

Last week I did something I thought I would never, ever do. I have to admit that I had a couple of drinks prior to making the decision, and I gave in to peer pressure. Joanne was there and she didn't do anything to stop me, so I did it, I got a tattoo. It all happened really fast and it didn't hurt like I thought it would.

This tattoo is on my right bicep. I guess I was thinking that when I actually developed some muscles there, it might look cool when I flexed. So far it doesn't do very much. The other guys I was with already had tattoos on their biceps so maybe I was just trying to fit in. And I did fit in! Multiple people wanted to take our pictures showing our tattoos, and I obliged.

Now I have to admit that I had never been a big fan of tattoos. Then as they became more popular, my lack of affections for tattoos didn't grow as they became more culturally accepted and more in the mainstream. I read that 25% of people under the age of 30 have tattoos, and they get them for one of five reasons: In memory of a loved one; as a sign of their religious beliefs; because they are proud of their military service; it was a mistake or just for fun.

Tattooing is an issue that is very sensitive to a lot of people. It seems that it is a polarizing issue, either people really like them as a form of self-expression, or people hate them because they see it as a form of self-mutilation, or just don't get it. But as small business owners and managers we have to make a well thought out decision about tattoos, specifically if we are going to allow our employees to have visible tattoos. Unfortunately the decision making process is not black and white.

I believe that it really depends on what the job is. If you hire people who have regular contact with clients who do not have tattoos and are more likely to fall on the side of not liking, not respecting people with tattoos, then it is probably in the best interest of the business to not allow visible tattoos on their employees. A bank loan officer in suburban Iowa would be a great example of just such a job. On the other hand I would not be able to object to a factory worker with visible tattoos. They have little, if any, customer contact.

It is a question of not offending your client base. More importantly, it is about connecting with your client base. Even though I don't really like tattoos, I understand they are a personal choice and even some of my close friends have them. Tattoos, and piercings for that matter, fall under the same category as dress code. Which ultimately ties back to connecting with your client base.

Now back to why I got a tattoo last week. As a smart reader of this column, you probably figured out early on that it wasn't a real tattoo on my arm, just a temporary one that took 30 seconds and a sponge of water before the Jimmy Buffet concert. The guys got free parrot tattoos, and it was just for temporary fun. Between the needles involved and the permanency of the decision, getting a permanent tattoo just isn't for me.

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