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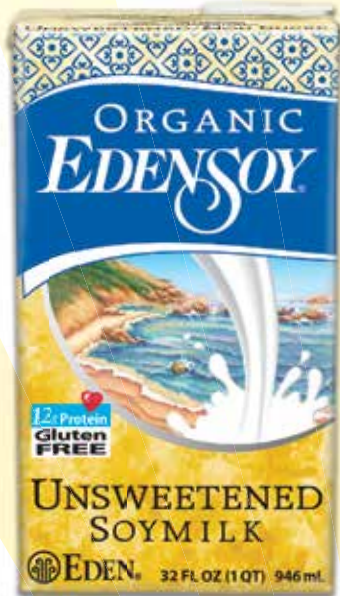
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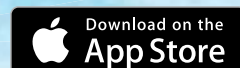
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Cooperative Grocer is the bimonthly trade magazine of the Cooperative Grocer Network

The mission of Cooperative Grocer Network is:
To strengthen all retail food cooperatives by creating community and promoting the sharing and development of resources among members.

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Fossil Fuels, Fossilized Growth

BY DAVE GUTKNECHT



Solar power projects at food co-ops are highlighted in this issue, and there will be more such reports ahead. These alternative-energy examples reduce the retailers' substantial

electricity costs, and the projects' visibility helps more of the public to think about energy issues.

I will assume that readers here recognize we face profound resource and energy challenges, globally and locally. Because of those converging threats—the combined crises of fossil fuel pollution and an overheated atmosphere, acidified oceans, fresh water depletion, and a global economic recession—we can anticipate further economic contraction. I want to question some common assumptions about energy, debt, and encroaching climate chaos.

Altering the complex sources of overheating the planet appears to offer two kinds of challenges: one is technical/financial and the other is cultural/political. Truth be told, maintaining our highly complex society is not assured with regard to either capacity. However, much thought is being directed to both.

A primary contribution cooperatives do make is in demonstrating the power of democratic participation and our methods for fairly sharing benefits and risks. The cultural/political shift needed for a constrained future is germinating in the daily work and in the ends envisioned by cooperatives and, more broadly, in the examples they provide.

As one limit to technical/financial capacity, significantly altering the energy infrastructure is enormously expensive. Alternative energy installations, preferably with storage capacity, do contribute toward a necessary energy transition and can buffer the risk of electricity brownouts and blackouts. "Renewables" require more debt and public subsidies—perhaps worthy investments, but with payback taking many years. The electricity provided is cleaner, but calculating the life-cycle net energy of the installation is dependent on multiple factors that vary by project.

When I read about the costs and limits of potential energy supply, an unavoidable conclusion is that we cannot maintain present (U.S.) consumption levels under any feasible scenario. That is actually a good thing! Culturally, a message of living with less stuff but more community connections is slowly spreading. In this vein,

food co-ops already promote eating well for less, conserving energy, working for a livable wage, and strengthening the local food economy.

There may be no soft landing ahead, but cooperatives—electric, food, credit, production, and other types—offer an adaptive method of fairly and democratically sharing services and resources. In situations of scarcity or social stress, cooperative sharing of risks and benefits attracts more people.

Cooperatives also offer an ownership structure that avoids the extreme concentration of wealth and power that is incompatible with democracy. But if cooperatives fail to ensure their expansion as a business model through the coming crises, cooperative ambitions will not be a global blueprint but rather a fading memory, and future readers and historical actors will again struggle to revive a fair and functional combination of productive enterprise and shared ownership.

Out of their concern for community, and in order to achieve their ends in support of economic democracy and a fair food system, co-ops will need to join in broader coalitions that address these and other critical social needs. See Art Sherwood's conclusions on strategic alliances, then shift to a larger context: how will civil society survive in an era of crisis and contraction? When the community and economy are disrupted, community survival will require new alliances, and cooperatives can offer foundational values and methods.

The transition needed is to prepare for a low-growth economy with lower consumption and a smaller population. As a society we are not ready for radical conservation—which will be forced upon us by encountering resource limits including the limits of renewables themselves. And a primary barrier to any fair arrangement is our extreme class divide—somehow the wealth concentration must be reversed.

Much of the public and visible leadership are in denial that there are resource limits and therefore limits to growth. Media talking heads also ignore cooperative and commons-based solutions and tell us that the only way to address inequality is through still more growth. I think of it as rushing toward a wall. Here's a well-grounded summary from Richard Heinberg, a leading voice on energy and environmental limits and building community resilience: <http://www.postcarbon.org/you-cant-handle-the-truth/>. □

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A Visit to Great Basin Community Food Co-op

BY ELLEN MICHEL

During the past month, I had the chance to visit Great Basin Community Food Co-op in Reno, Nevada. Heading into the Yosemite and the Mono Lake area for a few precious days of long-planned family hiking, my “first-things-first” instinct was to visit the nearest food co-op. We needed vegetables, protein, and local berries.

There’s something so exciting about visiting a co-op you’ve never seen before, right? And it’s thrilling to make contact with others working to create these warm and welcoming stores.

Begun in 2005, Great Basin opened its current location in 2012. Nestled in the heart of Reno, it stands in contrast to the banks and other mid-sized high-rises down the street. Easy to access, it’s a unique stucco building surrounded by garden landscaping. Sunflowers wave in the cool elevated air, green tomatoes ripen on the vine. The smell of fresh herbs is bracing.

When we arrived, a number of customers were socializing on the patio around large wooden tables, eating lunches from the in-house co-op kitchen. Paintings on the outdoor walls emphasize the store’s connection to the earth. “Everyone welcome” is written over the front door. Inside, there’s a beautiful produce section and a fresh-juice bar.

