

As I sit down to write this evening, it is my birthday. 52 years ago this day, in Dubuque, Iowa my mother gave birth to a son. I don't remember much about the day, but that is OK by me. To me birthdays are not that big of an event. When I was a teenager I remember that since we all had birthdays within a week of each other, my sister my father and I used to celebrate together. Usually on Labor Day.

On the other hand, my wife and her family like birthdays to be a big deal. Her brother Fred always insisted that a birthday should be more than just one day. He felt like the anniversary of his birth should be celebrated over a seven day period and that he should be exempt from almost all household chores, duties and other unpleasant tasks during that period. Joanne isn't that extreme but she feels that the birthday is a special day where people should be treated special.

When I moved to Davenport and worked for a bank there, it took less than a week on the job for a co-worker to inform me that it was their tradition that the person celebrating a birthday had to bring treats, preferably homemade. In my case I usually got off the hook pretty easy. My wife didn't want me to be embarrassed and/or chastised bringing something like chips and dip, so she usually made a nice treat for me to take and share.

There was never enough for everyone who worked in the bank, so you had to get to the break room early if you wanted a treat, especially the good stuff. At the bank in Ankeny we have birthday "buddies". The responsibility of the birthday buddy is to make a treat for everyone else on a designated birthday. That relieves the person who is having the birthday from actually having to do the work of making and bringing the treat. Today I had the pleasure of eating and sharing monster cookies. They were very good.

You might wonder what all this birthday talk has to do with owning and managing a small business. Despite what I said earlier about birthdays are not that big of an event, people do want to be made to feel special. Employees want to be made to feel special and your customers want to be made to feel special. I knew a small town bank that sent a birthday card to their customers signed by each one of the small staff. It was a great acknowledgement that didn't cost very much and customers loved it.

What doesn't make me feel special are birthday wishes that come without any special effort, like they are form letters. It was nice that I made somebody's data base, but just getting an anonymous card in the mail probably has the wrong effect when I read it. On the other hand walking into the bank and having the employees sing "Happy Birthday", the phone calls, text messages and Facebook greetings all make me feel special.

My challenge to you this week is to find a way to make your employees and customers feel special on their birthdays. Sure they might tell you that birthdays are no big deal, but everyone likes to be remembered and given at least a little bit of attention. Accomplishing this while keeping costs in line is a major accomplishment. Please let me know what your good ideas are and I will pass them along.

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