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Banks emphasizing client-banker relationships through design

Minneapolis / St. Paul Business Journal - by [Jennifer Niemela](#) Staff Writer

Am I at a north woods cabin or at a bank?

That's the question local de novo banks would have you ask yourself as you walk into their branches. Despite the heralding of the death knell of the bank branch 15 years ago with the rise of the Internet and its remote-banking possibilities, the bank branch is alive and well — and in Minnesota, it's cozy.

“I think the trend toward ambiance is a natural evolution of us having so many of our customers conducting their business outside the building that when they do come into the bank, we wanted to make it a special experience,” said Tom Mork, president and CEO of Lakeville-based **Lakeview Bank**, which has a fireplace in its waiting lounge.

Mork's 4-year-old bank is a Frank Lloyd Wright design that's a dramatic departure from the typical branch design of old. Much of the design innovation is due to technological advances.

“Only about 25 percent of our volume comes through the teller windows, so the old days when you had a long line of teller windows is gone,” Mork said. “We have three teller windows, and we've only ever used two.”

The best compliment you can bestow on Reid Evenson, president and CEO of **Tradition Capital Bank** in Edina, is to say his bank doesn't look like a bank at all.

“When I started in banking [in 1970 at **Northwestern Bank**], it had the longest teller line — it was literally a block long with the typical granite countertops,” Evenson said. The “teller line” at Tradition Capital, which opened in 2005, is a lounge with leather furniture around a fireplace.

“It's more like you're in the den having a chat,” Evenson said.

The lessons learned by community banks as they've figured out what customers want in the Internet age are particularly critical during these tumultuous times, when relationship banking is more important than ever, said Mike Kraft, a partner at Eden Prairie-based HTG Architects, which specializes in designing bank branches.

“Fifteen years ago, we all declared that branch banking was dead because of the Internet,” Kraft said. “Within about five years, bankers were looking at their market share and wondering, ‘Where did our relationships go?’ They realized that even banks that were really pursuing electronic banking needed to bring the customers back into the branches.”

For David Rom, president of **Platinum Bank** in Woodbury, bringing customers into the branch has reached a new level of meaning. Besides the wood decor — fashioned from trees that were cleared off the land to make way for the bank branch — it has a patio with a barbecue, plasma-screen televisions tuned to financial news channels and a community room called The Loft, which is open to groups to use free of charge even after hours.

And of course, it has a fireplace.

“Ten years ago, this would've been wild and crazy,” said Rom, noting that bankers aren't the most visually imaginative creatures. “But in the last 10 years, de novos have moved in a more creative direction. Life is too short for white walls and cheap carpet. Money can be one of the most personal

things in people's lives, and trust and confidentiality are important. Why not create an environment that exudes that?"

With public confidence in the banking system waning, local de novos hope they can use their warm ambiance as a marketing tool to shore up a sense of security with existing and potential customers. And that's centered around the fireplace trend.

"A lot of community banks in rural areas have fireplaces, especially if you go up north," Kraft said. "It's part of that northern Minnesota feel, and it's new to see it in these suburban banks. It's about trying to create that atmosphere that it's not about the transaction, it's about the relationship."

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