I spoke with Operations Manager Andrew Yochum, who told me that Great Basin is one of the fastest growing food co-ops in the nation. Sales are again up this year (24 percent to date), with sustained and impressive growth powering the co-op throughout its history. The staff includes 26 core players.

An upper level holds a vibrant wellness section, office space, and a currently under-renovation community room. The place was buzzing and soul-sustaining.



Playing the local ground game

The history of the relatively young Great Basin Community Food Co-op (GBCFC) echoes that of many food co-op startups today. It began as a buyers' club, with the goal of increasing community access to affordable, sustainable, and wholesome food.

Initially associated with a cooperative local food program known as the Great Basin Basket, GBCFC continues to be deeply connected with its local foodshed through its DROPP program: Distributors of Regional and Organic Produce and Products.

Two sisters, Amber and Nicole Sallaberry, were founders and first champions of the store. Amber continues as general manager, and Nicole serves as the sustainability and local food coordinator (including the DROPP program), helping build the northern Nevada infrastructure for local, organic, and non-GMO food.

The DROPP program includes a website where farmers, ranchers, and producers offer local products for sale, to be delivered to GBCFC. Customers are able to place orders online, and it's easy for producers to become affiliated with the co-op. DROPP bulk orders are advertised on bi-weekly sales flyers, along with in-store specials such as Field Day products and clearly labeled deals from the co-op's kitchen.

Co-ops are an eco-system

My visit to Great Basin underscored a thought I've held recently—that co-ops are part of a larger eco-system that includes valuable interactive "store organisms" of various sizes. The more we understand that, the easier it will be for us to remain flexible and competitive, forging the new connections and finding the strategies we need to survive, thrive, educate, and serve our shoppers.

An ecosystem point of view allows us to continually test and reshape our current boundaries. It demands that we think about both our local foodshed and our national (let's face it: our international) food system. It underscores the value of getting out and tramping around a bit, getting our feet dirty.

As locavores, we are exploratory. We become familiar with the terrain wherever we happen to be walking. At the same time, our food co-op ecosystem connects us with people holding similar values all over the world.

Like all businesses today, we face new competitive challenges. Some of them have evolved because the big ideas we represent have taken root in the broader culture. Shoppers want healthier food, and communities are embracing more sustainable options. There is more awareness of the co-op business model, and more criticism of big ag and of large corporations. Many aspects of our culture are in transformation.

Yes, it's disruptive. And the solutions we find won't take just one shape. They reflect global, national, and local realities. In some places, our best stores are the small or mid-sized ones, where we clearly offer more local connections than you'll find in the large chains, with their private-label "mystery" food.

The premise of Cooperative Grocer Network is that all of our food co-op efforts—those that are experimental, those that need improvement, and those that are resounding successes—have significance. We learn from one another.

That juice bar—oh, my!

By the time we left Great Basin, we'd loaded our cart with the food needed for a week of vacation. Our cashier told us what brought her from the Netherlands to Nevada (love!), and we

picked up a returnable Mason jar filled with fresh carrot juice.

Said one of the juicemasters, Isabella Jacobs, "It's something customers wanted, and the staff loves it, too." Another benefit of the fresh juice and smoothie bar? Waste in the produce section is now virtually nonexistent.

Visit their beautiful website to learn more about Reno's Great Basin Community Food Co-op, including their strategies for improving access to local goods produced within the watershed of the Truckee, Carson, and Walker Rivers: <https://www.greatbasinfood.coop>. □

Our ecosystem is big—and our stores are all sizes

The chief initiative of Cooperative Grocer Network (CGN) is to inspire all of us to our best work, becoming the best grocers and community members we can be. Knowing our history and viewing the food co-op ecosystem helps us position—and evaluate—ourselves in specific and meaningful ways.

We issued CGN membership invoices in July, and the response has been heartening. In doing so, we moved our billing system to a new timeframe, corresponding with the fiscal year. Membership is no longer matched to the calendar year, but will run from July 1 to June 30.

We've reduced our pricing into four basic categories, corresponding to the sizes of our stores:

SEED: Startups take us right back to our core values, to the desire for community involvement that is the principled heartbeat of our stores. It's important that startups have access to CGN. We offer subscriptions to them for \$200 per year.

SAPLING: Small and growing is beautiful. Those first doors on the store open to everyone, reshaping the way our customers shop and think about food access. Base membership dues begin at \$400 per year.

BROADLEAF: Sturdy and tall, these stores have deep roots. They pull us into the comfort of their shade. CGN variable subscription pricing is calculated at \$70 per million in annual sales.

EVERGREEN: These are the big stores, the ones that wow us with their sustained success and the size of their footprint. They have an enormous impact. CGN subscriptions cap off at \$1,400 per year for large and multi-store operations.

CGN is more than a magazine and a community platform. Metaphorically, it's a forest of great trees (large and small), a place to explore our core values and operational wisdom. It is designed to help us establish channels between our regions. Together, we repurpose the past, manage the present, and co-design the future. Thank you for your support for CGN.

Congress Passes Compromise GMO Labeling Bill

BY ALLIE MENTZER

On July 14, 2016, the U.S. Congress passed a bill that mandates a national system of mandatory labeling for GMOs (genetically modified organisms), and on July 29, President Obama signed it into law. Known after the bill's authors as the Roberts-Stabenow "compromise," this new law gives the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) two years to set up a federal system to regulate how foods produced using genetic engineering will be labeled.

