

Last week my daughter, Katie, and her husband, Arcadio, were home from California for a weeklong visit. They spent some time with us and some time with his family. One night Arcadio's local nieces and nephew (ages 13, 12 and 6) were around our house, so Katie brought out some of the games she played when she was a kid. Yes, we still kept a lot of those games.

They started out with the "Life" game. As a sometimes bystander, it was fun to see them tease six year old Alex when he got "married" and had children. It was obvious to me that Katie was really enjoying herself and possibly re-living some happy childhood memories. I wasn't around when the Life game ended and I don't know who won, but I do know that Life led to Sorry, no pun intended.

Since it was an afternoon of board games, "13 Dead End Drive" was the game that Katie found next. I never played it with the girls when they were younger, so I really can't explain it to you very well. From what I can gather it is a cross between Clue and Mouse Trap. Katie kept saying that she played the game for hours and hours when she was a kid and her and her friends really enjoyed playing. She was obviously having fun playing a game she had not played in years.

The rest of the Friedman family left for our Saturday night activities, and when we came home the Sorry game was sitting on the kitchen table. So 23 year old Jenni, Joanne and 18 year old Ted and I sat down and played. We are all competitive and very quickly a child's game turned to be something more. Even though I was the winner of that game, we all had a lot of fun. So much fun that we decided to play another game of Sorry. Following that game, which I also won, we moved on to "Splat" a game played with Play-Doh. The kids really enjoyed squashing each other's "bugs"!

So how do kids games relate to us as owners and managers of small businesses? Sometimes in our business, we try to get fancy in order to gain an advantage over our competition. Very often we get too fancy for our own good and end up wasting time, effort and money. We end up offering products and services that are too complicated, too difficult to explain and too hard to sell.

In those times it might make sense to look back to a simpler time, to re-invent a product or service. At one time, when I first started in the banking industry, we had free checking and offered incentives for people to open their accounts with us. Through the 80's and 90's we tried to get fancy and add on a lot of things that we thought people wanted. Some of it was good, but eventually when we got back to simple, free checking, and people responded. What product or service in your business can be re-invented to a more simple, but saleable form?

Before Katie and Arcadio went back to California, we did play more complicated, adult oriented games. But the kid's games were not very far away, just in case we needed to revert back to a simpler time, and help those around us do the same.

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