Millions for free

Pens, that is, which Huntington banks are giving away in a rebranding effort, which also includes free checking

By Steve Wartenberg
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

There’s no need for surreptitious glances to make sure nobody’s looking as you pocket a green-and-black pen at the local Huntington branch office. That’s what they’re there for. The Columbus-based bank has given away more than 14.7 million pens — and counting. If laid end-to-end, they would stretch from Columbus to Denver with a few to spare. “The pens are very much part of our rebranding efforts,” said David Clifton, Huntington’s chief marketing officer. So go ahead, he said, take a few ... but not a dozen. “People know what’s appropriate,” Clifton said. The rate of pen giveaways is growing every month and

See Huntington Page D4

Need a pen?
Top five pen-distributing Huntington locations (June 2012 to May 2013):
- Kingsdale Market District, Upper Arlington — 35,500 pens
- Airport Road Meijer, Jackson, Mich. — 30,100 pens
- Corunna Meijer, Corunna, Mich. — 28,100 pens
- Werners Corner, Toledo — 24,000 pens
- St. Claire Shores, Mich. — 24,000 pens

Source: Huntington Bank
Banking & finance

Huntington

FROM PAGE D1

shows no signs of slowing. Huntington gave out 60,000 pens in May 2010, the first month of the pen promotion. The monthly number was up to 620,000 this May.

“We had no idea it would take off like this,” Clifton said, adding that Huntington’s approximately 700 branch offices order more pens as they need them, in black and blue ink.

The bank’s goal is to give away the equivalent of one pen to every person in every household in the vicinity of its 700 branch offices in Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Kentucky, West Virginia and Pennsylvania.

This adds up to about 35 million people — and pens, Clifton said.

“We’re only three years in,” he said. “It might take a decade.”

The plastic-and-ink symbol of Huntington’s overall re-branding strategy is joined by a $70 million renovation of its branches, as well as the introduction of customer-friendly services such as a 24-hour grace period for overdrafts and asterisk-free checking.

“What would a welcoming bank do?” Clifton said of the overall strategy.

For one thing, it unchains its pens and gives them away by the millions, he answered.

The bank’s approach wins praise from at least one local marketing expert.

“They did it in the right order,” said Bill Faust, the chief strategy office of Oologie, a Columbus branding company.

“They trained their people, redesigned their branches and changed their policies, with the message of being more welcoming,” he said. “The pens are a great reminder of that.”

And this reminder seems to be multiplying exponentially. “It’s a running joke here, that if anyone sees one of the pens (outside the banks), they take a picture of it and we posted it on our Facebook page,” said Joel Hoover, director of development for Leaderpromos.com, the Columbus company Huntington hired to produce them.

“The pens are no joke to Leaderpromos.com. The Huntington order, Hoover said, is by far the biggest pen purchase in the company’s history.

“We’ve had a few orders in the hundreds of thousands and one or two around a million,” he said. The company employs about 80 in Columbus and said its 2012 revenue was about $20 million.

Clifton and Hoover declined to say how much the pens cost to manufacture.

A similar pen on the Leaderpromos.com website is listed for sale at 66 cents with a minimum order of 5,000, which is less than Huntington gives away every day.

“Our price is much lower than what you see on their website since we order them by the millions,” Clifton said.

And they’re a one-of-a-kind pen designed for Huntington and made in China.

“We made custom molds and had the manufacturer make a large volume of molds so they could run a lot at a time,” Hoover said.

The barrels of the first batch were too thin and “the point wiggled when you used them,” Clifton said. Since tweaked, the pen’s barrel is now thicker, and the glue that holds the pieces together is stronger.

Other banks have not leapt into the pen giveaway practice to the extent Huntington has. JPMorgan Chase does not give away pens at its local branch offices, said spokesman Jeff Lyttle.

PNC does give out pens at its branches “upon request from our customers,” said spokesman Craig Friedman, adding the bank does not track the number. (What it does track is a different giveaway — a multimedia school-readiness kit for preschoolers called Grow Up Great. A total of 2.6 million have been given away, he said.)

Meanwhile, Huntington keeps giving out pens and Leaderpromos.com keeps making them.

“At any point, there’s 2.5 million pens here,” Hoover said, referring to the Leaderpromos.com warehouse near Port Columbus. “Right now we have 1.6 million with blue ink and 1.4 million with black ink...”

Initially, Huntington branches ordered pens with black ink 70 percent of the time, but the blue ink ones have gained traction and it’s now about a 50-50 split.

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