**Independent Banker**

**Portfolio — Innovation Station**

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**Fueling growth through innovation**

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By Charles Potts, ICBA

Demand for digital solutions continues to accelerate, making innovation an imperative for community banks looking to excel in today’s evolving market.

That’s why ICBA makes innovation a priority and provides community banks with the information and tools necessary to grow and succeed in today’s competitive landscape. More than new solutions, culture change and mindset shifts, innovation is a journey that requires iterative steps toward sustainable growth.

Business thought leader Gary Hamel got it right when he said, “Innovation is the fuel for growth.” Greg Ohlendorf, president and CEO at $200 million-asset First Community Bank and Trust in Beecher, Ill., understands this well. As a three-time participant in ICBA’s ThinkTECH Accelerator program, Ohlendorf has had a front row seat to community bank innovation through collaborative fintech partnerships. In fact, First Community Bank and Trust has partnered with eight of our ThinkTECH Accelerator program’s alumni with impressive results.

Take its partnership with Surfly, which uses technology to personalize and innovate digital interactions in real-timecut call times from 30 to 60 minutes down to five minutes per call.

Rockland Trust Company, with $20 billion in assets and branches in Massachusetts and Rhode Island, also partnered with one of the companies that came through our Accelerator program: Agent IQ. Agent IQ offers a platform designed to integrate with a bank’s digital banking platform to deepen customer relationships through increased engagement. Rockland Trust had more than 57,000 logins and 500 to 600 conversations at its soft launch, managed seamlessly through Agent IQ’s platform.

[subhead] **Fostering innovation**

It’s stories like these that keep ICBA and its members pushing their limits, and why we continue to foster community bank fintech collabrations through our ThinkTECH Accelerator program.

Each year, we ask community bankers about the challenges they’re facing, and their responses inform and drive the selection criteria and process for our ThinkTECH Accelerator program and participants. This year, our community bank members expressed interest in growing their revenue and profitability, customer base and markets, and their businesses across the board. And we responded with an exceptional group of partners through our Accelerator program and a collaborative community willing to share their experiences, knowledge and expertise for the benefit of the overall industry.

Another step ICBA is taking to help community bankers meet their growth goals through innovation is engaging more bankers where they are. We are taking aspects of our programs to state associations, growing our educational outreach program to include new webinars and podcasts and working to raise awareness through new initiatives in development.

The demands on community banks in this evolving economic environment to grow, attract and retain quality business will only get more challenging. We’ve developed an ecosystem to foster growth through innovative partnerships and community involvement. Innovation is taking place all around us at a pace unlike anything we have ever experienced. It’s time to get on board.

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