

One of the victims of the current economy is Ankeny's annual volunteer recognition dinner. Sponsored by the Ankeny Service Center of United Way of Central Iowa, this annual event was a nice, local way to thank people who gave of their time to help others during the past year.

Eliminating the dinner in Ankeny was not United Way's fault. Given the choice of spending money on helping those truly in need or spending money thanking the volunteers who also help, the choice was obvious. This week, (April 20 – April 25) is volunteer appreciation week. Now just because the dinner in Ankeny is not happening, we shouldn't forget the volunteers or the good that they do.

As I began to think about writing this column I was going to list some of the prominent citizens of Ankeny who volunteer their time for the good of somebody else. They are names that you would recognize because they volunteer at a lot of different levels. But sometimes listing the obvious is not the best thing to do.

Then I thought about where people volunteer; the Ankeny Chamber of Commerce, churches, youth sports, On With Life, United Way, Rotary, schools, Kiwanis, Jaycees, and dozens of not-for-profit organizations. With so many volunteers helping so many different organizations, I thought about why people do or do not volunteer.

According to www.volunteeringinamerica.gov the reason most people cite for not volunteering is a lack of time. Given the very busy schedule that most people work and are involved with their families and outside activities, I agree that finding time for volunteering is very difficult. In a study cited by the web site, the average volunteer watched 325 less hours of television per year when compared to people who have never volunteered. In other words they gave up American Idol, Dancing with the Stars, Law & Order and even reruns of the Love Boat to help others. Not a bad trade off in my book.

The web site also said that people who volunteer work just as many hours in a week as those who do not volunteer. So volunteers are not slackers on the job. But all that information as interesting as it is, does not tell us why people volunteer.

My theory is two fold; one is that people are intrinsically good and want to help others. Two, it is just good business. People like to do business with others that they have gotten to know, like and trust. One of the best ways to do that in a non-threatening way is by meeting someone who is working for the same common cause. You can get to know how a person works, their thought process, and see if their overall philosophies are comparable to yours. No sales pressures, no product demonstrations.

The key to being successful in the volunteer world is to work hard to benefit someone else. The key to being successful in the business world is to work hard to benefit someone else, your customer. Potential customers do not have a hard time

making the transition seeing you in both ways. However, it is important not to mix the two at the same time.

Even though we did not have a local dinner to honor our Ankeny volunteers this week, try to say thank you to those who take the time to help others. They volunteer because it is the right thing to do and because it can be good business.

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