

Hybrid social networks help users connect online, meet up offline

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Not too long ago, friending someone involved more than just clicking a button on Facebook.

So in a retro twist to [social networking](#), a wave of [Web startups](#) are encouraging users to get off their couches, away from their smartphones and tablets, and back into the real world.

"We have an internal tagline: Use the Internet to get off the Internet," said Kathryn Fink, community manager at Meetup, an online-to-offline startup with 11 million members.

Hybrid social networks are connecting strangers with similar interests online, then directing them to meet in person for dinners, bar-hopping, bowling or biking excursions. Unlike dating or networking sites, these startups are focused simply on helping users make new friends and hang out face to face. If a hookup or [job interview](#) results - well, that's just an added bonus.

On the sites, users create a free profile of themselves with basic information and a photo, and search for get-togethers that interest them. Before meeting face to face, people can post questions, offer parking or traffic tips and suggest topics to talk about. Events that cost money are usually paid for in advance online.

The sites are doing especially well among twenty- and thirty-somethings in big cities, where finding new people to hang out with can be

challenging.

"When you're in college, friends are basically thrown at you," said Greg Self, 22, an assistant at a film production company. "You get off the bus, you step on campus, and everyone is in the same situation as you and it's super easy."

But that wasn't the case after Self moved to Los Angeles from Virginia earlier this year. He searched online for ways to meet new people and came across Grubwithus, a startup that enables users to create and attend group meals.

Grubwithus meals are hosted at restaurants and typically bring together six to 10 people who have never met each other. Everyone pays in advance for their meal on the Grubwithus site - the startup generally takes a 20 percent to 30 percent cut of each transaction - so there's no mulling over the menu or bickering over the tab.

There have been Grubwithus meals geared toward traveling enthusiasts, vegans, Clippers fans and music aficionados. One recent dinner in Los Angeles was devoted to people who love beer and the television show "Arrested Development."

Grubwithus has tripled its user base since the beginning of the year, with meal reservations growing 15 percent month over month; the company has more than 80,000 subscribers. It launched out of startup accelerator program Y Combinator and has raised \$7.6 million in financing from investors including Ashton Kutcher and venture capital firm Andreessen Horowitz.

Since February, Self has attended nine Grubwithus meals and said he has made a handful of friends from the dinners.

"It's definitely added to my experience in this city," he said, though he added that some "can be hit or miss."

"I've been to ones before where you're sitting in between two people who are not really talking at all, or are not very interesting," he said. "And you're like, 'Well, at least the food's good.' "

Grubwithus Chief Executive Eddy Lu said users like such online-offline sites because they provide a safe way for people to meet - members identify themselves through their profiles and get the chance to communicate with one another online before meeting at a business or other public place. That way, he said, intentions are clear from the start.

"If you talk to a girl at a bar, she thinks you're hitting on her; if you talk to a guy at a bar, he thinks you're hitting on him. It doesn't work," said Lu, who co-founded Grubwithus after graduating from the University of California-Berkeley and having trouble finding new buddies when he moved to Chicago.

What seemed to work best, he realized, was house parties where people got to know friends of friends over a casual dinner. He set out to re-create that experience at restaurants, with the focus on fostering "low-pressure hangouts."

The hybrid social networks aren't just for the friendless. Many members of Meetup, an online community for groups to organize in-person outings, are using the site to supplement their core social circles, Fink said. In Southern California, for example, Meetup has groups dedicated to art and museum enthusiasts, runners, Korean moms and young L.A. Eastsiders, among others.

"You might have a fantastic social circle with friends and family and co-workers, but if they're not into hiking and you love it, what do you do?"

Fink said.

Still, some of the startups have been slow to get off the ground.

After receiving \$5 million in funding in the spring, Lifecrowd, an experience marketplace for in-person group activities such as kickball and kayaking, went offline a few weeks ago. Chief Executive Bong Koh declined to comment on the startup's progress; on its website, the Los Angeles company promises to "be back soon with an even better Lifecrowd."

Venture capitalist Mark Suster of GRP Partners says investing in startups that bridge the gap between online and offline social interactions has become a smart move instead of "putting all your eggs in the online-only basket."

"Pure online friends aren't the same as the people you've met in your personal life," said Suster, who backs Grubwithus.

Another rising tech startup is Grouper, which connects two groups of friends for face-to-face hangouts after pairing them online. Users apply for membership and are matched with someone else on the site. Each person then invites two other friends to join in for drinks; after prepaying online for the first round of drinks, the group of six meets at a bar chosen by Grouper. The setup takes away some of the awkwardness of meeting someone new alone, said Michael Waxman, Grouper's co-founder and chief executive.

Launched in New York last year, Grouper expanded to L.A. in September.

"In a lot of ways, we're the anti-Facebook," Waxman said. "One of the original things that played into the genesis of Grouper was the idea that

social software didn't make a lot of sense. There's this underlying paradox: [Facebook](#), Twitter, social products - you usually use them by yourself by the glow of your computer screen."

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