and myself as the host. We went to a private dining room in South Kensington at Restaurant Ours. They got an invite and that was about it; I made sure their dietary requirements were taken care of and then essentially the aim of the game was good people in a room having fun over food and drinks, with good conversation flowing.

Since lockdown, all of our events are done via Zoom. There's a maximum of ten people. We run a series of ice-breakers, games and activities to help people interact with each other; there is one host, one live-scribe (someone who creates a beautiful infographic of our time together), and one masterclass host.

The masterclass is an activity we do together; it only takes up about 20% of the total two hours, but it's a way of learning a skill set with a bunch of people you've never met before. That could be anything from cocktail making to building new relationships, both personal and professional, how to sleep better and improve your wellbeing, and so on. We've run 17 of these Twist events during lockdown.

Then we ask questions. This isn't about your title or what you do, it's more about you as an individual and what you stand for. We share some fun stories, and then, because we have a give-back mentality, a portion of the ticket price (£5) goes towards a charity. It could be a Black Lives Matter charity, a Lebanon crisis charity, or a domestic violence charity.

We share the three or four we're thinking of supporting for that month and the guests go away and think about it, drop us a message, and tell us where they'd like their money to go.

## I get the impression that the speakers and masterclasses aren't very industry-specific. How come you decided to be more generalist in your approach, and how do you choose your speakers?

How we choose our speakers is very much, in turn, how we pick our guests. Our values at Twist are all about curation, diversity of thought and people, and most importantly of all that purposeful discomfort.

Having a diverse group of people from lots of different backgrounds – age, sex, religion, experience level – makes for a more enjoyable evening. Everybody can learn from everybody else – so having a specific industry focus will alienate people. And then there's that whole expectation of what they think is going to happen. The whole point of Twist is to have no expectation and no idea of how the event is going to unfold.

All of our masterclass guests are also normal guests; they're not just brought in to do their masterclass and leave. They're a guest that happens to have a skillset, an interesting topic, a knowledge base they can share with the community. They're there for the duration as well.

How come you went for an 'invite-only' policy, and how do you choose who you're going to invite?

*What I found going to other supper clubs is that I just ended up with a room full of 'guys in tech'. That was great – but it wasn't what I was looking for. We didn't want that.*

The invite-only thing came about through asking how we could make it exclusive in the sense of being able to manage the dynamic in the room, but not in the sense of having to pay a certain amount of money, having to look a certain way, or needing to be in a certain industry. It was purely to help us create the right experience for everyone.

It also did create an element of drama and excitement, as well as allowing us to fine-tune the guests, the style of the event, and which masterclasses we should run and when.

Could you elaborate on how COVID has affected Twist? Now feels like a difficult time to be networking; have you come across any problems or unexpected silver linings?

If you asked me at the start of the year, after I ran my first event in person and was all ready to go before COVID happened... I would have said no. But I think actually this is the best time to be networking!

Going from a London-centric supper club to being global, in well over 15 cities, we've been able to connect wider and easier than ever. Also, before, I was only

going to run five or six of these a year with my business partner Viviane Paraschiv, whereas now we can run an event every Thursday evening.

Generally speaking, on behalf of some of our members, that loss of Thursday drinks at work, or going out and meeting people at a bar, or bumping into someone at a conference – that serendipity has been lost.

*How do we stop loneliness? How do we stop that anxious feeling of 'I'm stuck in my bubble and not meeting new people'? Events like Twist and others are promoting mental health and wellbeing, resilience and building connections.*

For me, there's no better time to be running a business, and there's no better time to be connecting with people. I have more time and energy than I would have done, because I'm not going out all the time, I'm not commuting an hour and a half into work and back. Yes, there are things like Zoom fatigue, but if I'm structured I can meet more people from around the world, have a lot of fun and build my network all in a two hour window.

And finally, more of a personal question we've started asking everyone in light of COVID. What's your daily routine and the rules you're living by at the moment?

I run my own podcast, so I've been interviewing guests and asking them the same question – and then taking elements from them!

I would say having a commute is important. My commute is obviously from upstairs to downstairs, but I now force myself to go on an hour walk in the morning before I start my day with a podcast or some music. At the end of the day, I do the same. Getting those two hours to earmark the day has been really critical to me.

I've also been doing pilates - 10 minutes of stretching here and there, two or three times a day, to stop me sitting down too much.

The other thing that's been good in terms of a routine for me is just promising myself to check in with two to three people a day; a WhatsApp message or a call at lunchtime. I would have done that otherwise - going for dinner or drinks - and it helps break up my work day.

*Discover Twist*

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