As with any compromise, there are both pros and cons associated with this law. While not perfect, it appears to be more consumer-friendly than previous incarnations of the so-called DARK Act, which did not require manufacturers to label GMO foods, and could have defined GMOs as "natural." These earlier versions of the GMO-labeling bill were narrowly defeated, thanks to the many concerned citizens, farmers, and industry leaders who joined forces with key lawmakers to ensure that Congress heard consumers' call for the right to know what they are eating and feeding their families.

What does it mean for consumers?

The federal GMO-labeling law stipulates that product labels will be required to have one of the following three designations:

1. **On-package written disclosure.** Clear, simple language such as "produced with genetic engineering" will appear near the ingredient panel.

2. **On-package digital quick response (QR) code.** Packaging can contain a QR code that shoppers can scan with a smartphone and be directed to a website to learn whether or not the product contains genetically engineered ingredients. Very small companies may use a 1-800 number or web address in lieu of a QR code.
3. **On-package symbol.** Manufacturers can opt to display a symbol that has yet to be developed by USDA.

Continuing advocacy for written disclosure

Since 2011, National Co+op Grocers (NCG) has advocated for national, mandatory GMO labeling. Our preference continues to be for clear, simple on-package language (option 1, above) so that all people, whether they have access to a smartphone or not, can know at a glance if the product was produced using genetic engineering and have the information they need to make their own purchasing decisions. NCG and our partner organizations urged Congress to reject the QR code option (2, above) by informing lawmakers about the many reasons why QR codes are often impractical, inconvenient, or inaccessible for shoppers.

NCG will continue to encourage food companies to print a simple and clear statement of GMO content on the product label. We applaud the many major manufacturers—beginning with Campbell's and including PepsiCo, Kellogg, ConAgra, Mars and General Mills—that are already labeling their products with clear language such as "produced with genetic engineering." In addition to working with industry, we will continue to work with partner organizations and USDA to push for the most consumer-friendly possible implementation of the law.

NCG thanks its co-ops and their members, as well as our dedicated D.C. partners, all of whom worked hard to ensure that Congress was informed on this issue. Over the course of many years, we succeeded in bringing this consumer right-to-know issue to the forefront, despite enormous opposition.

NCG is providing a consumer-facing article "Four Common Questions about the GMO Labeling Law" on the Co+op, stronger together website, which co-ops may share via social media and/or reprint in full with permission by contacting NCG Marketing Programs Manager Mari Roseman (mari.roseman@nccg.coop). □

Just Fumble It!

Organic Trade Association "wins" GMO-free label for organics

BY DAVE GUTKNECHT

Because the rules for certified organic production prohibit use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs), the GMO-labeling issue is of strong concern to those in the organic sector—farmers, retailers, advocacy nonprofits, manufacturers, and others, from consumers to the Organic Trade Association (OTA). However, few issues have been as divisive within that organic sector—debate catalyzed most recently by GMO-labeling legislation in several states, including a Vermont law that was to have been enacted July 1, 2016. The new federal legislation nullifies such state-level laws or policies.

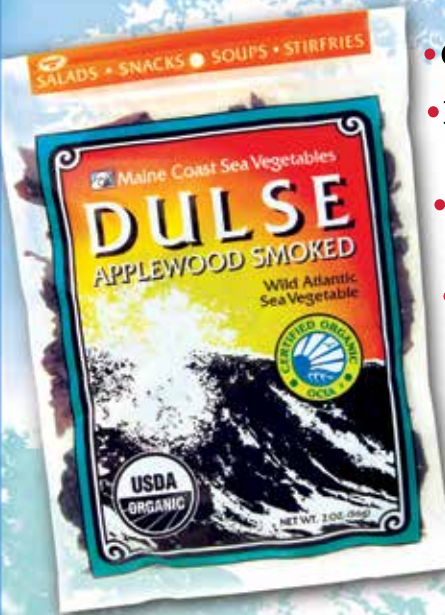
The "right-to-know" campaign goals were badly compromised by the recent federal legislation, which was supported by the OTA (ota.org), whereas allowing organic product labels to say "GMO-free" was upheld. Any future campaigns around GMO labeling will not only have to contend with the delays and ambiguities in the legislation, but also with a badly divided organic community.

Addressing these issues, Andrew Kimball, executive director of Center for Food Safety (centerforfoodsafety.org), said that the new legislation “is a sham and a shame, a rushed backroom deal that discriminates against low-income, rural, minority, and elderly populations. The law also represents a major assault on the democratic decision making of several states and erases their laws with a vague multiyear bureaucratic process specifically designed to provide less transparency to consumers.”

Some members of the OTA are outraged by that organization’s role in getting the legislation passed, and the board of directors of The Organic Seed Growers and Trade Association (osgta.org) voted unanimously to withdraw its OTA membership. Said Kimball, “The OTA leadership bears a tremendous responsibility for this, and they betrayed the whole food movement. The problem is that when the OTA talks with senators and takes a position supporting a bill, those senators think that the OTA is speaking for the entire organic business sector and for all organic consumers—when in fact it was only a very small cadre at the top of the OTA who went rogue and decided this. Neither the OTA board nor its members voted on this, and most were not even aware of what the upper echelon of OTA was doing.”

