

Bank's New Branch Design Is 'Just Better'



The sign outside may read South Shore Bank, but first-time visitors to the new financial center in Hingham, Mass. typically have to rethink what “going to the bank” means once they step inside. That’s because the recently opened office was designed with a “reimagined vision” of what future branches need to be, given recent changes and trends in how customers choose to interact with banks.

An established community bank with a 180-year history may not seem like the place where experiments in the future of branch design would take place, but South Shore Bank President/CEO John Boucher says the writing is on the wall when it comes to customer behavior.

“People are fearful of change, particularly when it comes to banking, so we understood that we were taking somewhat of a risk with the design of the Hingham Financial Center,” he explains.

“Yet no matter how we looked at the trends, it was clear that the way consumers interact with banks is undergoing a fundamental change. We wanted to get ahead of the curve.”

Recognizing that transformation created an exciting opportunity for South Shore Bank to free itself from traditional branch design so the new office could embody the bank’s brand. The result was a project that has created a comfortable environment where high-tech delivery and personal service sit side-by-side, blending self-service and professional guidance so customers can choose how they would prefer to manage their finances.

Embodying the brand

South Shore Bank’s newest branch is efficiently spacious — open, inviting, and bright — as the teller counter and queue lines have given way to a new way of interacting with customers in keeping with its brand promise of “Just Better.”

The design recognizes a central finding in the brand positioning research McDougall & Duval Advertising had conducted for the bank in 2010 — that especially younger consumers craved more convenient banking options, such as mobile and online banking, online account openings, and quick loan decisions. Based on that research, “our goal became to position South Shore Bank as the financial institution that supports smart, savvy, time-saving banking decisions — through better solutions and better technology that allows you to access and manage your accounts on the run,” says Jeff Bard, Strategic Planner for McDougall & Duval.

The “Just Better” brand focus sums up the vision for the new branch and the bank’s overall customer service approach, says Dan Duval, CEO of McDougall & Duval and Creative Chief for the South Shore Bank project.

“It’s simple and aspirational in setting the tone for how we want people to think about the bank and how employees think about their roles within the organization,” Duval says. “It also relates to how South Shore Bank serves its community. It’s really become the bank’s mantra, its guiding philosophy.”

It’s also been effective in helping South Shore Bank grow in assets, which crossed the \$1 billion mark in 2013. “A brand is built from the inside out, and this bank has done a good job of integrating the brand philosophy,” Duval notes.

The Hingham branch, which opened in December 2013 in a relatively affluent coastal community south of Boston, translates the brand promise into brick and mortar, with an emphasis on helping customers manage two of their most precious commodities — money and time.

The branch design emphasizes “time saving and convenience, with access to people when you need people and access to technology when you prefer it,” Bard notes. “It’s tough for banks to differentiate themselves based on price in this flat-rate environment, but this is a great example of a bank becoming more innovative and making banking more accessible. There’s a bit of alchemy in discovering the best mix of personal service and technology.”



A “Personal Teller Machine” capable of two-way video interactions.

Time for something completely different

Planning for the new Financial Center began with a reality check about whether physical branches are even necessary in an era where in-person transactions are declining steadily. After agreeing that brick-and-mortar facilities serve a vital function as the physical manifestation of the brand, South Shore Bank's strategic and tactical managers began meeting with Towne Architects & Co. and environmental design firm Image 4 to plan a new type of branch that would combine convenient technology for routine transactions with a comfortable environment for personal conversations on mortgages, education savings plans, investments, retirement planning, and business services.

The Hingham Financial Center represents a significant departure from the traditional bank layout that dates back to frontier days, says Image 4 President/Creative Officer Jeffrey Baker. It takes some cues from higher-end retailers in using lighting, shape, and color to assign functions to specific locations and guide customers through the space with features such as carpet cuts and ceiling soffits.

Architects, designers, and brand specialists worked with bank staff to identify and remove "friction from the physical environment" so that customers could move at their own pace between technology-enabled transactions and conversations with staff, says Elizabeth Hummel, Image 4 Vice President of Operations.

"Our goal was to move visitors — we think of them as visitors, not customers, because no money may change hands in many interactions — away from the typical queuing patterns in a bank, which involves a lot of wasted time moving from department to department," Hummel explains.

The interior is designed so that visitors, especially people new to the branch, can step in and take a look around at this new way of banking. Then a staff member steps forward to greet and guide them either to the technology channel of their choice or to a table for a consultation.

Walking through the door, an ATM and personal teller machine (PTM), which facilitates video interactions with a bank employee, are available immediately to the right for quick self-service of deposits and cash withdrawals. Customers can also help themselves to the Technology Bar, where they can check their account balances and transfer funds using their own device or one provided by the bank.

