

Not too long ago I had the pleasure of sitting near Rick Hermann, Ankeny's latest Outstanding Citizen of the Year before an 8th grade band and chorus concert. He was talking about how he has recently started using Facebook.com as a way to communicate with his high school classmates. Rick was very excited about his new discovery and was telling how he has regained contact with people he has not communicated with for years. He was spending a lot more time on the computer than he ever thought he would.

Four out of my five kids are active Facebook.com users and when I told them about listening to Rick, they immediately got very defensive. They thought it was a little weird to have their parents on Facebook, and they were NOT going to be our "friends". Apparently there are some things that parents just shouldn't know and Facebook is the place where kids talk. So I have decided a slightly different approach to electronic social media, Twitter.

We have talked about Twitter at the bank, and I volunteered to be a guinea pig. I admit I needed some help getting started. According to their web site, "Twitter is a service for friends, family, and co-workers to communicate and stay connected through the exchange of quick, frequent answers to one simple question: What are you doing?" The answers have to come in the form of 140 characters, or less. Incredibly difficult for a long winded writer like me. Co-workers guided me through the set-up and what a good post or "tweet" should look like.

On Twitter you "follow" other people's tweets and learn about them, what they are thinking. I decided to follow people that I either knew, found interesting or thought might be interesting. Right now I am following 17 different Tweeters. Some people I am following are: my kids, a few co-workers; Keith Murphy from Channel 13 sports, very interesting; Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric and author, a big Red Sox fan and kind of interesting; Jeffrey Gitomer, a sales guru; Nick Swisher a pitcher for the New York Yankees (I am not a Yankee fan) who is not interesting at all and Thomas L. Friedman a writer for the New York Times who hasn't Tweeted in months.

I have only been doing this a few weeks and I have 12 followers! There used to be more, someone I didn't know named "Destiny" was following me for a while. When I clicked on her profile, I was taken to a web site that offered me a relationship with a woman who wasn't my wife, if you know what I mean. 2 days later, Destiny was banned from Twitter.

My 12 followers pale in comparison to other people who are actively using Twitter. Keith Murphy has 922, Tom Friedman (the famous one) has 8,900 and Jack Welch has 229,000. But I am not discouraged. My reason for joining Twitter are several; I am anxious to keep up with new technology; and it is another way for me to listen what is happening outside of my little world.

Banks and businesses are jumping on the Twitter bandwagon. UMB in Kansas City tweets, Wells Fargo and Bank of America tweet too. Different generations communicate in different ways, and in order to stay in touch with each part of our customer demographic base, we must learn how they communicate. A large part of people younger than me communicate electronically. As small business owners and managers we have to constantly and effectively communicate with our entire customer base, not just the ones that are our age.

If you would like to follow me on Twitter.com, my screen name is TomtheBanker. I will not promise you amazing insights in under 140 characters, but I hope my posts will not stink. Who knows, if this Twitter thing doesn't work out, I can look up Rick Hermann again, and he can teach me how to use Facebook.

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