Members of such organizations as Just Label It! (justlabelit.org), the National Organic Coalition (nationalorganiccoalition.org), and Citizens for GMO Labeling (citizensforgmolabeling.org), which strongly opposed the new bill, will now have to decide how to influence its implementation, as well as with what allies and strategies. Lawsuits opposing the new law are likely, while additional tactics will need vigorous debate. □

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A Tale of Two Co-ops

BY STUART REID

East Aurora Community Market (East Aurora, N.Y.) and BisMan Community Food Co-op (Bismarck, N.D.) are startup co-ops to be proud of. They both opened in spring 2016, and they both have longtime project managers who are now in management positions.

Like most startup organizers, Sheila Conboy in East Aurora and Heidi DeMars in Bismarck had no retail grocery experience before they became part of their co-op's steering committee. Nevertheless, they led their co-ops to successful openings and have now taken important roles in their co-op's operations.

Here is a brief profile of these two new members of our co-op community:

New York and networks

East Aurora Co-op Market could well be the poster child for using all the resources at its disposal. When they began organizing in 2010, the first thing they did was call Food Co-op Initiative (FCI) for guidance. Sheila Conboy still likes to tell people how surprised she was when she called FCI and a real person answered the phone.

By 2011 the group was working with CDS Con-



Shortly before the co-op was scheduled to open, the board realized that they needed a stronger general manager. Thrown into a bigger role than she ever expected, at the point when most co-op founders are ready for a well-earned vacation, Conboy stepped up. With her strong leadership and ability to grasp the complexities of a modern grocery co-op, Conboy has the confidence of her board and staff and has made an impressive start.

Food Co-op Initiative usually recommends that startups have a project manager other than the general manager for the final implementation stage, allowing the general manager to concentrate on the multitude of operational requirements just ahead. Sheila went straight from the controlled chaos of construction, capital campaigns, and member drives into the whirlwind of managing a new co-op. That takes something special.

North Dakota drive

BisMan Community Food Co-op got its start in 2011, when a group of about 30 people met at a local truck stop to talk about community access to fresh, local food and the possibility of a co-op solution. After a year and a half of research and preparation, visioning, and building a team, the co-op incorporated in 2013. The co-op's name

"A passionate and talented community"

The East Aurora Cooperative Market has made tremendous strides since its inception nearly two and a half years ago. We immediately were witness to the benefits of a passionate and talented community. They not only were an immediate support to the co-op in terms of membership, but also in regard to the plethora of talent that they continually bring to the project. This passion and talent within the community, fostered and directed by expert consultants in the field, has been a winning combination for us. ~Sheila Conboy (2012), then board president of East Aurora Food Co-op

sulting Co-op members, including an early consultation in East Aurora with Bill Gessner. They continued using the help of both organizations throughout the project, and they also contracted with National Co+op Grocers (NCG) for their plan implementation, store opening, and support. Along the way, they attended conferences and webinars, shared their successes and stories with other startups, and kept asking questions. Tim Bartlett, general manager of the Lexington Co-op Market in nearby Buffalo, N.Y., became a mentor and friend.

After six years of hard work, frustrations, accomplishments, and, ultimately, success, the East Aurora Co-op Market opened June 9, 2016. Already, the store is exceeding its sales projections, even though summer was expected to be their slow season. The co-op is clean, attractive and well-stocked. The staff is friendly and helpful. The site has good access and visibility, lots of parking, and a welcoming feel. If you want to see a startup that did it right, come to East Aurora.



reflects their commitment to serving both Bismarck and Mandan, neighboring communities in south-central North Dakota.

BisMan organizers began a member drive that summer of 2013, and by August of the following year had over 600 owner-members! The community support was clearly evident, and it continues to this day. The co-op opened with 1,750 owners, about double what is typical for startup food co-ops, and in the following three months they increased the owner rolls to 2,400.

All this is in a state where nearly everyone is familiar with farm co-ops, but almost no one has had experience with consumer-owned food co-ops. Co-ops from other sectors became major supporters—so much so that BisMan is planning a pictorial dedication in the co-op honoring those supporters and the history of cooperation in North Dakota. These cooperatives made preferred equity investments totaling \$85,000—including Basin Electric Power Cooperative, National Information Solutions Cooperative, and Tri Energy Cooperative. Other

	East Aurora Community Market	BisMan Community Food Co-op
YEAR STARTED ORGANIZING	2009	2011
DATE OPENED	JUNE 8, 2016	MAY 16, 2016
RETAIL SQUARE FEET	4,445	5,600
STARTUP BUDGET	\$2.65 MILLION	\$2.65 MILLION
PROJECTED SALES (YEAR 1)	\$2.2 MILLION	\$4.5 MILLION
TRENDING SALES	\$2.8 MILLION	\$4.4 MILLION
STAFF	23, 15 FTE	21, 15 FTE
OWNERS AT OPENING	1,350	1,750
OWNERS 08/16	1,505	2,400
SITE, ACCESS	591 MAIN STREET, EAST AURORA N.Y. 7 AM–9 PM DAILY 716-655-2667 EASTAURORAFOOD.COOP	711 E. SWEET AVE. BISMARCK, N.D. M-F 7 AM–8 PM, SA-SU 9 AM–6 PM 701-751-3119 BISMANFOODCOOP.COM

“Understanding the impacts of food choices”

Food is central to each of our lives, yet many people purchase, prepare, and eat food without fully understanding the impacts of their food choices. My goal is to increase access to healthy, sustainable, and local foods by developing a community-owned food cooperative that will inspire others to know their local farmers, cook with a child, share with a neighbor, and re-invest in their community. ~Heidi Demars, former project manager for BisMan Co-op, now marketing and communications manager

community-anchored businesses invested an additional \$42,000 in preferred equity.

