

One of the things I enjoy this time of year is watching the Ankeny High football team play on Friday nights. I enjoy everything about the night, the band, the cheerleaders, the kids in the stands and the intense Ankeny fans. One of the new elements introduced this year by those excellent cheerleaders are flags that have the Ankeny Hawk symbol and that spell out the word Hawks, one flag for each letter. After touchdowns and field goals, the girls take those flags and run in front of the home crowd, inspiring them to cheer even louder.

When the girls run from in front of the student section toward the concession stand the flag order is: Hawk symbol – H – A – W – K – S. As they run from our right to our left it looks great. When they turn around and come back, the order is the same. During a recent game, one of the people I sit with asked a perplexing question about the flags. Is that the right order when the girls are running from our left to our right?

The discussion was very interesting. Someone asked how we read the English language? The answer was obvious, left to right. Therefore if you took a snapshot of the series of flags the word would be spelled correctly. Someone else talked about the order the girls were running and why would the hawk symbol be the first to arrive at the destination, yet be at the end of the letters? Yet another person noticed that when the flags were moving from left to right, the letters k and s were backwards. We agreed that was an interesting point but that was a fact of the way the flags were made, not the order.

As we talked about it between plays and Ankeny scores, it was clear that there was not going to be agreement about who was right and who was wrong. It was simply a matter of perception.

My business as a banker is primarily a service business, where perception of how we deliver that service is everything. In other businesses which are more product based, service of the product after the sale is critical to future sales. Perception of how that service is handled by our companies will either keep the customer coming back for more, or send them searching for somebody else.

How is your service perceived? One common way to test it is to have your service mystery shopped. I have been on both sides of the mystery shopping process, and I can tell you that if done properly, it works. Employees must know up front what is expected with each customer interaction, and the mystery shoppers must have enough knowledge of your business to be considered to be credible. Most importantly the mystery shopping process cannot be used for anything other than improving service. If our people are scared to lose their job because of a mystery shop, we are not using the process correctly.

Right or wrong, how your business is perceived will affect its ability to survive over the long haul. I am not suggesting to the great Ankeny football cheerleaders to change the way they run with the hawk flags. Seeing them run every time Ankeny scores is enough for me. I hope to see those flags flown well into November.

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