

It is definitely getting cooler outside, fall is in the air. One of the fall rituals around the Friedman house is the ceremonial placing of the electric blanket on the bed in the master bedroom. OK so it isn't really a ritual and it is defiantly not a ceremony, but I did put a new electric blanket on our bed last week. This is the third electric blanket we have had in our married life.

Since we got married in the early 1980's we had a waterbed that came with it's own heater, so no need for an electric blanket when the entire bed is warm all the time! We needed a blanket to help keep the warmth from escaping. The first electric blanket we had was the traditional kind, one control for the entire bed. That worked fine for a while, but eventually the electric part of the blanket stopped working and then it was just a blanket with wires in the middle. Not very cozy. Not to mention the fact that with this type of blanket, both people really need to want the same amount of warmth at the same time.

Our next electric blanket was really a step up. It wasn't necessarily more cozy that it's predecessor, but it did have dual controls so that each side of the bed could have different heat. That blanket was nice, for about a week. That is when it stopped working, time for a replacement. My wife used her great powers of persuasion and received a replacement blanket at no cost. This one lasted for several winters. Last year one side of the bed stopped working. Fortunately it was my side and I was OK with that as long as I cheated a little bit toward the middle of the bed for some warmth.

When she brought out the new blanket on a cold night last week, I happily placed it between the sheet and the comforter and proceeded to connect the wires, I noticed a couple of things. First there were now two separate plugs instead of one like the old blanket had. Secondly in order to get both plugs in the sockets, I was going to have to do some major moving of furniture, and at 10:00 at night I simply wasn't in the mood. We were warmer that night than the night before, but not as warm as we wanted to be.

As small business owners and managers we must recognize that not all of our customers want exactly the same things. They might want similar products, but will want to use them in different ways. Some customers want more "bells and whistles" and are willing to pay more to have them. Some only want the very basics and are more price conscience. It is important for us to make sure we have a good range of products that our customers will want.

Equally as important is that our sales staff understands the products and the differences between them. If a single person is looking for a blanket, they may not need an electric blanket and if they do, they may not want the hassle of dual controls. If it is a couple that has been married for a long time, dual controls might be a necessity. Only by asking the right questions, can our sales staff recommend the right products and services for our customers. It's not rocket science; have the right range of products and the right people, trained in the right way to sell them.

Our old electric blanket has now been claimed by 15 year old son Ted. He doesn't care that only ½ of it works, for him it is a significant upgrade from the traditional blankets he had on his bed. No ritual, no ceremony, just a new level of warmth.

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