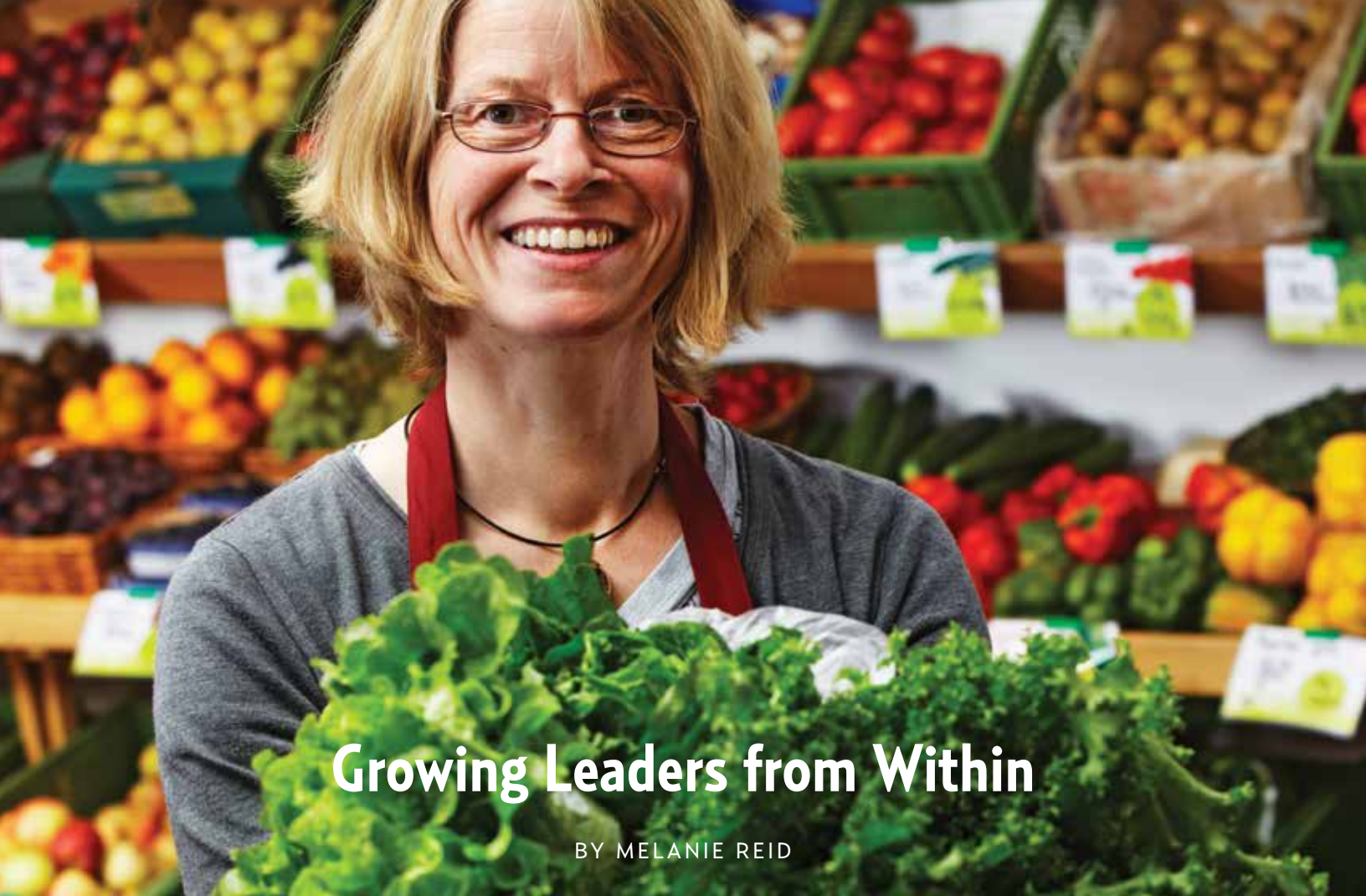
Those local collaborations also led to an estimated 300 additional member shares sold, or \$60,000 invested in the new co-op. BisMan generated total owner equity and loans for its startup of \$1.23 million, comprising \$480,000 in common equity; \$212,500 in preferred equity; and \$541,000 in member loans.

One atypical obstacle that BisMan Co-op faced was the boom market in real estate and employment caused by the explosion of drilling in the Bakken oil field and the subsequent demand for workers, services, and housing. Eventually, the co-op was able to find a desirable site that fit its plans and budget. Because there are no other nearby food co-ops or large communities, BisMan also faced difficulties getting commitments from primary grocery distributors for frequent enough deliveries. KeHE Distributors eventually came through with a satisfactory delivery schedule and services. (BisMan is not an NCG affiliate at this time.)

In June 2015, the co-op hired Randy Joersz, an experienced grocery store operator, to be its general manager. Joersz had recently sold five food stores and moved back to Mandan, where he welcomed the opportunity to work with the co-op and share his expertise.

Joersz hired staff for their positive attitude more than for their specific skills and experience. New employees, especially in new stores, always face a learning curve as they become proficient—but it is hard to change personalities. The result has been great customer service and a friendly store that “already feels like a co-op.”

Early sales ran a bit below projections, but the deli was not open at the start. More recently, sales have been rising and should meet or exceed projections by the time the fall season arrives. Especially noteworthy is the outstanding performance of the co-op’s produce department, bringing in 27 percent of the store’s revenues. The co-op expects to gain a lot of exposure and traffic with a week-long grand opening celebration Sept. 11–17 □



Growing Leaders from Within

BY MELANIE REID

As co-ops evolve and expand and our industry continuously changes, it's important that we have mechanisms in place that enable employees to see career pathways within our organizations.

