

Put your money where your community bank is

Lauren Ritchie

COMMENTARY

11:28 PM EST, January 21, 2010

In this whole bail-out-the-big-banks operation the federal government has going, I'm betting the average person feels as though he or she has a lot of control.

Or not.

While the government was handing out \$77.5 billion to banks taking a nosedive last year, the consumer unhappy with everything from customer service to the bank's investments was left babbling in the background.

People couldn't stop it. They couldn't guide it. They had no say.

Now an intriguing new movement has started — one that honestly can be called grassroots. But rather than rely on traditional methods to spread the word, it is using the newest technology to pull in supporters — the social media Facebook and Twitter, video and of course, the Internet.

Move Your Money started when political blogger Arianna Huffington and some friends began talking shortly before Christmas about how people could retake control from the Big Four banks that, propped up by taxpayer bailouts, were squandering money on big bonuses.

The gap between how those conglomerates operate and the thinking of Main Street banks is breathtaking. Even after getting bailouts, securing a loan from one of the Big Four — JPMorgan/Chase,

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Bank of America, Wells Fargo and Citigroup — required signing away one's first born. Disgusting.

Then, Huffington and her buddies recalled that beloved icon of an American Christmas movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*. The 1940s movie is about good-guy community banker George Bailey and his fight against Mr. Potter, the profits-at-any-cost predatory lender who was ruining the town of Bedford Falls. In the end, the townspeople recognized Bailey's efforts, got behind him and saved the community

'Starting to get wings'

Using the movie and a variety of news clips, they produced by early January a video and a Web site urging people to withdraw their money from the biggest banks in the country and put it in local banks that every day are helping communities prosper and grow. If enough people sign on, it will reduce the power of Wall Street and restore some balance to the economy, they predict.

Three weeks later, backed by the Roosevelt Institute, a series of think tanks on campuses and Institutional Risk Analytics, which rates the stability of banks, the idea is exploding around the country.

"It's just now starting to get wings and people in Eustis are hearing about it," said Ken LaRoe, founder and president of First Green Bank. "I don't want to be overly optimistic, but it could be one of the biggest things that happen to community banks this year."

Engineering company owner Don Griffey learned of the idea on Huffington Post, and this week was switching all his personal accounts, including those of his teenage daughters, from Bank of America to First Green.

Griffey, 51, said he opened accounts with a small bank years ago.

"We have just gotten taken along for the ride as all these banks got absorbed and became Bank of America," he said.

Griffey, who came to Lake County in 1986, is angry with the big bank, which got \$9.3 billion in bailout cash. He said he doesn't "see any reason" to keep doing business with the institution. Its behavior and policies on the national level are unacceptable to him.

But he never thought he could do anything about it.

"As individuals, we don't have a lot of voice, but we can vote with our dollars. It's a chance to do or say something other than pulling the lever at a voting booth," Griffey said.

And, he said, it's an opportunity to support the community. First Green gave him a mortgage for an old home he converted to a new office in Eustis. Griffey said he hired local contractors and in that way, tried to do his part to stimulate the economy.

'Clean balance sheet'

Other banks are starting to see some results from Move Your Money..

"Hello, this is George Bailey from Bailey Building and Loan," joked Greg Nelson from United Southern Bank.

Nelson, president and CEO, has the right to feel a little smug. He was one ahead of Huffington.

In USB's December newsletter, Nelson drew for his customers the distinction between the big banks and the community banks, which are anxious to distance themselves from the sloppy too-big-to-fail operations.

"Claiming we are all alike is akin to claiming George Bailey and Mr. Potter read from the same 'ethics manual,' " Nelson wrote.

A bit prophetic.

"I couldn't believe it when this movement came out," Nelson said, chuckling.

Customers who have seen the movement aren't banging down the door, but a few have decided to switch their money to USB, which has been around since 1937.

"We operate in about as old-fashioned a way as we're allowed to operate," he said. "We still make loans based partially on the character of the people and knowing them."

At Reunion Bank, which like First Green is a young institution, president and CEO Mike Sleaford said that he has a "clean balance sheet" and that has attracted customers. He expects to gain a few because of the movement.

"People are looking at community banks because of the safety and soundness," he said.

And Move Your Money?

"It is pretty cool," he said with admiration.

Got that right.

Make a statement to the big guys

What makes more sense than doing business with someone who knows your name and isn't handing out absurd bonuses to executives in the midst of a recession where they've been forced to take tax money to stay afloat?

I'd do it myself, but all my meager bucks already are in either a community bank or a credit union. Huffington has been asked to add credit unions to the mix, but they report financial stability in a different way than banks and aren't rated by the Institutional Risk Analytics. The blog has asked readers to check back on the progress

So, if you want to make a statement to the big guys, pick your community bank. It's hard to go wrong — only one institution in Lake County received bailout money from the federal government. It was Citizens First Wholesale Mortgage Company in The Villages, which received \$610,000 of the \$1.4 billion distributed in Florida. None of Lake's community banks got a cent.

For more information, go <http://www.MoveYourMoney.info>.

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