

Last week Joanne and I celebrated 29 years of marriage together. Not a year that represents a significant milestone, but we both received a present that we will never forget. Our five children got together and wrapped up 29 items, representing one for every year that we have been married. At first I was not very happy because while our children do not want for very much, they don't have much money to spend on anniversary presents for their parents. 29 presents would be way out of what is reasonable.

My worries were swept away when Joanne opened the present marked as #1. What was inside was a dog toy. Since we do not currently own a dog, I was a little puzzled. Then Joanne read the note that was attached..."Dog Toy: Remember Gretta? Yeah, me too. Here's a dog toy in anticipation of Fido/Spot (or your grand puppies)." Gretta was a dog that we had when we lived in Davenport and a few years in Ankeny. The light bulb came on and I realized that each of the items that were wrapped were not gifts of the traditional nature, but various memories and an item that represented each memory.

As we proceeded in opening presents, taking turns as a good married couple should do, it turned out that each child put together 5-6 items of things that represented good memories of our times together. For example we "received" a half empty sack of un-popped popcorn (taken from the pantry, of course). This represented the popcorn that our family, and all of our children's friends love to eat. Then there was a note representing well, notes. Our family relies on notes to communicate and remember.

There was one reference to a column I wrote sometime around 1998, even though regular readers will know that my family is a constant source of inspiration and material for my writing. All of this was orchestrated by my 21 year old daughter Jenni. She took the time to type all the notes, each kid in a different font and wrap all the presents, each kid with different wrapping paper. She even coordinated a 3 way video chat so that everyone could be involved, even though we were in Iowa, Kansas and California.

As small business owners and managers, we often don't realize that the small things we do have a profound effect on those around us, to those who look to us for leadership. All of our actions, habits and words are subtle clues to our staff on how we expect them to behave. I am not suggesting that everything we do be carefully planned to impress people. I am suggesting that you look at how you perform your duties and treat people. People are watching, and learning.

One of the funniest items we received was a collection of paper moustaches, each attached at the side to a pencil. For the first 28 years of our marriage, I was sporting a pretty thick moustache. Now I believe she wishes I would have shaved it sooner. But if she does miss it, we now have options. We laughed until we cried. And then we cried tears of happiness because of the love, respect and warmth that our anniversary "presents" had given us.

Finally, I would be remiss if I didn't mention the passing of Sandy Sanderson, former editor of the Ankeny Press Citizen. As has been mentioned before, Sandy was a first class journalist and gentleman. He was always supporting of my writing and had kind words to say to me, even when they weren't necessarily deserved. We will miss his balanced reporting, his keen wit and his contagious smile.

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