

In the mail last week we received a letter from MidAmerican Energy giving us a “personalized report to help you save energy.” What this report does is compare the amount of energy (electricity and natural gas) that we used in the Friedman household vs. 100 of our “neighbors.” The letter explains that our neighbors are approximately 100 occupied nearby homes that are similar in size to ours and use natural gas to heat their homes.

It turns out that MidAmerican thinks the Friedman household is not very energy efficient. Our rank for the last month we were the 83rd most efficient household out of 100. Not very energy efficient at all. Over the previous six months our efficiency ranking ranged from 90th out of 100 to 61st out of that same 100. In my opinion, we have some neighbors who are very energy efficient!

According to the report, we used 11% more energy than our neighbors last winter and 15% more energy than our neighbors for the last 12 months. This was proven to us in all sorts of color charts and graphs to make it easier for us to understand. MidAmerican also provided us with several tips on how to save energy and potentially move us up on the list compared to our neighbors.

The question for us now is what do we do with this information? One of the solutions to our inefficient energy use MidAmerican presented to us was to unplug electronics when they are not in use. Of course with five of us in this house, including two teenage boys, we are constantly using computers, charging cell phones and recording shows on the DVR. They predict that by turning off those gadgets when we are not around would save us \$45 per year. Unfortunately, the “quick fix” they recommended might not be so quick in our house.

As small business owners and managers we are often presented with information from vendors or potential vendors that will help us either become more efficient or garner additional sales for our company if only we used their product or service. The question we have to answer is, do we trust the source or are they manipulating the data for their own gain? We see the manipulation of data all the time in politics. Spinning the facts or coming to conclusions based on partial information appears to me to be the way most politicians like to talk to us.

Trust is the primary component here. Allow me to paraphrase Ronald Reagan: trust, but verify. That is why it is important that if you are looking at buying a product based on claims from a vendor, ask for references and give them a call. If you are on the vendor side of the equation, be prepared to give a list of references to your potential client. Verification from an independent source increases the confidence that the data presented is trustworthy.

As for the Friedman house and our energy use, I honestly think that we try to be conscious of our habits and conserve when we can. I feel like I am constantly turning off lights as I walk around the house, kind of like my dad used to do, but that is a different story. But now I will share the letter from MidAmerican with the rest of the residents of my house to see if we can lower our bills by this time next year. If we can move up the rankings, maybe I will let them turn up the heat a degree or two or even keep an extra light on for a while.

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