



# Take the Money and Run

BY JOHN G. BROWNING

I like to think of myself as a law-abiding citizen, the type of person who would never do something like hold up a bank. Yet, like so many of us who enjoy watching sports and playing Monday morning quarterback, I can't help reading about failed robberies or watching "true crime" reality shows and thinking, "What a moron — I could do better than that." My personal theory is that such unsuccessful stick-ups underscore the importance of staying in school and getting a good education. After all, following some of the fundamentals instilled by many a dedicated teacher over the years probably would've helped such hapless robbers avoid not only jail time, but the added humiliation of being immortalized in the press.

## Be Punctual

Being tardy in real life carries bigger consequences than having points deducted from your grade — just ask the would-be thief who tried to hold up the Guardian Credit Union in Waukesha, Wis., in late November 2009. According to police who reviewed that bank's security tapes, a man wearing a ski mask and carrying a gun entered the credit union's first set of doors at 5:36 p.m., apparently not realizing that the bank had closed six minutes earlier. The robber found the bank's interior set of doors locked, and left in frustration before police arrived. If this hapless criminal ever succeeds in his life of crime, the first thing he should buy is a watch.

## Penmanship Counts

In the Woody Allen classic *Take the Money and Run*, a luckless bank robber is foiled in one attempt when none of the tellers can decipher the illegible writing in his stick-up note. Stephanie Martin of Hillsboro, Ore., probably should have spent more time on her penmanship. In September 2009, the 30-year-old woman walked into a Wells Fargo bank and handed the teller a note that read "Need \$300 or I'll kill you. I'm

serious." The teller couldn't read the handwriting, prompting a frustrated Martin to go over to a nearby counter and re-write the holdup note on a bank slip. The teller then pressed the silent alarm, and shortly thereafter police arrived at the scene and arrested Martin, who, according to police, was under the influence of drugs.

## Know Your Physical Limitations

Clint Eastwood's famed *Dirty Harry* character once reminded moviegoers that "A man's got to know his limitations." The elderly robber who allegedly held up the San Diego National Bank branch in La Jolla, Calif., in September 2009 must have missed that movie. According to the FBI and other law enforcement authorities, a man in his 70s or 80s with gray hair and liver spots handed the teller a note demanding money. The robber then fled on foot with the case — carrying his oxygen tank! If you need an oxygen tank to keep you going mid-heist or if your getaway vehicle is a motorized scooter, then maybe it's time to trade in the ol' ski mask for some white Sansabelts, retire to Florida, and holler at kids to stay off your lawn.

## Avoid Predictability

Most businesses are continually trying to build brand loyalty. Banks want that too — just not from the people trying to rob them. One holdup artist targeted the same Bank Atlantic branch in Broward County, Fla., four times between February and October 2009 — often enough that in his latest heist, one of the tellers recognized him and said, "It's him again."

Having a "go to" bank also caught up with thief Stephen Halliday in 2005. After holding up the Summit Bank in downtown Oakland, Calif., four times within a nine-week period, the repetitious robber was recognized by tellers during his fifth attempt. Although he fled with the demand note still in his pocket, Halliday was caught a few blocks away and arrested.

## Cover Your Tracks

How many cheating students have been caught because they left a trail? Bank robbers have been known to leave some rather obvious clues, too. Just ask Kevin Fitzpatrick or Scott Schmitz. In 2007, a female acquaintance turned Fitzpatrick in to the police shortly after he borrowed her car and mysteriously returned with a large amount of cash. The woman read online media accounts about the robbery of Liberty Bank in Norwich, Conn., and recognized Fitzpatrick's face from the surveillance photos. When police investigated further, they found numerous pre-robbery searches performed on his computer about robberies, including one search entitled "how not to rob a bank." Fitzpatrick probably should've paid closer attention to that one.

Of course, there's obvious, and then there's *obvious*. Scott Schmitz of Fond du Lac, Wis., was accused of breaking into the carwash where he used to work and stealing 5,619 quarters (\$1,404.75, weighing 71 pounds). This genius popped up on local law enforcement's radar after he purchased a number of items around town (and attempted to purchase a car), paying in quarters. Police later found about 400 quarters and a broken lock in Schmitz's house and car. There's no word on whether he tried to post bail in quarters, too.

Following a trail of quarters makes for easy policework, but Kansas City cops had an even easier time tracking down Albert Vincent Perkins. Perkins was arrested mere hours after he allegedly robbed First Federal Bank in May 2009. According to the U.S. Attorney's office, Perkins left behind telltale evidence on the bank teller's counter that was better than any fingerprints: his wallet. A teller and a bank customer identified Perkins by his driver's license photo and other photos in the wallet, and he was apprehended shortly thereafter.

## Personal Hygiene Counts, Too

Authorities in South Florida are on the trail of an alleged bank robber who held up the TC Bank branch in Tamarac in November 2009. According to the Broward County sheriff's office, a man with "notably bad breath" told a teller to fill an orange Halloween bag with cash before fleeing the scene in a white Honda Accord. Let's face it, if your breath is so bad that it forms part of the description that bank tellers give police, you need to find yourself a new mouthwash.

## Originality

Some people will do anything to show that they can think outside the box. Unfortunately for some robbers, deviating from the tried-and-true ski mask or stocking over the head doesn't really work out. In May 2008, police in Arvada, Colo., posted surveillance tape of two men robbing a Diamond Shamrock gas station — wearing thong panties over their faces. For the soon-to-be-christened "Thong Bandits," the scanty underwear did little to hide their facial features, and it probably would have helped if they had spent less time finding just the right color at Victoria's Secret and instead focused on covering up the distinctive tattoos on each of their arms.

Not to be outdone in the disguise department, James Coldwell was arrested in 2007 for robbing the Citizen Bank branch in Manchester, N.H., disguised as a tree. The 49-year-old, with

leafy boughs duct-taped to his head and torso, demanded cash and walked out after receiving an undisclosed amount. Although the greenery partially obscured Coldwell, his face was still sufficiently recognizable that individuals viewing images from the bank's security camera were able to tip off police. I'd guess that Coldwell won't try a disguise like that again, but I'm just going out on a limb.

Kasey Kazee of Kentucky found a use for duct tape as well — trying to disguise himself in preparation for a liquor store robbery by wrapping his head in the stuff. Store employees, evidently not intimidated by someone looking like Home Depot's version of a mummy, quickly subdued the would-be holdup man. Kazee must have learned a whole new meaning for cruel and unusual punishment when that duct tape was ripped off of his face and hair.

Robert Lavery and Robert Miller may have also done their pre-robbery shopping at Home Depot. In 2006, the pair robbed the New Cumberland, Penn., Federal Credit Union. Their disguise of choice was drywall compound, which didn't do much to obscure their features, but which did help police in tying them to the crime. Besides having drywall compound smeared all over their faces, Lavery and Miller's clothing and getaway car bore telltale traces of the stuff, as well.

Of course, the NASCAR vanity plate on the car, which Miller had failed to remove, may have helped police locate him.

## Originality Will Only Take You So Far

There's a time and a place for social networking; mid-bank job is not it. After robbing a bank in North Augusta, S.C., 27-year-old Joseph Wade Northington was thoughtful enough to stop and update his social media page status to "Wanted." He also posted the message "One in the head still ain't dead!!! On tha run for robbin a bank. Love all of yall." A friend recognized Northington from bank surveillance photos that were posted, and police arrested the social networking bank robber for the January 2009 heist. The incriminating online statements helped lead to his conviction. I guess you can update his status to "Busted."



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