Visitors who want to consult with a banking specialist are guided to a high-top table and chairs toward the front of the Financial Center for a quick conversation, or to a table equipped with a movable computer screen for more in-depth interactions. There is also a conference area with a large screen "smart" television to facilitate financial education and business meetings.

In interactions with business customers, the goal is to position South Shore Bank as a key financial advisor, inviting them to use the Hingham branch to make conference calls and facilitate their business. "We want business customers to think of their banking partner as an extension of their companies," Hummel says.



Reimagining customer service

Optimizing this new approach to service required retraining staff on how to interact with customers. “It was really empowering to see the bank’s commitment to working in this new environment, training staff to ‘get out of your chair and go greet customers,’” Baker says. “They planned for it, trained for it, and delivered it well, and the staff has had a very positive attitude.”

South Shore Bank selected some of its most outgoing high performers to staff the new center, Hummel notes. “They needed to be brave enough to come out from behind the desk rather than waiting for customers to come to them; and comfortable having two conversations at once, greeting people walking in the door as they continued to help people at their workspaces.”

Working at the Hingham branch is a plum assignment, and other branch managers are clamoring to have their offices redesigned in this new style. Boucher is not convinced this new model of branch design would translate as well to all of South Shore Bank’s locations, but he understands the enthusiasm.

“When the other branch managers see the success we’ve had — particularly in using the design to streamline operations and the use of personnel — they see a huge upside for their own location,” he notes. “The modern design is extremely popular, as well as the technological enhancements like the PTM, cash recycler at the teller pods, and Smart TV for educational sessions and seminars.”

Hummel compares the new branch design to the way the iPad so quickly gained popularity across all age groups. “This is in its purest form relationship banking,” she says. “It’s intuitive, with a focus on connecting with people in conversation.”

At 1,200 square feet, the Hingham Financial Center is 60 percent the size or smaller than the footprint of other South Shore Bank branches, but with a wider service offering and shared space for mortgage, investment, and business services. The design offers the flexibility to enclose the conference space for private meetings, and the use of glass partitions conveys an impression of openness while still defining spaces for discreet interactions with customers.

“Banks and credit unions are requesting a lot more glass, to convey that they are interacting with more transparency and more involvement by their customers. It’s not like Oz behind the curtains pulling the levers,” Baker says. “At the same time, there is a need for privacy in some interactions — reviewing a loan application, closing on a mortgage, settling an estate — and to acknowledge people’s strong emotional feelings about their money.”

The newest South Shore Bank branch is “designed in the local vernacular” with natural colors and textures that are familiar to New Englanders and evocative of the bank’s logo and cultural connections with the communities it serves, Baker adds. Image 4 has found that people tend to subconsciously recognize and gravitate toward their regional “palettes.” In the Northeastern United States, for example, that means the use of marble instead of sandstone, the blue-green of the ocean, and the maples and birches of the forests.

One other difference customers might notice is the lack of promotional posters and video messages. As marketing moves increasingly to online and mobile channels that can be targeted to individual customers — South Shore Bank has a strong social media presence — branches can deliver on their role in maintaining the brand presence without a lot of merchandizing.

“The ‘in your pocket’ online and mobile marketing never stops and alleviates the pressure to put it on your wall, so you can focus on whether the environment is conducive to the customer experience,” Hummel suggests.

“It’s about adapting the bank environment to the environment of its customers,” Bard concludes. Home-based entrepreneurs and distance workers, dual-income families, small business owners, and customers across the age spectrum can attend to all their banking needs in a novel and inviting setting.

From what he’s heard, Boucher says the decision to design the Hingham Financial Center around the customer was absolutely the right move.

“Customers say they love that we are trying to reinvent our branches to better fit how they bank with us, which has been a great validation of the risk we took,” he says. The extended hours for access to the PTM and the wider choices for conducting business — from the video teller to the “pods” for consulting with bank staff to the use of their own devices — have been especially popular. “Even those who were hesitant about having a futuristic branch admit that they are surprised at how intuitive they find it.”

“Honestly,” he adds, “it all reminds me of a friend who said that as a young boy he wouldn’t try lobster because it looked different. Once he tried it, of course, he loved it.”

For more information about branch design, customer experience, integrated merchandising and branch development, Contact Image 4 today.

Image 4

7 Perimeter Road

Manchester, NH 03103

603.644.0077

sales@image4.com

Elizabeth Hummel LEED AP, Practice Expert

Jeffrey Baker GA-C, Creative Officer