

Boise Conference Breaks Through

BY DAVE GUTKNECHT

How will food co-ops differentiate themselves? How will they become more inclusive?

These were key themes for nearly 400 cooperators and allies from across the U.S. and Canada at the 59th annual Consumer Cooperative Management Association (CCMA) conference in Boise, Idaho. Attendees discussed the elements of these questions from many angles, and the atmosphere combined camaraderie with worries over how co-ops will address a changed and much more competitive market.

CCMA brings together new and veteran managers, staff, directors, and other co-op leaders for professional presentations, peer discussions,

How can we make the food co-op sector stronger? During the first day in Boise, a third annual “think tank” brought together some 40 cooperative leaders to wrestle with critical issues in co-op development, and several key themes recurred throughout the conference. (For intriguing ideas on unified co-op messaging, see <http://www.buildingabetterworldnow.coop>.)

CCMA and key national groups bring us closer together for collaboration and discussing challenges. But the widely scattered and independent status of food co-ops has disguised their deteriorating market position. While many food co-ops continue to thrive, an equal number are now experiencing flat or declining sales—an unprecedented scenario after many



CCMA conference host Boise Co-op maintains several grab-and-go stands at the airport (left). The conference ended at a street party in the city's Basque neighborhood, complete with paella dishes and traditional dances (right).



networking, and celebration. Our local host, Boise Co-op, showed off its thriving store and a planned second site, while offering much support to the conference through its staff, led by Ben Kuzma, general manager. Boise (say *boy-see*) was bright and warm, and the conference hotel and schedule allowed easy access to the outdoors and riverfront walking and biking paths. Conference bus tours visited the co-op, as well as a local winery, parks and monuments, and an organic farm.

The leading sponsor, National Cooperative Business Association, had utilized co-op advisory and planning committees and provided attentive staffing—who kept conference logistics smooth, the food and refreshments plentiful, and the program diverse and well targeted. Two dozen additional sponsor businesses contributed essential support and an active presence.

Differentiation and diversity

The market landscape for many of the food co-ops that were in attendance is now as rugged as the conference backdrop of the northern Rockies—where peaks still showed snow traces in a dry time. The stronger competition in natural/organic adds to the hard questions about differentiation and diversity.

How can we extend co-op successes and reverse the decline of others?

years of growth. It is uncomfortable to recognize threats to success, but a new era of operating and governing challenges is already here.

The two busiest days had plenary sessions and six tracks with five workshops each, addressing themes such as embracing change, leadership strategies, telling our story, and being better retailers. In two of the plenary sessions, speakers added perspectives from national associations in sectors including electricity, hardware, finance, and market analysis. The conference program provided inspiration, yet this year had a more sobering backstory. Its overall theme expressed the positive side: “Break Through: Innovate. Grow. Lead.”

Answers to the many challenges faced by food co-ops will surely require, among other tactics, differentiation and strong branding leading to improved member-owner loyalty; aggressive leveraging of capital to support expansions; and sophisticated management backed by strong board leadership. Our communities’ class and racial divisions also have pressed upon co-ops, with their stated values and desire to share more effectively. In light of those social divisions, the conference planners showed poor judgment in holding a first-day party on the grounds of an old penitentiary, complete with photo booth, and the next day acknowledged the criticism. (For a statement on this by the USA Cooperative Youth Council, visit ▷



On the final day of the CCMA conference, attendees celebrated awards for Cooperative Excellence, Cooperative Service, Cooperative Board Service, and (with a golden shopping cart) the Startup Co-op of the Year—then enjoyed traditional dances and paella provided by the local Basque community.

s.coop/ccma2015letter. See p. 26 in the present issue for discussion and examples of food co-op outreach to racial and low-income constituencies.)

The need for greater unity and cooperation among cooperatives, and the importance of our sector organizations, is evident: National Co+op Grocers, Food Co-op Initiative, CDS Consulting Co-op, Cooperative Grocer Network, cooperative lenders, and regional associations—each of these strengthened the conference, and all are making vital contributions to co-ops' future.

Milestones

At CCMA we also recognize and celebrate outstanding contributors and enduring achievements. Co-op milestones by decade are noted, and this year the oldest are 80 and 60 years of age, followed by a big class from 1975:

- 1935:** Adamant Co-op – Adamant, Vt.
Consumers Cooperative Association of Eau Claire – Eau Claire, Wis.
- 1955:** Calgary Cooperative Association – Calgary, Alberta
- 1975:** Bethesda Co-op – Bethesda, Md.
Blue Hill Co-op – Blue Hill, Me.
Brattleboro Food Co-op – Brattleboro, Vt.
Co-opportunity Consumers Co-op – Santa Monica, Cal.
French Broad Food Co-op – Asheville, N.C.
George Street Co-op – New Brunswick, N.J.
Kickapoo Exchange – Gays Mills, Wis.
Kootenay Country Foods Co-op – Nelson, British Columbia
Lakewinds Natural Foods Co-op – Minnetonka, Chanhassen, and Richfield, Minn.
Menomonie Food Co-op – Menomonie, Wisc.
Mountain People's Market – Morgantown, W.V.
Mountain View Market (Organ Mountain Natural Foods) – Las Cruces, N.M.

- Newark Community Co-op – Newark, Del.
- Open Harvest – Lincoln, Neb.
- Other Avenues Food Co-op – San Francisco, Cal.
- White River Co-op – Randolph, Vt.
- Ypsilanti Food Co-op – Ypsilanti, Mich.

