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Customer Service, Creature Comforts Replacing Stodgy, Traditional Banks

Your Dad's Bank Didn't Have Coffee, Tv, Internet Service

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By Ellen Williams-Masson

It's not your father's bank.

Chances are, it's not even like the bank where you do business today.

Gone are the four-deep teller lines, intimidating atmosphere and hushed silences, swept away by a new trend in banking where hospitality is the currency of choice and customers are welcomed like family.

The flagship Park Bank branch in Downtown Madison opened June 11, featuring complimentary creature comforts like wireless Internet access, specialty coffees and a comfy seating area, dubbed "Central Park," offering panoramic views of the Capitol.

Glass frontage and high ceilings create a feeling of openness warmed by the personal greeting customers receive when they walk through the door.

Routine transactions are handled in minutes via the bank's mechanical money handling system, which increases efficiency and accuracy. Customers with more involved financial needs are invited to meet with personal bankers in the privacy of individual consult rooms.

Inspired by the traditions of hospitality providers in the retail market, Park Bank goes far beyond the vinyl chairs and stale coffee found in many banks. The attention to customer service embodies the bank's promise, emblazoned on the wall, to put "caring before calculating."

"It's quite a bold statement we're making in acknowledging that, quite frankly, nobody wants to bank," said Kelly Lietz, vice president of marketing. "They typically come to the bank because they have to, but that doesn't mean it can't be a pleasant experience."

With \$650 million in assets – more than double that of five years ago – Park Bank has grown from its original location on Park Street in 1966 to an organization that is slated to open its 12th branch by the end of the year.

Rapid growth led to a period of reassessment two years ago and a rebranding strategy to bring the bank's image in line with its goals.

"That was a deep, soul-searching moment for us, because as you get bigger, you ask those hard questions of who we are, and what do we still care about, and we felt the need to affirm what we had always believed to be the case: as we grow, it's not going to change," Lietz said.

KEEPING CUSTOMERS HAPPY

With a myriad of banking options available to today's savvy customer, focusing on customer satisfaction can be a niche for community banks.

"Large banks offer so many more services than the small banks, and it's a way to try to restore the balance between the two," said Donald Hester, professor emeritus of economics at UW-Madison. Hester has also written books on banking and monetary policy.

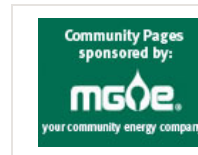
"It may also cause some networking, not only between the bank and customers, but among customers, and that will also improve the frequency of which people show up at the bank," he said.

The State Bank of Cross Plains is counting on that competitive edge as the company renovates most of its nine branches in anticipation of its 100th anniversary next year.

"Banking and financial institutions are a commodity, and we have to do whatever we can to differentiate ourselves from our competitors," said Dawn Ferguson, vice president of sales and marketing.

"Part of our whole branding goal is to create an environment that is warm, welcoming and inviting, and encourages our customers to slow down and take their time through the lobby."

The 9,000-square-foot branch in Mt. Horeb was the State Bank of Cross Plains' first building to be designed in the new retail



style. Completed in 2006, the \$2.2 million facility features a fireplace, big-screen television and computer workstation.

INTERNET QUICK, USEFUL

Karen Meudt of Blanchardville has been banking at the Mt. Horeb branch so long that her "check numbers are five digits." Dropping in at the branch once or twice a week, she said she likes using the high-speed Internet because it's faster than her dial-up connection at home.

"When I've done my transaction at the window, then I go around and use the Internet banking to check on several things," she said. "It doesn't make us go more, but when we're there, it's just nice to relax."

Russ Kashian, associate professor of economics at UW-Whitewater, questions whether happier customers will ultimately translate into more money in the bank. Kashian was formerly the manager of a credit union and does research on financial institutions.

"You have to ask at the end of the day, how does this add to the bottom line? Are banks somewhere people want to hang out? It seems a little gimmicky to me."

Rick McGuigan, executive vice president of Community Bankers of Wisconsin, said community banks are looking for ways to attract younger people, who tend not to seek the same level of personal interaction that previous generations did.

"Clearly we've seen a decrease in lobby traffic, so there have been discussions on ways to get more customers back into the lobby," he said. "Creating a more hospitable environment would make a lot of sense."

M&I Bank, AnchorBank and Associated Bank have not rolled out Internet cafes, but Associated Bank spokesman Don Klein didn't rule out the possibility. Associated Bank has more than \$20 billion in assets and the most branches of any bank in Wisconsin.

"Certainly, we're always looking at new ways to serve our customers, so if something made sense and was of great demand, of course we would take a look at that," he said.

FRESH-BAKED COOKIES

Seven-year-old Oak Bank in Fitchburg was a forerunner in the hospitality movement in the Madison area, offering a playground for kids, fresh-baked cookies every morning and a "Director of First Impressions" who greets customers at the door.







"It's worked extremely well and served our niche," said Jim McNulty, vice president of business banking. "Madison is extremely well-banked and there is a ton of competition. It's that high-touch, quality service that we can do."

banking on his staff to provide the human touch, and sincerity, that will set them apart from the competition.







"Are you offering it just because you feel like you have to, competition-wise, or are you offering it because you really care?" he said. "We're offering it because we care about our clients."

Ellen Williams-Masson is a New Glarus freelance writer. She can be reached at thecoop@tds.net.

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