

A few Saturdays ago I had the privilege of helping our local Council of the Knights of Columbus take donations to help people with intellectual disabilities. Some of the people who know me might think my two hours of wearing that yellow vest might be ironic. However, I digress from my story.

Sometimes this annual appeal by the KC's is called a Tootsie Roll Drive. To help motivate people to donate to the cause, members of the Ankeny Council of the Knights of Columbus (a religious based organization for Catholic men) had boxes and boxes of the chocolate treat to exchange for a donation. Many Ankeny retailers allowed us to ask for donations in front of their businesses, and we are very grateful.

My particular station was at the south entrance of the Wal-Mart. I arrived exactly at the agreed upon hour, donned the standard bright yellow vest and wondered what to do next. I watched my co-worker, who obviously arrived ahead of time work the crowds. He had a supply of Tootsie Rolls in the front pouches of his vest and a donation can in one hand. It was interesting to watch him give away Tootsie Rolls and receive donations in return.

Inspired by what I saw, I tried the same tactics. It would have been a fascinating study in human nature. Some people saw what I was doing, read the vest or perhaps saw the pitiful look on my face and immediately dug into their purses or pockets to make a donation. Of those people who were proactive in making a donation, I would say about 1/3 of them declined to take a Tootsie Roll. Some people took a Tootsie Roll and kept on walking into the store. Others took a Tootsie Roll, then came back later to make a donation.

Some people did not want a Tootsie Roll no matter what. I tried to tell them that there was no obligation in taking one. That usually didn't work. I tried to tell them that other people had already had donated and not taken their treat, and that worked some of the time. Of course there were those individuals who looked for more than one.

One of the sales gurus I follow is a fellow named Jeffrey Gitomer. I don't always agree with what he says, but most of the time he has great ideas for increasing sales. My time with the Tootsie Roll Drive reminded me of one of his ideas. Give away a small sample of your product, just to let the potential customers get a taste of something they simple can't live without. It worked with the Tootsie Rolls.

As owners and managers of small businesses we typically do not have a large budget for marketing, or for a lot of giveaways. Think about what samples you might give away. I am not suggesting you give away your profit margin, but often you have to give a little to get more. The strategy works and it works well with your other marketing programs. Give your potential customers just enough to want to buy more.

After my shift was completed I was not sure how much money we raised to help people with intellectual disabilities. But I do know that two canisters were jammed full of dollar bills and coins. I learned a little bit about human nature, remembered a good lesson about sales and even bought 3 treats for the kids at home.

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