

Americas



Are Your Branches Boring?

How can you remedy your pesky double chin and branch malaise all at once? Simple: start looking up.

Too often in today's world we miss the inspiration all around us (and weaken our chin muscles) by keeping our noses buried in our smartphones. And this passive approach to our daily routines is showing in our branch designs – often trapped in a cycle of non-descript brick buildings and dingy interior color palettes. As the retail world continues to evolve in exciting and forward-thinking ways, many banks are stuck in customer experiences of the past.

But what if your branches took a note from co-working spaces or quick service restaurants? Or even a speakeasy? While this may seem farfetched, it's possible. And even more importantly, it works. I'll show you how.

Getting Started with the Unexpected

Whenever I visit a new city, I almost always start with a walking tour. In my opinion, it's the best way to really get to know a new area. A recent trip to Denver

was no different. Though I found myself sucked into my smartphone during my exploration – reviewing trip photos, texting, checking social media – I managed to notice something unusual in the sidewalk. A seal, branded by the company that laid the pavement, was etched into the concrete. Further down my path I noticed another, then another. This got me thinking about how turn of the century banks did something similar with their pressed metal seals, proudly indicating when it was built and by whom. If parallels can be drawn between a bank and a sidewalk, just imagine what else could apply to your branch designs.

It's for this reason that when beginning a new relationship with banking clients, I also start with a retail walking tour. Not only does it break them out of the office mindset but allows them to draw inspiration from anything – not just what's trending in the industry. And let me tell you, inspiration is everywhere (if you can manage to look up from your phone) from the second you wake up to the last minute of your day.

Where Your Day Can Take You

Like many of you, I start out my day with caffeine. And naturally, this is where the first bits of inspiration can arise if you're paying attention.

What do your branches and, say, your favorite coffee shops have in common? Why, your drive-throughs of course! Much like your drive-up tellers, quick-service restaurants have many mobile and drive-through orders to fill. Fast-casual spots like Dunkin' Donuts are reimagining their drive-throughs. In a new concept store, simply known as the rebranded Dunkin', they've added an "HOV" lane for mobile orders – not too far from how many banks set-up exterior ATMs. Some major banks are taking a page from this playbook, including Chase and Huntington, with remote drive-ups for ATMs that are both efficient as they are a major branding opportunity to create an iconic statement. How does your drive-up stack up? It is an utilitarian, cement overhang void of branding and design? Just something to think about.

More of a tea drinker? Another bit of inspiration from my time in Boston is an installation at T2 Boston, a tea shop, with walls adorned with "tea literacy" information about each product. How could that translate to a bank branch? Regions Bank is leading a similar charge with digital signage in branches that offer financial literacy quizzes to patrons, in order to help add value to their experience through education.

As my day in Boston wore on, inspiration was waiting for me in the library. I find it interesting that, like banks, libraries are in the throes of reinventing themselves to become "relevant" again. For example, the Boston Public Library has strived for over 100 years to bring passion to the people. Though the building is historic, like many legacy banks and credit unions, you're welcomed in by a lobby that's nothing short of modern, outfitted with all interactive and engaging digital displays. For example, one display turns guest photos into images built from passages of classic novels. In the age of social media, this type of instant – and Instagram-able – gratification is key.

You might've noticed that many of my examples thus far are from customer service venues. "But what about the workplace," you might be asking. "Banks are a place of business!" I couldn't agree more, let's take a look at the latest in workplace design: co-working spaces.

The craze that's taken over the entrepreneurial ventures of the last few years have some important things to add to a branch. A Boston WeWork has taken on the popular trend of hyper-localization, resulting in large murals, relevant signage (theirs being Red Sox-themed, naturally). Many banks are currently tying this theme into their branches, like Citizens Bank and its community walls supported throughout its network with digital displays. Going digital not only lends itself to a sleek design but is a cost-effective method of maintaining consistent execution while celebrating historical significance and community values relevant to each branch.



Other examples of banks mirroring the co-working space model is the widely talked about Capital One Cafes, a brick-and-mortar coffee shop and banking institution from the previously digital-only ING Direct, which incorporates discreet sitting areas for customer privacy.

And at the end of a “work-day,” inspiration even found me during a nightcap in a Philadelphia speakeasy. Its monetary themed décor, with a nickel bar top or copper penny flooring, could speak so well to a banking interior. Even how the bar carved living room-esque dining spaces in lieu of close-together tables was thought-provoking. And during a commute home, it was clear that transportation too has run with this trend, for example, Union Station in Denver, which transforms multipurpose areas into cozy vignettes resulting in a more comfortable setting to relax in while traveling. Just think what this could do for your lobby areas while customers waited to speak with their banker.

Where Are Your Possibilities?

Now that I’ve shown you some of my inspirations, are you ready to find yours? It’s clear that banks and credit unions no longer need to stick to the status quo when it comes to design. In fact, if the goal is to stand out, it’s nothing short of paramount to think outside the box for your branch design. Your customer base is changing, and your branches can change with them.

A well-seasoned design partner can not only help you evaluate your current network design and narrow in on your vision but should also bring unconventional ideas to the table that will allow your institution to create a unique, differentiated experience. Don’t forget how important it is to consider scaling and rollout as well, because a good design isn’t feasible without a tangible execution plan.

And finally, remember to put down your phone and take in inspiration wherever you go. Your customers will thank you, and so will your chin muscles.



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