- 1985:** Neighborhood Co-op – Carbondale, Ill.
- 1995:** Viroqua Food Co-op – Viroqua, Wis.
- 2005:** Basics Cooperative – Janesville, Wis.
- 2015:** Eleven new co-op stores opened, as a new wave of co-op formation continues. (See the accompanying "Up and Running" report from Food Co-op Initiative.)

Awards: excellence and service

The award for *Cooperative Excellence* was presented to People's Food Co-op in La Crosse, Wis., and Rochester, Minn. Its stalwart general manager, Michelle Schry, who is moving on to Central Corridor Development Manager for National Co+op Grocers, accepted the award on behalf of the co-op and its leadership team. Schry led the successful 2012 merger of the La Crosse co-op, with its downtown location and mixed inventory, and the Rochester co-op, where its completely new facility is exceeding sales projections.

Terry Appleby, general manager for over 20 years at Hanover Co-op in New Hampshire and Vermont and also a longstanding leader in regional and national associations, was awarded recognition for *Cooperative Service*. Appleby expressed his gratitude and recalled with emotion his humble beginnings, at Seattle's PCC Natural Markets, of a career in co-ops.

The *Cooperative Board Service* award was presented to Jennifer Nalbhone of Lexington Co-op in Buffalo, N.Y. (the co-op was honored in 2013 for retail excellence). Nalbhone's nine years on the board, five as president, have demonstrated thoughtful and careful leadership that inspires strong mutual support among board members.



Food Co-op Initiative followed its announcement of new co-op openings by presenting its *Startup of the Year* award to Durham Co-op Market (N.C.) and its manager, Leila Wolfrum. The co-op, after eight years in development, is exceeding its sales projections by 50 percent.

Finally, we gave a fond farewell to Alex Gyori and honored his 20 years of service, marked by dedication, integrity, and humor. He is retiring as general manager at Brattleboro Food Co-op in Vermont. The CCMA raucous bunch, the Italian Grocers Caucus, nearly expired with the departure of Gyori, who blessed the crowd after being gifted with a papal mitre.

Yet another important feature of CCMA is fundraising for the Howard Bowers Fund; see the accompanying report by Annie Hoy on this year's results and scholarships.

We wound up a well-run and well-targeted conference with a dinner party, complete with delicious paella and traditional dancers, in the local Basque neighborhood, which maintains some of the cuisine and shepherding tradition from its origins in the Pyrenees—a region that also is home to the world's foremost worker and consumer cooperative complex centered in Mondragon, Spain.

In June 2016, the CCMA conference, always packed with training, inspiration, and solidarity, will be held in Amherst/Northampton, Mass. It is clear that for food co-ops to survive and thrive in the coming era will require more business improvements, market differentiation, and cooperation among cooperatives. Strong competition, opportunities for reaching new constituencies, and our shared cooperative values demand that we address these multiple challenges. □



Milestones for the Bowers Fund #CCMA2015

BY ANNIE HOY

The Man. The Myth. The Grocer. The iconic Blues Brothers-ish image of Howard Bowers was fiercely evident during this year's CCMA conference. It served as a reminder of the essence of cooperation—that joining together for a common purpose gets the job done. The Bowers Fund strengthens our sector by giving grants to support training and education for food co-op managers, staff, and boards. These grants are made possible because our sector collectively donates to the Fund.

Who was Howard Bowers, and how do we tell his story? The black-and-white rendition of him with glasses, moustache, and goatee somehow made Bowers more accessible and intergenerational. All ages donned Bowers-style sunglasses at the Thursday welcome event, reinforcing the open and sharing grocer he was and that we strive to be. We followed that with Friday morning's explanation of the Bowers ribbons worn on the nametags of many Bowers Fund scholarship recipients who were present. On Saturday at breakfast we heard testimonials from Outpost General Manager Pam Menhart and People's Food Co-op General Manager Michelle Schry about the impact Bowers had on their careers. The puzzle pieces fit together, and there was a feeling that this man, the grocer, was no longer a mythical figure.

Bowers was launched into the new world of tech this year with the hashtag #CCMA2015 and the implementation of an easy way to donate to the fund by texting COOP to 91999. You can do it right now before finishing this article! We still had the familiar conference silent auction, pitting cooperators one against the other for the best co-op swag, services, and collectibles ever—including two quilts, one for outright purchase and one to hang for a full year in a generous food co-op. These fundraising efforts brought in over \$11,000 in donations.

While there were many hellos to both long-term and just-met friends, there was also a big goodbye to Bowers Fund advisor Alex Gyori. Gyori has served our committee for the past 11 years. He has been a kind, yet firm, facilitator who kept us on track during our sometimes-unwieldy conference calls. His history, experience, and dry wit has helped the committee make tough funding decisions when grant reviews take place. The Fund advisors and the staff at CDF thanked him with a lovely glass apple etched with the image of the continents, symbolizing our global movement and our food sector specifically.

This was a transition year for #CCMA2015, when the conference reins of control were passed from longtime organizer Ann Hoyt to the NCBA. On behalf of the Bowers Fund advisors, I thank NCBA for their support through increasing the presence of the Fund both in imagery and access to attendees. It made a difference. Now search the hashtag, and post all your pictures on Instagram and Facebook. Or start a #CCMA2015 Pinterest board for us. Howard Bowers is a bit bemused!