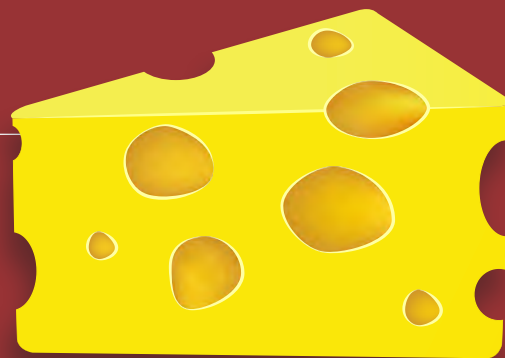


THE UN-COMFORT ZONE

With Robert Wilson

The Second Mouse Gets the Cheese



My title this month is a funny metaphor for a common opinion that I found written on a bathroom wall. The understood part of the graffiti is that the first mouse must die springing the trap before the second one gets the prize.

After observing big failures, it's human nature to be a little wary of trying new things. Fear of failure tends to make us less likely to take risks even if we're not putting our lives in jeopardy. No one likes to lose money, or even lose face on an idea that doesn't work.

Another anonymous bathroom wall writer phrased the same sentiment this way: "Eagles may soar, but weasels are never sucked into airplane engines." In short, many people are motivated by security. And, when I observe the differences between my two sons, I can see how it happens.

My first son, by virtue of birth order, had to be a trail blazer. He was first to play soccer, baseball and basketball, attend Cub Scouts and go to school. Meanwhile, my second son, forced to sit on the sidelines and watch, enjoyed all the benefits of seeing his big brother struggle, thus learning what to avoid. When his turn to try those things finally arrived, he was prepped and succeeded quickly and easily.

A second mouse rarely leaves his comfort zone. "Uh, go ahead... you try it first. I'll just stay over here in my safe cozy world and watch. If you don't die, and it looks like there's something to gain, then maybe I'll try it."

I think Mark Twain said it best, "A man with a new idea is a crank -- until the idea succeeds."

A desire for security, and its accompanying risk avoidance, keeps us from even testing our potential. I remember when I started my first advertising business, many of the writers and graphic designers I

knew would say to me, "I wish I could be self-employed like you and have the freedom to set my own hours. If I could just find one client, I could quit my job."

I always responded by saying, "You're not going to find that client until you quit your job. There's nothing more motivating than a mortgage payment at the end of the month, to get you out there and find one. As long as you're comfortably receiving a steady paycheck, you're not going to take that risk."

More than any other characteristic, it is the willingness to take risks that defines the innovator. Today our sluggish economy is screaming for some innovation. Unfortunately, at the same time, our society is shunning risk like never before.

As we have become wealthier as a nation, we have become more comfortable, and less risk tolerant. Meanwhile our government - always moving with the will of the people - has attempted to secure that comfort for us in the only way it knows how.

In the name of protecting people, our government has stepped up regulation on business to the point that it has stifled innovation. A certain amount of constraint stimulates creative thinking - that's where the term "thinking outside of the box" was derived. But, the increasing level of regulations and the accompanying penalties for violating them has upped the ante on risk.

According to The Economist magazine, "There are over 4,000 federal crimes, and many times that number of regulations that carry criminal penalties... many laws, especially federal ones, are so vaguely writ-

ten that people cannot easily tell whether they have broken them."

When it is impossible to know the rules, it makes it even scarier to try something new that could possibly break them and land you in jail. Security is nice to have, but it is more about being ever vigilant than it is about finding a no-tolerance rule that will cover every exigency. Financial security, in particular, is tied to your mind, not your paycheck.

Benjamin Franklin warned us more than two hundred years ago, "They who can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety, deserve neither liberty nor safety."

Innovation requires creative thinking, time, and the willingness to take risks. None of those matter if the environment to try new things is severely limited. Innovation also requires liberty - the freedom to fail or succeed.

For the sake of the economy, we need to give those First Mice, the ones willing to take risks, the freedom to try.

Robert Evans Wilson, Jr. is an author, humorist and innovation consultant. He works with companies that want to be more competitive and with people who want to think like innovators. Robert is also the author of the humorous children's book: *The Annoying Ghost Kid*. For more information on Robert, please visit www.jumpstartyourmeeting.com