

In my 37 years of driving a car, I am proud to say that I have never run out of gas. In the 13 years since my children started driving, none of them have run out of gas. Until last Saturday night that is. My 18 year old son, Ted, was tasked with picking up his little brother from a basketball tournament at the new Kingdom Hoops facility just south of Ankeny. He drives our 2006 mini-van, which is probably not the first choice of a high school senior, but it beats walking or asking your friends for a ride all the time.

Ted was supposed to pick up Ben right around 10:00 and it was about that time that I got a call from him saying he missed the turn to the gym and needed a little help finding his way back. Plus, he was a little worried because the van was getting low on gas. Since Ted was close to his destination, it didn't take long to get him to his turn, and we were back at our Saturday night fun. It was about 10:30 when I got the second call.

"Dad, we ran out of gas," it was Ben. After the initial shock wore off, I asked Ben where they were, and fortunately they were off the interstate, near the corner of First Street and Delaware. The good news was that there was a gas station kitty-corner across the street. I quickly explained to my friend John what had happened and asked him if he would help. He agreed and we drove the few blocks to where the stalled van was sitting, Ted in the driver's seat, Ben as a passenger. Knowing the area well, we quickly decided to push the van to the gas station. It didn't look that far.

Fortunately for us, there was very little traffic and we got a green light so we started pushing down First Street, John and I pushing from the back, Ted and Ben sitting comfortably inside. Why we agreed to that arrangement I still don't know, because he did offer to help. After about 100 yards, what didn't look that far originally, was starting to feel like we were pushing the van all the way across Ankeny. When we finally reached the driveway for the gas station, I felt like somebody was shoving jagged icicles into my lungs. We had to stop before I threw up. It was at that point Ted suggested that he help push and 15 year old Ben could steer the van the rest of the to the pump. I was in no shape to argue with him.

Ben did a great job guiding the powerless car next to the gas pump. Semi-frozen, John and I made our way back kitty-corner to my car. As small business owners and managers, we have an obligation to be prepared for our co-workers and our clients. What I mean by that is we need to make sure that we have enough product on hand to handle all of our customers' needs. Running out of product to sell is simply unacceptable. If you are in a service industry, say banking, you need to have the right people with the right understanding of what the customer needs or it is just like running out of product.

I was going to give Ted a lecture about keeping enough gas in his tank so that he doesn't run out of gas again, but I know he felt really bad because of the apology later that night. He learned his lesson about keeping gas in his vehicle, but he learned it the hard way.

*Small Business Today is a bi-weekly feature written by Tom Friedman, market president of First National Bank, Ames-Ankeny.*