

Those of you who know me, you know that I am competitive. Ok, really competitive. So when friends of ours suggested we get together a team to compete at trivia night at the church, I was all for it. My mind immediately went back to all those Trivial Pursuit games I have played over the years and all the truly useless information that fills my mind.

Then I thought about my friends who made up the rest of the team...a math professor; a law student; 2 people involved in education; a medical secretary and a couple of banker types, one who was really good at sports trivia (not me). All in all I thought we had a great mix of talent, background and fun people. I was confident we had a chance to take home one of the top prizes. Since we could work on the questions as a team, my confidence level stayed high.

The trivia night was on a Saturday, and it was a rare Saturday for me as there was nothing on our family calendar. So I went down to the basement and dusted off an old box of Trivial Pursuit cards and spent the next few hours testing myself on world events and somewhat obscure figures in history by reading through the cards. By the time we packed up and left for the church, I was feeling very confident in our abilities. Organizers of the event divided the evening into ten sessions of ten questions each. We were going to get eight minutes per session to answer those ten questions.

After reading through the first ten questions, I knew we might be in trouble because we only knew six of the answers for sure. Even though we felt pretty good about the rest of the questions, I was sure the other 15 groups were having the same issues we were having. The second set of ten questions was completely different and we didn't have as much luck in answering the questions as the first set. My confidence level was waning, sinking lower with each guess.

On my desk at work is a "quote-a-day" calendar. As we struggled with some of the answers I was reminded of a quote I came across not long ago. It was from H.L. Mencken, an American journalist and it went like this: "For every problem, there is a solution which is simple, neat and wrong." As we discussed the possible answers, and then heard the answers later, the Mencken quote felt more and more true.

I understand my personality, and for most of my life I have wanted the solution which was simple and neat. Unfortunately, it was sometimes proven to be wrong. However I have been learning that often I need to move beyond the simple and neat into the complex and messy. This doesn't mean I can't rely on that gut feeling that comes with experience; it just means that I have to take the time to confirm it with facts. The trick is to know which decisions can be handled quickly and which need to be analyzed.

In the end the good news was that our team had a very good time at trivia night, even though we did not finish well enough to take home a top prize. As a matter of fact we came in second to last, which was kind of disheartening. Especially for someone so competitive.

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