

Banker tests waters with unusual ads

BY CHRIS CASACCHIA
ccasacchia@bizjournals.com

Pirate-themed advertising campaigns tend to tout rum or seafood, not checking accounts or CDs.

But one Valley banker is trying to break the mold of a stereotypical bank and gain attention in a crowded market. That's why James Christensen OK'd the 30-second radio spots for Gateway Commercial Bank in east Mesa.

Christensen, who became president of Gateway in March 2007, said the ads' "treasure map" motif fits well with the bank's location in the East Valley, far from the financial strongholds of downtown Phoenix and the Camelback Corridor.

"We wanted to be ahead of the growth. The potential is phenomenal," he said.

To say Christensen was born into the profession may be an understatement, despite his brief stint as a radio soap opera host in college. He even majored in mass communication at Baker University, a small liberal arts school of 1,000 students in Baldwin City, Kan., that was founded by United Methodist ministers.

But he knew the media industry doesn't provide the best income, particularly in the Sunflower State. So, he followed in his forefathers' footsteps: His father, like his grandfather, was a bank president, but later worked with the U.S. Treasury Department until he retired.

Christensen has worked in the banking industry for 22 years. Before taking the top job at Gateway, he was president of First Kansas Bank in Kansas City, Mo., where he commuted weekly from his East Valley home.

He still remembers his days behind the microphone, though, and said that experience helps him in front of big crowds. Maybe that's why he gravitated toward lecturing an entrepreneurs class for seniors at Arizona State University's West campus.

Christensen enjoys teaching and hopes to enter academics when he hangs up the banker's suit.

