

My oldest son Ted, entering his senior year at Ankeny High School, has been blessed with being both tall and somewhat athletic. He has loved basketball since he was old enough to stand without an older sister helping him. One of his goals was to be able to play basketball in college, and my wife and I shared that goal with him. Personally, I didn't care if he played at Kentucky or at a junior college in the middle of nowhere. Selfishly, I wanted Ted to be happy, but I would also be pleased if somebody else was paying for his education.

The recruiting process started when Ted was a freshman and received a recruiting letter from South Dakota State. We were really excited until we found out that every player on his AAU team got the same exact letter. In any event, there was hope that Ted's goal of playing basketball after high school might be possible. It took a while for things to heat up after that. NCAA regulations were a part of the reason why, plus a lot of schools wanted to see if he would grow any taller and develop as a player.

General information letters from various colleges started showing up in our mailbox about a year later. I always found it interesting what different schools thought would spark an interest in their school. Quite a few schools sent highlights from different games or highlighted players in their programs. One school took to writing a personalized letter on a very regular basis.

Then assistant coaches started showing up at games and workouts. The NCAA regulations didn't allow them to talk to Ted, but they wanted to let him know they were interested. Over time, the regulations allowed them to make occasional phone calls and talk to Ted about the advantages their school and basketball program had over others. We were invited to come to different campuses and get a feel for the school and the coaches on their home turf.

In short, each school was trying to sell Ted on playing basketball with their team, and Ted was trying to sell them that he would be a good use of their scholarship dollars. Neither quite knowing if it was the best fit. We also realized in a hurry that basketball at the college level was not just for fun, it was a business. It was a dance where there were multiple dance partners, and we were not quite sure of the steps.

I think Ted got a taste of what sales can be like in the real world. Our job as small business owners and managers is to help our sales staff find the right customers and help those customers feel comfortable doing business with us. It is not necessarily an easy task. It takes time to build relationships and understand what the other party is looking for. Sometimes it works out great and we gain a new client, other times the competition wins. Ted had 8 offers total and had a difficult time making a decision.

A few weeks ago Ted gave a verbal commitment to play basketball at the University of Northern Iowa. They were the first to make him an offer and did the best job of convincing him that UNI was the right place for him to play basketball and get a college degree. The coaches made him feel like they wanted him more than anyone else. The type of players they had on the team and were recruiting were the kind of players he wanted to be around. As a parent I think it is a great choice and I think he will be happy there. Plus I am thankful that I was able to be a part of the dance, the sales process.

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