

[\(As originally published in the National Law Journal June 6, 2011\)](#)

Most of my good online habits I learned as a teenager working on my grandparents' ranch in Wyoming. At the end of the day, we would head back to my grandfather's house to be rewarded with a homemade dinner from my grandmother.

Grandma taught us more than just manners; she taught us good social habits. It wasn't just about saying "please" and "thank you," but about paying attention to the others at the table, looking to see what they were missing. If they didn't have a drink yet, pass them the water; if they needed butter for their bread, hand it over. Passing the bread was something that should be automatic, but, like many things in life, it wasn't always intuitive for kids.

Good social habits online should be automatic as well, but some of them simply aren't intuitive. The most obvious rule concerns talking about yourself. Most of us know that at networking functions the way to get people interested in what you do is to ask about them first. As Tara Weintritt of Miles & Stockbridge said during ALM's chief marketing officer conference in New York recently, "It's more important to be interested than interesting." So how do we translate that message online?

Start by listening instead of talking. You can always tell a new social-media user because he jumps in with guns blazing trying to promote himself. This is comparable to stepping into a circle of strangers during a cocktail party and handling out business cards as though you're dealing hands at poker. It doesn't work and makes a bad first impression.

Think about joining a new network as if it were the first day at a new school. What is your first priority? Find a friend. Online, you need friends and allies to spread your message, but it takes time and energy to earn them. Most importantly, it requires that you look for ways to help others before you help yourself. On LinkedIn, you can "like" articles they have

shared; on Twitter, you can retweet what they have written; on their blogs, you can leave comments. It needs to be genuine and sincere, but it will help you meet friends and make all the difference in the world to your success online.

It may not come naturally, but it makes sense, right? Just like passing the bread at the dinner table on the ranch. And don't forget to pass the butter and raspberry jam while you're at it.