

The sirens were going off, but I slept through them. I woke up when the power went out. My first thought was checking on the sump pump in the basement. Years ago we bought a battery back-up, and I wanted to make sure it was working. With my wife out of town visiting her parents, I was so paranoid that it wasn't going to work that I made sure that a path was cleared in the basement, and several buckets were ready in case I had to start bailing out the basement. To get those buckets ready, I had to dump dozens of baseballs and golf balls into a chair in the garage.

Taking electricity for granted is something I do on a regular basis. Getting ready for work without power in the house was an interesting exercise. Fortunately hot water was not dependant on electricity, so my morning shower was relatively normal. I know that I needed light to be able to get ready for work, but until that morning, I didn't realize how much.

Light is necessary for me to shave in the morning. Since the power was out, I had to think of an alternative. What would my great-great-grandfather do? Candlelight was the first thought that hit my mind. After looking around for several minutes, I found a couple of small candles. Placing them close to the mirror to reflect the little bit of light they put out, I thought I was pretty smart. But that wasn't nearly enough light. The modern equivalent of candles hit my mind next, a flashlight.

Unfortunately a flashlight shining straight up doesn't give enough light to shave either. Holding the flashlight in one hand didn't work either. Apparently I need to stretch my face with one hand while holding the shaver in the other to get a good shave. Holding the flashlight in my mouth didn't occur to me, and I am glad because it would have looked really funny. Thank goodness the candles worked OK for putting my contacts in my eyes. Using a hair dryer? Not necessary.

Ironing my shirt was out of the question, so I decided to keep my suit coat on at the bank all day. When I got to the bank, I found out the power was out there too, what a day this was going to be!

Usually at this point in my column I try to relate this life experience to something in the business world. My first thought was to say something about how as small business owners and managers we need to have contingency plans in place to cover emergencies. But that connection seemed too obvious. I owed it to the faithful readers of this space to be more creative.

As small business owners and managers we should all have a goal: be as indispensable to our customers as electricity. Our product or service should make people curse when they don't have access to us, and be thankful that we are available to them. Accomplishing that would be an amazing, although somewhat impossible task.

We don't need to be a monopoly like electricity to become indispensable, although that would help. We need to be the thing people talk about or where they gather to talk. What we need are great products, and more importantly outstanding service. Gimmicks sometimes get attention, but do not last. To become indispensable takes time and effort, near perfection in everything we do; day after day, year after year, employee after employee.

By 1:30 that afternoon my wife was safely back in Ankeny and the power was back on at home. Thank goodness the power doesn't go out very often. My semi-shaven face and un-ironed shirt can only go to work so many days out of the year.

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