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By Steve Hendershot

The New Networking

It used to be called the Old Boys' Club — the exclusive golf course or members-only lunch room where powerful people cultivated friendships with one another and did business.

Today, a more diverse set of business leaders is making connections away from the club. The next generation of Who's Whos conducts the social side of business at the gym, at fashionable watering holes, at industry conferences and, most of all, online.

Connecting with influential people is a critical part of business for Billy Dec, 36, president of Rokit Ranch Productions LLC. Earlier in his career, he scraped together enough money to join the East Bank Club and attend young professionals events. Now his strategy has changed, and his challenge is finding time to build audiences for his blog, Twitter feed and Facebook page.

"I used to meet all the influential, important people at these social gathering spots. Now the platform to connect is much easier and faster on the Internet," Mr. Dec says. "When people finally do want to meet, it's played down quite a bit — it's 'Let's meet at my house' or 'Let's meet at a coffee shop'."

Mr. Dec's experience meshes with the observations of Umair Haque, a business strategist whose recently published "Generation M Manifesto" begins, "Dear Old People Who Run The World, My generation would like to break up with you." He believes young business leaders' reliance on online communication leads to more authenticity when people do meet in person.

"If I go into a meeting and everybody there has blogs, then we've already checked each other out and don't have to spend as much time sounding out what each person there believes. It's much easier to be honest," says Mr. Haque, director of London's Havas Media Lab.

Jason Fried, 35, is an exemplar of Mr. Haque's modern executive. Unless you meet the founder of Chicago software firm 37signals LLC at an industry conference, chances are the only place you'll run into him is on the Internet. He flees the city most weekends in favor of his Wisconsin farm. And he avoids meet-up events because he thinks that when business leaders congregate, "everyone asks each other for advice and you stop thinking for yourself. I see a lot of groupthink going on."

Mr. Fried is hardly isolated. He Tweets and has more than 13,000 followers. He blogs and has 98,000 subscribers.

Michael Evans, 32, founder of Chicago's GrubHub.com, which connects customers with restaurants that deliver, also blogs and Tweets, and participates in industry meet-ups. But he hasn't joined any of the old-time country or social clubs.

"I think that the old way of meeting is going away — or maybe I just haven't been invited," Mr. Evans says. "But I'm interested in a more democratic and open way of meeting people."

In fact, making introductions at open events can be a powerful way to stand out, according to Brook Jay, founder of Chicago marketing firm All Terrain. The younger generation of business leaders, she notes, is usually found in the hospitality suites at sporting events and concerts or lined up at the starting line of a charity 5K race.

"This generation is so specific in the way it targets its likes and interests, and these people pride themselves on knowing what's cool, what's new," says Ms. Jay. "It's all about

participating in the relevant events."

That's not to say there's no place left for rubbing elbows.

Though most of Genevieve Thiers' networking happens online or through an informal group of female CEOs, Ms. Thiers, 31, CEO of Chicago-based child care-services Web site SitterCity.com, isn't ready to write off traditional networking. She's considering joining the board of one of Chicago's established charitable organizations.

"I'll milk it for the revenue-generation opportunities, which every good CEO needs," Ms. Thiers says. "You can make great connections on non-profit boards; that's still a viable way (to network)."