

My wife Joanne has been bitten by the entrepreneurial bug several times during our 30 year marriage. When we lived in Davenport and our girls were much younger, she had a business where she would make hair bows and sell them at local craft fairs. The business faded away when we moved to Ankeny and had a couple more kids. I know she enjoyed making the bows and meeting different people. Sometimes I think this entrepreneurial spirit might be in her DNA as her father and most of her five siblings have had their own businesses at one time or another.

Joanne's latest venture is renting lighted curtains for weddings and formal events. This business started innocently enough when she utilized all of my limited mechanical and engineering skills to make a lighted curtain for our daughter Emily's wedding. The trick was that since Emily and Pete were getting married in Kansas, the curtain had to be engineered so that they could be constructed in Ankeny and transported without incident to the wedding. Thankfully things went very well; several people actually tried to buy our handiwork. Joanne thought that others might enjoy the benefits of a service that could potentially make a plain reception hall more elegant.

Since we knew we had a desirable product/service the challenge was how to get the word to potential brides-to-be. (Truth be told, most grooms don't really care and probably wouldn't notice if any of the decorations were there or not!) Since this was a fairly niche market, some of the standardized advertising methods such as newspapers, radio, television, etc. would probably not be cost effective for us. We needed something much more targeted and something that would satisfy our limited advertising budget.

We turned to old fashioned footwork, electronic media and Craigslist. Since our web site needs were relatively simple, Emily was able to help us get a free site where we were able to show off the pictures of the lighted curtain so future customers could visualize their head table with the curtain as a backdrop. Joanne also stopped by to see the managers of popular reception halls to give them business cards. The lighted curtain business has been pretty successful. I have helped set up and tear down in more than half a dozen reception locations, and am looking forward to many more.

As small business owners and managers we often have very limited marketing and advertising dollars to spend. So we need to spend them wisely. Word of mouth is by far the best form of advertising, but too often companies go out of business before they can reap the benefits. The problem is the vast majority of us are not experts in how to attract customers to our businesses. Sure most of us know a clever ad on TV, radio or in the newspaper when we see or hear it, but we don't know if it will attract customers. Plus there is no shortage of people trying to sell you all forms of advertising.

Now I am not here to give you magical words of wisdom that will triple your sales. There are people who have majors in advertising and marketing from institutions of higher learning and as well-educated as those people are, they cannot give you an easy, effective, low cost answer.

My feeling is that this business might be longer lasting than hair bows and occasionally has other family members involved. As a result it looks like that entrepreneurial spirit might have been passed down to the next generation as well. Emily has her own photography business in the Kansas City area.

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