

Refining Bank Branches, Texas Style

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Foot traffic may be slowing down at brick-and-mortar branches, but that should only inspire lenders to rejuvenate their **branch approaches** to ensure they are accommodating visitors' needs and wants.

This theme came up in a recent call I had with Waco, Texas-based Extraco Banks, a community lender that stands out in how it has reshaped its operations in recent years and one which now boasts a consulting division to help other companies stay fresher, too.

"Branches will never go away," James Geeslin, chief sales officer and vice chairman, tells **Bank Innovation**.

Because of such, Extraco Banks decided to flex its imaginative muscles and redesign its branch setup to improve the lobby experience about two and a half years ago. The lobbies "were kind of stale," recalls Geeslin. Taking a cue from retailers like Apple and Home Depot, Extraco opted to deploy universal-type employees to its brick-and-mortar locations. Its new branch approach, which is part of its larger efforts called SWARM Banking, means every employee can do, well, a lot.

"We don't have traditional tellers. Everybody can do about everything," Geeslin tells **Bank Innovation**. "We try to touch our customers within a few seconds of them entering the door."

Naturally, training employees became an upfront cost the bank had to swallow. The training program now runs eight to 12 weeks, whereas before training boiled down to more of a learn-as-you-go approach. Nonetheless, since deploying the SWARM Banking model, Geeslin says some of the benefits include better employee retention, better customer experience and a simplified product mix.

Geeslin scored the 2011 Maverick Banker of the Year title from BAI for his retail banking operations transformation, but he's not done with his innovation efforts.

Extraco boasts an innovation group that meets every two weeks. During such meetings, the group studies other retailers' strategies and throws out new ideas to possibly introduce to the company. Each meeting has some 15 to 20 agenda items, with subject matters ranging from cellphone technology to social media strategy to planning ways to smooth out products and services.

"That keeps us fresh," says Geeslin. "We have to continue to be innovative."

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