

“The first day of spring is one thing, and the first spring day is another. The difference between them is sometimes as great as a month.” – Henry Van Dyke, American poet and author. As I sit down to write this, I am not sure that we have experienced much of a spring this year. Actually I think that what was supposed to be winter might have passed for spring, and Mr. Van Dyke was probably correct. With the very nice weather and spring break last week, I thought it might be a good time for some spring cleaning around my office.

I guess it started a couple of weeks ago when I was looking around a stack of “stuff”, you know papers, folders, government manuals and the like, I noticed that there was a thin layer of dust over everything. It’s not the cleaning people’s fault. In every bank I have been in, the cleaning people are instructed to not touch anything that wasn’t bare desk. So it would only make sense that if I haven’t moved it in a while, there was likely to be dust.

Those of you who have not been inside my office might have conjured an image of stacks of paper, cobwebs and barely enough room to walk to any of the chairs. Our bank policy is to make sure our desk is clean and all potentially sensitive information locked up when we leave. I make sure that I abide 110% by that policy. So anything that is left on my desk or credenza could easily be published in this newspaper. But still there was too much “stuff”, so I made a vow to clean my office.

As I thought about it, just cleaning up the stuff up wasn’t going to be enough. I thought about how my office looked to someone new coming in for the first time. How inviting? Did it portray the image that I really wanted to project? That thought sat with me a while, and when I came back to the bank later, I decided to expand my review and took a drive around the outside of the bank. My expanded goal was to look at the outside and through the windows with the eyes of someone who has never seen my bank.

While I trust my own opinion, I wanted the opinions of others. So I went to a couple of tellers that have been with us since we opened the bank 5 years ago and asked them to do the same thing. To say they gave me a weird look would be an understatement. Both of them wanted to know what was really going on, what my underlying reason was for wanting something I have not asked of them in 5 years. My explanation was plausible, but they were still a little leery of my request.

Very often we get used to our same old routine. As time goes on, we get used to coming to work every day and we often don’t see things that need improving or changing. You do need to make a concentrated effort to do some of the leg work yourself. Here is what I recommend. Go walk around your competitor’s locations. Take mental notes about what you like and don’t like about what you see. Then walk around your own location, but pretend you are a first time customer. How easy is it to find what you need? Is the environment inviting, does it promote your company and your products in a way that customers want to come back again and again? If not, invite your staff to help you make changes. Sometimes even minor changes can have a big impact.

Spring is a great time for cleaning and re-evaluation of your workspace. With luck, the next time you see mine, it will have improved.

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