

For months my father in law, Joe, has had a bone to pick with me. He wanted me to write a column about one of his pet peeves, people not cashing the checks he so generously writes for birthdays, Christmas and special occasions. Well, not cashing them in general, but specifically not cashing them in what he considers a timely manner.

For example, Joe wrote checks to his six children and 27 grandchildren for Christmas. His goal is to have all the checks cashed quickly so that when he goes to balance his checkbook, he will have no outstanding checks. That would mean cashing the Christmas checks in time so that it would clear his Sioux City bank by the end of January. As a matter of fact he has written "void in 30 days" in the memo section of the check!

While Joe is very generous with his gifts, not all the grandchildren are conscientious about adhering to Joe's request for swift cashing. I asked him to name names, but being a gentleman, the only names he would tell me are my own kids. So I asked my wife about not cashing checks from her dad and she readily admitted to holding them. In her opinion, holding the check was a "win-win" situation because her dad got to hold on to the cash for a while longer, and our kids didn't spend the cash. Kind of like a savings account without utilizing the actual account. (That is probably a discussion for another time!)

Now being a banker for all of my adult life, I understand that cash is king, both in business and our personal life. So in this instance I agree with my wife, as the benefit to not cashing the checks should be Joe's. She understands why he wants the checks cashed but because the amounts are relatively small (we ALWAYS cash the larger checks) so to her way of thinking, it shouldn't be a big deal to hold the checks for a while.

Some of you who are regular readers of this column are probably wondering how I am going to tie this back to the business world. What this situation comes down to is expectations, and clear, effective communication of those expectations. Joe expects that his gifts be appreciated (which they are) and the checks get cashed right away, which is a reasonable expectation. The problem is that obviously not all the recipients either get the message or care enough about the message to act.

So when we communicate, especially with those who we are expecting to act on our behalf, including our staff and vendors, our expectations have to be very clear. Just because they are clear to us, such as writing "void in 30 days", does not necessarily mean that they are clear to those around us. We need to seek acknowledgement of their understanding and their commitment to act.

After eight decades of sending checks in the mail, Joe is threatening to now only send cash as gifts to his family members. Which will likely mean smaller gifts, since it is not recommended to send cash in the mail. I think I will work on convincing him to give everyone a re-loadable debit card. That way he doesn't have to worry about his family cashing checks, and he can still give nice gifts!

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