Opportunities to learn new things and grow within the organization are important for everyone on the co-op staff roster. If their training ends after 90 days, you probably have some less-than-satisfied employees.

Sometimes staff training and development is as simple as providing information about a new product line or local producer that the co-op is working with. Sometimes it means ensuring that employees are trained on how to pull reports from the POS system or use other technology at the co-op. At other times, it involves providing long-term, strategic opportunities to help employees grow into the future leaders of the co-op.

Development plans for everybody

Individual development plans can be an important tool for improving performance when employees struggle. In addition, high-performing employees and those who have expressed interest in moving up within your organization should have development plans in place to ensure they are getting the opportunities for growth that they seek.

Too often when conducting employee surveys I hear from co-op employees that, "The co-op doesn't promote from within." Or, "There's no room to grow here." More often than not, this is far from the truth. Most co-ops do actively promote from within. However, what many co-ops are lacking is a systematic approach to growing leaders from within.

Lacking formal development plans, co-op employees can become frustrated by a perceived absence of forward motion. Unfortunately, a perceived lack of growth opportunities can lead to your best people looking elsewhere for advancement.

With that in mind, it's important to know the aspirations of your employees. Have you asked your staff members where they see themselves two years down the road, or whether they are appropriately challenged in their current position? Holding performance-evaluation meetings, or utilizing "stay interviews," provides an opportunity to ask these questions and to engage in conversations with your employees to learn what their long-term goals are.

Interviews: stay!

The brilliant concept of the stay interview may not be new, but it is intriguing. Why wait until the exit interview to learn what departing employees found frustrating about the workplace or what opportunities they were looking for at the co-op? What if you found out before they started looking elsewhere? Asking employees what will keep them with your company before they decide to leave, rather than after they have given notice, can lead to raising employee satisfaction and reducing costly turnover.

Some sample stay-interview questions:

- *What do you like most about your job and work in our co-op?*
- *What do you like least about your job and work in our co-op?*
- *Do you feel that you are part of a bigger vision and mission? Why or why not?*
- *Is the co-op providing you with opportunities to grow and develop as a person and as a professional? What would improve your opportunities?*
- *What type of feedback would you like to receive about your performance that you are not receiving now?*
- *Are there career opportunities that you would like to pursue within our co-op?*



Those who have expressed interest in moving up should have development plans in place to ensure they are getting the opportunities for growth that they seek.

Read article on variable pricing strategy (finish by end of August)
Conduct a margin audit of the grocery department (during September)

2. Labor Budget

Work with Janet on writing the weekly schedule at least twice per month (start in September)

Review monthly department financials with Susan (begin in October)

Be sure that, once development plans and goals are in place, there is follow-up. Employees will become discouraged if goals fall by the wayside, or if management fails to follow through on commitments for training opportunities. Make agreements with employees about where the responsibility lies for taking the next steps in the plan, and do your part. Set a schedule for checking on goals.

Thinking bigger: co-op careers

Looking further at career advances, what about within the collective food cooperative sector? Thinking about all the ways in which we are similar, all the best practices that we share, and all of the opportunity that exists among food co-ops is exciting. Our “virtual chain” offers many opportunities for career growth, not unlike career pathways in private corporate settings. I can think of many examples of employees who have followed a career path that included two or more co-ops.

There certainly are some potential barriers to cooperative career pathways. However, there are also many benefits. In addition to the obvious positive of keeping high-potential employees engaged, challenged, and satisfied, other benefits might include:

- cross-pollination of best practices and great ideas;
- stronger connections among stores, possibly leading to more collaboration.

Opening our doors to new talent

Investing in training and development not only strengthens current operations, it also helps to ensure that strong cooperatives are sustained over the long term and that your employees are appropriately challenged and engaged for years to come. Finally, why not promote your own co-op’s success with internal development and promotion?

Many employees in the current workforce are looking for companies that actively train, develop, and promote employees. When telling your co-op’s story, be sure to include its commitment to employee training and development and to promoting people from within. □

Be creative

Development opportunities come in many forms. Perhaps it is a chance to attend a leadership training or seminar of interest, or to attend a trade show or industry gathering. Other opportunities are as simple as visiting a local competitor to check prices and peruse endcaps, serving on a task force, or managing a small-scale project or a reset of a store section.

Development can also be experiential. Offering employees a chance to shadow a co-worker for a few hours or pick up one shift a week in another department can pique interest and help people gain additional skills and experience. Such internal cross-training also serves to “strengthen your bench”—making it easier to cover absences, planned or unplanned, and easier to fill vacancies when people in mid-level positions either move on or move up. Just as you should always have a candidate pool of external applicants interested in joining your staff, you also want a pool of high potential employees who are preparing for promotion.

Creating a development plan

When drawing up a development plan, be sure goals are specific, measurable, attainable, and realistic. Goals should also have a timeline attached.

For example, “Sam will begin cross-training in the produce department one shift per week on July 15. We will assess how the training is going at the end of August and potentially add a second produce shift at that time.” Or, “Sam will prepare a 10-minute informational training about XYZ Farm and will present at the all-staff meeting to be held on Sept. 10.”

