



What to tell your bank when they say something you don't want to hear

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There's a lot of public anger at banks these days. Pick a bank topic, any topic -- bailouts, executive pay, interest rates, ATM, NSF, overdraft fees -- and it's hard to imagine anyone nodding happily. But all this anger begs the question: When we're frustrated and being thwarted by our bank, what can we do to make ourselves... well, happy?

If you've heard any of the following from your bank lately, here's what you ought to say in return.

"You have six overdraft charges." One or two overdraft charges certainly aren't fun, but five or more, and you can suddenly feel your monthly budget going to ruin. If your bank isn't one of those that's curtailing its overdraft fees (Bank of America), or it is but hasn't stopped yet (yeah, you heard us, U.S. Bank), you may, unfortunately, know that feeling.

If it happens to you: Call, or better yet go to, your local branch to talk to your bank manager about those fees. With a few hundred dollars on the line, it makes sense to invest the time to drive over there and talk to someone in person.

But before you launch into a tirade, realize that screaming at the manager isn't likely to win you any points. Understand that this isn't personal -- it's just the way that the bank works -- and your manager may not like enforcing the overdraft policy any better than you like paying those fees. After all, he or she probably gets yelled at several times a day. So if you're pleasant, right there, you may have an edge on getting those fees wiped out.

If your manager can't help you: Ask to speak to the bank's regional manager. Nobody's likely to suggest it, but if you ask for the regional manager, you'll likely be put in touch with them. That manager almost certainly has the power to eliminate those fees -- the question is whether he or she will use that power to help you, or the bank.

Another thing to consider: Are you banking with the branch at which you first opened your account? After all, people move. So if you opened your account in Pittsburgh and then moved to Denver, the person calling the shots on your account -- the one who has the power to remove your overdraft fees -- is most likely back at your old branch. If that's the case, you'll probably want to open a new account with your current branch and close the old one in order to be working with a manager empowered and willing to help you.

"Based on your credit score, we can't give you a loan at that rate." You know how it is. You see the ad. The bank tells you how you can get a fantastic rate. You confidently apply. You're soon humbled.

If it happens to you: Unfortunately, there's probably not much you can do about loan rates these days. Lenders are scrutinizing everybody's financial portfolio's more carefully than ever, and if you don't fit their requirements for lending, they're not going to budge. Gregory B. Meyer, a banking professional who spent nearly 20 years working at banks like Cal Fed Bank and then Citibank, told WalletPop that in those 20 years, "I never had any ability to influence the underwriters whatsoever." (And keep in mind, these were during relatively non-recessionary times.)

Now that doesn't mean you should wave the white flag. You can always try to find a loan at a different bank or look into LendingTree.com. Some organization specialize in working with people who have bad credit; for instance, HomeRun Homes is an operation that helps people lease homes and then buy them. While there may not be much you can say to your own bank at this point to get them to change their minds, there are other options out there you can investigate.

Another thing to consider: Asking another bank for a loan is the route that Meyer, currently the community relations manager at Meriwest Credit Union in San Jose, Calif., recommends. And then if you're still not getting a loan for the rate you want, there's likely a good reason. Maybe you're overextended with your debt, and maybe in a perverse way, the banks are doing you a favor. If that's the case, Meyer suggests getting a free copy of your credit report at the FTC's web site, AnnualCredit Report.com. Study it carefully to see what's on there that might be keeping you from getting a loan. After you've fixed any credit problems you might have, try again.

"You don't have as much money in your bank account as you thought." Bank tellers will rarely put it quite so nicely, but that's what your bank is telling you when you look at your checking account and the balance is much lower than you imagined.

If it happens to you: It's most likely that you probably do have less than you thought because you overspent. However, it just might be the case that the bank is wrong -- computer glitches can happen. For instance, as we wrote about at WalletPop not long ago, TD Bank had some horrendous computer problems, and customers were without access to their money for nearly a week. And it's not impossible for a teller to transpose a few numbers when plugging them into the system, and suddenly you're not as rich as you thought you were.

Obviously, if you feel the bank has made a mistake, you should talk to your teller, your branch manager or your regional manager, or even the regional administrator above that, if you're getting nowhere with the other bank employees.

Another thing to consider: If you're still getting nowhere after going up the chain of command, don't flip out. Meyer has a suggestion that may help you speak your banker's language. If you truly think money has vanished from your account but you can't prove it, ask your manager if he or she can check the bank's *trial balance* from the day before the money disappeared. These are the numbers that show what was in all the accounts the night before. Meyer says the bank should be able to look at those numbers and see exactly how much you had in your account before checks began clearing, debits disappeared from your account, and your money pile began to shrink.

"You're no longer welcome at this bank." It's rare, but I've interviewed people who have been kicked out of their bank.

If it happens: I'm sorry to say it, but you pretty much have to follow the straightforward advice of **Dennis Nason**, a former banking executive who's worked at Credit Suisse, Citigroup and Wells Fargo: "Find another bank."

Nason, who is now CEO of **Nason and Nason**, an executive recruiting firm for the banking industry based in Coral Gables, Fla., adds that if a big bank, in particular, has kicked you out, you should opt for a community bank. "Large banks don't intend to offer bad customer service," Nason told us, "but a lot of them are so large they've lost their personal touch. This is why we encourage people to deal with community banks -- they're still connected to the community."

Nason says he's heard of customers whose accounts were too small to make it worth a bank's while. Certainly, if you've had a lot of overdraft fees and have had trouble paying them back, your bank could decide to kick you to the curb. And if that happens, grab a new bank quickly. Why? If you're blackballed by your bank for not paying back fees, you could wind up on a list produced by ChexSystems, which is something of a consultancy for about 80% of the banks in America. Like a credit issuer that tells a lender if you're a bad credit risk, ChexSystems tells banks if you're a risky bank consumer. Once that happens, and you're on the list (the information they have on you remains there for five years), finding a new bank to join, while not impossible, gets very complicated, very quickly.

Another thing to consider: If you've been asked to leave your bank, says Meyer, the reason probably comes down to this: "The bank has decided that you're a liability to them. They probably lost money on your account, whether it's fees they've had to waive for you, or maybe it was the additional time that was taken to keep your account straight. After all, time is money, and if you have a teller constantly spending [time] explaining to the same customer why their account is in the negative or why these charges came about, that may explain why they've decided you're a persona non grata."

One way to become someone your bank will listen to -- no matter what the situation -- is to have more than just a checking account with your bank, Meyer adds. While there are a lot of good arguments for not having all your money at one bank, especially in this age of bank failures, it's hard to argue with Meyer on this point. He says that if you have your home loan with your bank and your savings, a branch manager is going to be much more willing to help you out, if they can, because, as Meyer explains, "If something goes wrong, they know where to find you. Relationships play a big role in banking."