

Back in April I wrote about a tattoo that I had applied prior to a Jimmy Buffett concert. I wrote it in such a way that you had to read the column all the way to the end to figure out that the tattoo was only a temporary. Normally I do not receive much reaction to my columns, but this time I received several interesting responses.

My oldest daughter Emily read the column and sent me an e-mail that went something like this: "Dad, I read the first paragraph of your column and thought you were kidding about getting a tattoo. I read the second paragraph and started getting worried. After the third paragraph I thought Armageddon was happening. I had to skip to the end just to confirm your tattoo was temporary and the world wasn't necessarily coming to an end." Later that week I saw my neighbor and she wanted to compare tattoos. I think she was disappointed when I explained to her that mine was just temporary.

For both my parents and Joanne's parents, we copy my columns and send them once we have accumulated a couple months' worth. Joanne is the one who takes care of that for me and I didn't realize she had sent the latest batch until several weeks ago when I called home to chat. My mother answered the phone and after realizing it was me wanted to know "where is it at"? Her tone was angry. I was confused until I asked what she was talking about. When she said she wanted to know more about that stupid tattoo, I asked her if she read the entire column.

She told me she was too angry with me to finish reading. Then I talked with my dad and asked him why he didn't set my mom straight. He also was too disappointed to finish reading the column. In the end I believe they were more relieved that I didn't get a tattoo rather than reading the entire column.

Since Joanne's mom has difficulty reading, her dad reads my columns to her when they get a batch in the mail. He started reading about the tattoo and was embarrassed to have a son-in-law like me. As he re-told the story to me, I could hear the disgust in his voice. In the end, he too was relieved that my skin was still tattoo-free. But as he continued to read aloud, he believed his daughter might have married the wrong guy.

In all of the stories I heard about the temporary tattoo, not one person reacted to the business moral I talked about. Everyone was shocked at the story. As small business owners and managers, the written word is a very important way to communicate. We need to really grab our reader's attention right off the bat, and effectively communicate our message. I try to do the same thing here and in all my communications at the bank. Obviously, I am not always successful.

My writing was not effective for my daughter, parents, in-laws and neighbor. They all enjoyed the story and got a nice chuckle, but I missed the mark. So how do we make sure we communicate the right message in our writing? The best way is to let others read and edit our writing. As a matter of fact in a perfect world, you would let multiple people with different points of view read and edit your writing.

When I sit down to write these columns my goal each time is to be entertaining and educational. I know that not every word I write will be Pulitzer Prize material, but now I hope my family reads the entire column.

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