A larger, long-term development plan for a person who is interested in promotion might include several goals that look something like this:

Goal: Learn more about key financial indicators

1. Margin Control

Participate in Retail Basics 102 (begins Aug. 1)

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Co-op Solar Energy in Cloudy Bellingham

BY MELISSA ELKINS

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6AC string

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Output voltage: 208V

Solar Subpanel

Solar array feeds six 3-pole 20A breakers
No main breaker

The Pacific Northwest: home to towering trees, majestic mountains, beautiful islands...and a lot of cloudy days. In 2013, city-data.com ranked Bellingham, Wash., as the city of over 50,000 people in the lower 48 states with the lowest number of sunny days. On average, it is sunny roughly 35 percent of the year—a good indication of why there are so many direct flights from Bellingham to various Hawaiian islands in the winter months.

You might think that would preclude us from utilizing solar energy, but think again! We may have dark and dreary stretches during nine months of the year, but that sunny 35 percent falls primarily during our long summer days—and that's when our “power” amps up.

In July 2012, the Bellingham Community Food Co-op installed a 126-panel solar array at its LEED-certified Cordata neighborhood location. At the time, it was the largest array in Whatcom County, which made it a great opportunity to be a showcase for sustainable energy. The Department of Revenue was offering helpful incentives for businesses installing solar arrays, and co-op management determined that it was a good fit, at the right time, for our organization.

The project was started due to the diligent work of one dedicated board director and co-op employee, Beau Hilty-Jones. In February 2011, Hilty-Jones began researching the benefits of installing a solar array at our Cordata location. He learned that when the store was built in 2008, the co-op thought forward and constructed the roof for a future solar installation, so no structural work was needed

to prepare for the added weight—almost 11 tons of equipment.

After Hilty-Jones brought an initial proposal to Jim Ashby, the co-op's general manager, Ashby gave the go-ahead to continue exploring our options. After consulting with several local contractors, Hilty-Jones and Ashby and Terry Parks (who was then the store manager) refined the co-op's requirements. In March 2012, Ecotech Solar was awarded the bid.

Ecotech Solar (www.ecotechsolar.com), founded in 2004, is a locally owned solar contractor. They developed a customized solar-array design to maximize our power generation, based on our building and location characteristics. Each of our panels has its own microinverter, which converts direct current (DC) generated by a single solar module to alternating current (AC) that runs most appliances. Microinverters are highly efficient and are better suited to our array than other types of inverters and optimizers because they allow energy to be shifted away from panels that are shaded to panels that are actively converting energy.

To monitor our solar power generation, we use Enlighten monitoring software, by Enphase (enphase.com). Unlike a lot of monitoring systems, Enlighten continuously monitors the health and performance of every solar module and microinverter in the array. Their web-based analytics can identify and alert us and Ecotech Solar if there is a deviation in performance, so we can get the problem fixed in a timely manner. In addition, we are able to display up-to-date solar generation data for our store customers on a display screen located

near our registers. (To check out what's currently being generated by our array, visit <https://enlighten.enphaseenergy.com/public/systems/KzYu97423>.)

Financial incentives played a large role in the viability of this project—the co-op was still recovering from the impact of opening a second location just as the recession hit and wanted to be cautious with its spending. At the time, the Department of Revenue was offering a 75 percent refund on sales tax paid by the solar project, and we qualified for annual incentives through the Washington Department of Revenue's Renewable Energy Advantage Program (www.pse.com/REAP), which ends in 2021. We also received a federal tax credit of over \$48,000 due to the project.

All in all, with the incentives and the cost savings from internal solar generation, the system was expected to pay for itself within 10 years. Now that we have four years under our belt, we appear to be on track; as of the end of the second quarter of 2016, we were seeing a roughly 72 percent return on investment for the solar project.

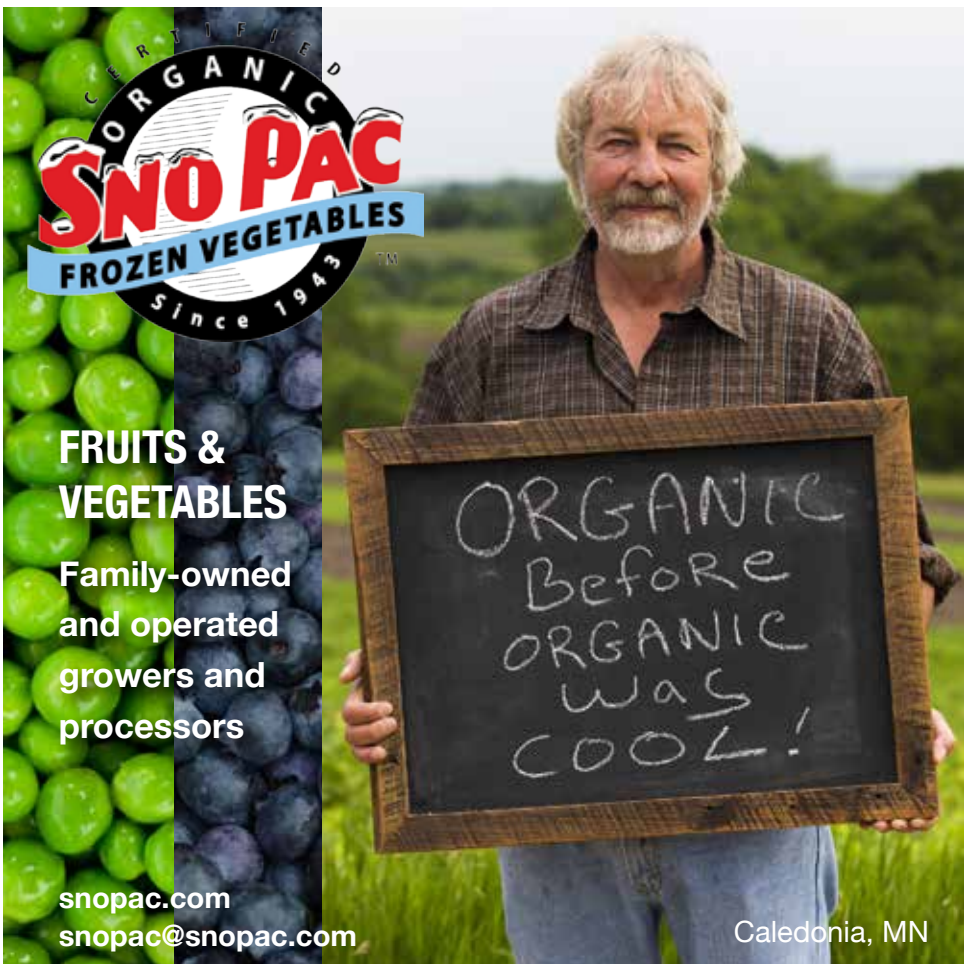
A happy side effect of the installation is the press we've received over the years. Most recently, a front-page story and photo of our array ran in *The Bellingham Herald* (Mar. 25, 2016), explaining how the solar array was a contributing factor in our co-op receiving recognition as a U.S. Green Power leader.

