After the attack on Pearl Harbor and American involvement in World War II, the U.S. government produced a Why We Fight film series to underscore to Americans what was at stake.

In the same spirit, it’s important for us in Cooperative Extension to focus on what’s at stake with our social media effort. All of us must understand that it’s not just about having a Facebook or Twitter account. The reasons are bigger and the stakes much higher.

With this in mind, we have identified the four traits that will define a successfully engaged, networked Extension professional in the future. If all of this could be boiled down to one take-home message, it would be that social media is not an add-on to our work but something that is changing life and work as we know it.

1. Keeping Pace with Change

Successfully networked Extension professionals fully appreciate how quickly the communications landscape is changing. All of the interactions taking place on the Internet and within social media are generating knowledge at rates unimaginable only a generation ago.

This challenges us to change the way we interact with our audiences. We simply can’t keep pace sticking solely with the outreach methods that we developed in the twentieth century. Social media will make up an important part of the new outreach methods we develop to survive in the twenty-first century.

All of us must understand that the Internet and social media are game changers in that they are changing the way all of us live and work.

In building a presence on Facebook, Twitter, and other social media networks, we are taking the first steps toward interacting with our audiences in ways that are becoming increasingly commonplace. To put it another way, we are positioning ourselves to operate at the speed and volume this new communication order demands.

2. Building Networks

Successfully networked Extension professionals know that they are no longer among a handful of elite knowledge providers. Not too long ago, we confined ourselves almost exclusively to older forms of media—mass media, such as newspapers, radio, and television—to reach our audiences.

The big difference now is that new media—what we typically call social media—have liberated our audiences. Knowledge no longer has to be handed down from on high by information brokers as it was in the past.

Operating in large, highly fluid networks, our audiences are now fully liberated to find information on their own, which is why we are being challenged to participate in and build networks, those virtual spaces such as Facebook and Twitter where increasing numbers of people interact with each other and share knowledge.
3. Fostering Creativity and Innovation

Networked professionals know where most of the action will occur in the future: in virtual networks where people increasingly go to interact and share knowledge. It is increasingly within these spaces where ideas are meeting, mating, and morphing into even newer ideas. Sharing is increasing the opportunities for higher levels of creativity and innovation.

Under the circumstances, the times are calling us to understand these networks for what they are: opportunities to create the optimal conditions for sharing, discussing, and building on ideas. To put it another way, networks better ensure that ideas move from the drawing room to the assembly floor and, ultimately, to the end user.

4. Marketing Extension

Networked professionals also operate with another critical reality in mind: that within this global and highly competitive communications landscape, Extension must operate a lot like a business. It is our responsibility to remind our customers and our funders that we provide a valuable product—in our case, research-based knowledge that helps people improve the quality of their lives. Networking enables us to engage new audiences and, in the process, demonstrate the continued value of our product.

We also need to be mindful that as we participate in new networks, whatever they happen to be, we run the risk of diluting our organizational identity. In using social media, we can remind people of our connections to Alabama Extension as well as our organizational identity and mission.

Here’s another way of looking at it: While participating in networks, we should remember ways to remind our audiences not only of who we are and what we do but also of the products we provide online.

This publication is the first in an ongoing series on developing effective skills for network- and community-building in social media.