

I have heard it has ruined marriages. Or at least created major fights between married couples, roommates, siblings or anyone who has to share a bathroom. No, I am not talking about leaving the toilet seat up, although that is probably a story for another time. Especially with boys aged 13 and 10 in the house! This story is about toothpaste.

For some reason when our family brushes our teeth at night, it always is in the master bathroom. Sure we have multiple toothbrushes in other bathrooms, but it doesn't matter. Sure it sometimes gets a little crowded when all four of us are trying to brush our teeth at the same time, but that doesn't bother me either. What tends to bother me is an incident like what happened the other night.

When I grabbed the tube to apply some of that magic gel on my toothbrush, my hand came into contact with a gooey substance, toothpaste. Not at the mouth of the tube where you would expect it, but down toward the bottom, where you squeeze. It makes me wonder how in the world toothpaste gets from the mouth of the tube all the way to the bottom. Not in a large quantity, just enough to make your hands sticky.

My first thought was that the tube had a hole in it and that was the source of my frustration. Closer examination revealed that the cause came from another source. My kids were not around and I have been married far too long to even think of my wife being the culprit, and I know I am always far too picky about toothpaste tubes to be responsible for any spillage.

After washing my hands free of the toothpaste and starting the task of brushing all 32 of my teeth, I looked down at the counter. You guessed it, more toothpaste there. My patience was being tested. Partly since my mouth was full and partly because I didn't really know who to yell at, I kept my frustration to myself.

As small business owners and managers we often have difficulty setting ourselves apart from some of our bigger competitors. They often have bigger marketing budgets, better web sites, lower prices, more people and generally more resources to gather more sales and profits. The small businesses have to rely on better service and niche markets to make a buck. It's the little things that set us apart.

Our customers count on us to make sure that little things are taken care of. They count on us to make sure things like the toothpaste is not on the outside of the tube.

The outside of the toothpaste tube in the master bathroom is now clean of excess toothpaste. I feel a little better about the incident since I had the opportunity to share it with you here. Rest assured it will not ruin my marriage or cause a fight. I took care of the minor irritant.

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