Flippers or Balls?

These days, as I spend more and more time in airport waiting areas, I find myself having the most random of thoughts. One of the more relaxing ways I’ve found to pass the time is to indulge in one of my personal favorite applications of technology yet.

On Windows XP machines (I don’t know about Vista; I haven’t taken that plunge, due to my personal hesitation to pay for the privilege of beta-testing software.) there is a surprisingly realistic pinball game. A throwback to my own childhood favorite arcade game—yep, I have experienced firsthand the entire evolution from Atari’s Pong to Nintendo’s Wii Fit—Microsoft has embodied a game with an amazing feel for the real sensation of slapping the buttons on the side of the box, and hearing the buzzers and bouncers ring and sing as the score tallies ever higher.

So the randomness comes in as I think about the game of pinball and how it is analogous to the life of an association spokesperson (or any meaningful career choice that motivates you). My first thought is that life can be like the ball, bouncing from one motivating force (the ‘flipper’) to the next target or trap. Sometimes you score lots of points directly; sometimes you bounce off one interaction to the next and score there; and sometimes you unexpectedly step into a void and lose your turn.

This year it would be easy to fall into the mindset of the ball. With the speed and fluidity of regulatory and legislative activities increasing, particularly between California and Washington, D.C., it seems like I’m getting invites to even more short-notice meetings than I ever anticipated. And I knew this year was going to be hectic! From the HCFC phaseout (can you believe how many contractors and technicians are only now bothering to learn about R-22 replacements?) and HFC phase-down discussions (Are you kidding me? We haven’t even migrated to them yet!) to energy-efficiency rebate opportunities flowing faster than bills through Congress, sometimes it literally feels like we’re bouncing from one challenge to the next.

But then I thought more about it, and I realized the real similarity isn’t to be the ball—it’s to be the flipper. The key to pinball is to keep hitting the ball at the right moment. It doesn’t matter so much exactly where it goes on each individual hit, just that you keep the ball in play. Eventually, it will hit the right combination of targets and your score will rise tremendously. You also get the knack, with practice, for hitting the ball at just the right moment so that it hits the targets you desire relatively easily.

And while I am by no means saying it’s easy to navigate the sometimes seemingly chaotic world of HVACR, especially these days, I do believe that if we think about the challenges and opportunities facing us collectively, we can realize that we’ve been here before. And those experiences have given us the practice we need to address these issues. So let’s be flippers, controlling the game as best we can, and not the balls bouncing around at someone else’s direction.

Mark Lowry
RSES Executive Vice President