

Two weeks ago we were on vacation in an Okoboji cabin with Joanne's family. We always seem to have fun and experience new and different things, including this trip. Although he also has a strong sense of tradition, one that typically helps us to think outside the customary is Joanne's brother Fred.

Fred was frying eggs for breakfast one morning when he found a bottle of Captain Morgan Spiced Rum that I brought along. It seems that Fred has not tried that particular adult beverage, but seeing that it was too early in the day to actually start drinking, he thought of other ways to try it. Being adventurous and on vacation, Fred decided to cook the eggs and add the rum as additional flavoring, after figuring out that the alcohol evaporated in the cooking process.

He was so proud of his "discovery" that he kept asking everyone in the cabin if they wanted Captain Morgan on their eggs. He asked again and again. When someone took him up on his offer he immediately quizzed them, to see if they enjoyed the taste as much as he did. After everyone had their fill of eggs, Fred decided to pour the rum on the bacon, just to see if the flavor was enhanced. Of course he again thought it was fantastic. Personally, I couldn't taste any difference in either the eggs or the bacon.

All that day Fred looked for cooking opportunities where he could enhance the flavor of the meal by adding the rum. Part of me thought it was fun and adventurous, part of me thought it was ridiculous waste of perfectly good rum. The more Fred raved about his new found additive, the more we teased him about becoming addicted. I knew he had reached the end of his rope when he added a cap full to his mint chocolate chip ice cream.

Fred found a new use for something that I had only blended with coke. I never would have thought of using Captain Morgan in any other way than I already have. So I went to their web site to see what other uses they might suggest. No fried egg, bacon or ice cream recipes. As a matter of fact the only thing they promoted was different flavors of their spiced rum.

As small business owners and managers we have certain products and services that we sell. In our minds we have specific uses for our products, ways we envision our customers using our products. But what if our products could be used in ways that we haven't thought about? Could we sell more? Could we diversify and potentially protect against downturns in the economy? Definitely!

What alternative uses have you thought about for what you sell? Granted, this becomes harder for some businesses more than others. Service industries might be a little more difficult because what we sell is more abstract. But if you specialize in one industry, maybe some of the skills and ideas are transferable to another. How about nuts and bolts as fishing weights? Captain Morgan Spiced Rum as a cooking aid? Who knows what your product can be used for!

Turns out that Joanne really liked the taste of the rum and the mint chocolate chip ice cream, and I suspect that I will be on a grocery store run in the near future with at least two items on the list. All thanks to Fred for being adventurous.

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