

Tailoring branches to modern customers

By Sandra P. Haltner

Remember the predictions that electronic banking would replace “brick and mortar” branches? What happened? Branch construction is at an all-time high, especially in the South and Southwest. Not since the 1980s has such unprecedented high growth in branches been seen. Most people have used an ATM and some type of Internet banking. Still, building continues. What do customers get out of taking the time to park their cars and walk into a bank when they could use the ATM or Internet? Could it be that no matter how much they love their electronic gadgets, they still like experiencing that one-on-one interaction for some banking needs? Or do they feel they get more of a positive response on a face-to-face basis?

Some say growth in brick and mortar branches is driven by big bank mergers and the consumer is seeking new choices. What are these choices? What do customers want today? With banks on every corner of every major intersection, why do customers choose one bank over another? Is it curb appeal? Is site navigation important? What is the driving force?

Branches with curb appeal and easy site navigation rank high. First, the bank has to get customers on site. Sounds easy, doesn't it? However, too many bank sites have been purchased without enough thought given to the importance of the right ingress and egress. Being able to enter the site well before reaching the intersection is important, especially during rush hour traffic. Remember, a lot of customers go through the motor bank on their way to and from work. Also, they should be able to exit the site and continue in the same direction they were going. Some bank branches have motorists exiting on the street running perpendicular to where they entered, therefore forcing them to make a u-turn.

Next, building design and curb appeal need to be considered. Be sure the building design gives a feeling of security and stability to customers. Too many times not enough thought is given to the design development phase of the project. Also, building visi-

bility is an important element. This means the height of the building is an important architectural consideration. Too often bank buildings are designed too low for the area they are in and the surrounding structures. Be sure the building can be seen and easily identified. Also, spend the available dollars on the right architectural elements. Cut corners somewhere else, not on the building entry or landscaping. First impressions are lasting.

Feeling comfortable ranks high as a driving force. Branches with distinct character that reflect the cultural diversity of their neighborhoods fit that mold. Knocks down the “cookie cutter” approach doesn't it? Feeling comfortable also means being recognized. Remember when bankers knew their customers' names? And where they lived and worked? It really made them feel comfortable. It made them feel like the banker cared about them and their money. Customers stay where they feel cared for and comfortable. Sometimes this ability is lost in the mega-mergers. Don't lose that ability.

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Corporate identity can be achieved through other means. Module signage, overhead banners and wall murals not only establish corporate identity, but serve as directional pathways to other services provided by the bank. Check out all options before going to the “cookie cutter” approach. Signage, graphics and marketing materials all play an important role in corporate identity.

Better, faster, cheaper building is today's mantra. While this may be a worthy consideration, the number one priority is designing the right building to meet the needs of the bank. A lot of thought and planning goes into the design of a building – both exterior and interior design.

Design and plan for 15 years out. Don't be trendy with colors and furnishings. Don't look outdated in a few years. When designing for inner urban environments, consider age as well as diversity. Younger markets call for brighter colors while older, conservative customers prefer a more subdued and constrained palette.

If name recognition were the only factor in the success of a bank, than there wouldn't be any new successful banks. And customers wouldn't have any choices. **BN**

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