

Business, Recommended

HENOKIENS: THE WORLD'S MOST EXCLUSIVE CLUB

David Bain · January 28, 2015



The 2013 Henokiens congress.

If the waiting list of a private members club is a measure of its exclusivity then the Paris-based Henokiens must be the world's most exclusive. That's because to be a member of the Henokiens Club you need to be a family business that has been in existence for at least 200 years.

And that's not all. You also need to be owned by the original family that set the business up and family members still need to be involved in its management. There's also a 51-question questionnaire that needs to be filled in, and passed.

If you can meet all these requirements then you might just be able to join and mingle with other members including family members from such great businesses as the Italian gun maker Beretta, the Dutch distillers De Kuyper and the Japanese accommodation group Hoshi - the oldest family business in existence, dating back to 717.

"Altogether there are 44 members," says Gérard Lipovitch, the secretary general of Henokiens. "We started 33 years ago with just two members." So, that's about one and half new members a year.

Lipovitch says today under the group's new president Willem van Eeghen of the Dutch-based Van Eeghen Group the desire is to grow by around two new members a year.

Currently, there's around five Japanese companies looking to join. In the UK, the 287-year-old cider maker Aspall has had discussions to join, says Lipovitch.

Once a company meets the criteria it normally takes around a year before final approval is given, adds Lipovitch. "It's a very thorough process," he says. "We like our members to have a similar core set of values as our current members."

Those values are the typical commitment to long-term decision making that is core to so many family businesses, but also good governance, and a strong connection to the workforce and community. "We see these businesses as a viable alternative to the listed multinational," says Lipovitch. "And we are keen to get that message out."

So, what are the benefits of membership? Alexander Hoare, whose 343-year-old bank C. Hoare & Co is a member says Henokiens provides excellent networking opportunities. "And, particularly with companies with a similar set of values as ours on the continent."

An annual congress is held, which is hosted by one of the members. For example, last year it was hosted by the Japanese confectionary group Toraya in Tokyo. This year it will be hosted by the Italian paper-making company Cartiera Mantovana, which is celebrating its 400 anniversary, in Verona.

The club also awards every year the Leonardo da Vinci prize. The award is given to a family business that best exemplifies commitment to long-term decision making and the longevity of the business. Unlike membership of the Henokiens, it doesn't have to be a 200-year-old business. Winners in the past have included Salvatore Ferragamo in Italy, Otto Bock in Germany, Daher in France and Kia Corporation in Japan.

Lipovitch says that interest in the club has grown hugely since the financial crisis of 2008. "Many people now see family businesses as the future, not something that is about the past," he says. "They want to know what makes these businesses so successful over so long a period and imitate them."