What wats?

But what about the all-important energy that it was installed to produce? In 2015, the array produced 33,900 kilowatt hours, which amounted to nearly 5 percent of our overall electricity use in the store and a savings of about \$3,500 with a carbon offset of 23.7 tons. Energy generation fluctuated over the four quarters of 2015: in the first and fourth quarters the array generated just under 5,000 kWh (2.6 percent of total electricity use) and 3,100 kWh (1.9 percent of total electricity), respectively. Spring and summer is when it really starts producing—generating nearly 14,000 kWh (8.4 percent of total electricity) in the second quarter and nearly 12,000 kWh (6.9 percent of total electricity) in the third quarter.

The solar project was a natural fit for our environmentally conscious community and for our co-op. Said Ashby, the general manager, "Thanks to the dedication and thorough research of one motivated employee—and the support of our board, management, and member-owners—our co-op was able to take a very reasonable risk that the investment in solar would pay off. And it has, in many ways—not only financially. It also has positioned us as a leader in sustainability, demonstrates that we live our values, and is enthusiastically supported by our member-owners."

Besides, it gives the residents of often-overcast Bellingham one more reason to celebrate the sunny days of summer! ☐



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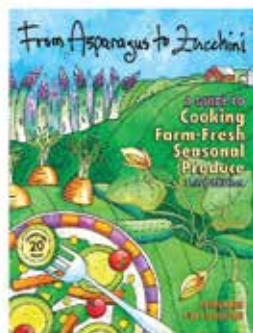
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Co-op's Parking Lot Solar Reduces Energy Costs and Impacts

BY STEPHANIE MANDEL

The use of energy-efficient, environmentally sensitive design has been a part of BriarPatch Co-op's store on Sierra College Drive since its construction in 2006, when the co-op stepped up and built a LEED-certified "green" building. Located in Grass Valley, Calif., the co-op's operations are humming, with a staff of 210 and a facility of 8,856 retail square feet supporting sales of \$29.4 million in 2015.

Food markets invariably consume a large amount of energy because of the continuous operation of refrigeration systems. Plans to expand the co-op's parking lot presented a perfect opportunity to construct a large overhead structure for solar panels, which will dramatically reduce our utility costs and carbon footprint.

The BriarPatch Co-op's 16,000-square-foot array with 680 solar panels will span almost the entire 300-foot length of the co-op's westerly parking lot and will have a 5-degree tilt for ideal southern exposure. Construction of the array began in May 2016 and is scheduled for completion in October of this year.

BriarPatch Co-op is teaming with a local firm, California Solar Electric Company, to install the array. A 30-percent federal tax credit will defray the overall initial cost. The system will reduce the co-op's annual electrical bill by \$75,000—saving us \$3 million over the guaranteed 25-year life of the panels. This solar system will be the largest parking-lot photovoltaic array in our area, and the first commercial solar project constructed over a parking lot in Nevada County.

California Solar owner Lars Ortegren says, "We are excited to partner with BriarPatch in realizing a significant investment in renewable energy while also improving a core part of our community—our local food co-op."

BriarPatch Co-op's new solar system will utilize industry-leading technology. The SunPower E20 solar panels offer high efficiency with a minimal footprint, producing 70 percent more electricity than conventional panels. Each panel has 128 cells and produces 435 watts; this results in an array wattage rating of 295,800 watts (DC). In terms of carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions, the new system will generate enough power to equal the CO₂ offset of 61,926 trees over the 25-year lifespan of the system, or the equivalent of CO₂ emissions from 800 barrels of oil consumed.

The new solar array will also allow for future renewable energy expansions, starting with the addition of vehicle-charging stations. These stations will make the choice of an electric vehicle a bit more attractive by making it possible to conveniently charge it at our local food market.

There's a real possibility that, in the future, BriarPatch Co-op could add more solar panels—on the building roof, and/or over other portions of the parking area—and consequently be able to generate much more of its electricity from its own system.

This project is a great example of how renewable energy can keep our community strong by providing local businesses with multi-use design solutions that maximize long-term savings while reducing environmental impacts. □





CO-OP MONTH | OCTOBER 2016

The theme for the 2016 National Cooperative Month in October is “Cooperatives Build,” which cooperatives are urged to reflect in their communications and outreach activities. The theme can be used on its own, or extended with sub-themes, such as: Cooperatives Build Communities; Cooperatives Build Jobs; Cooperatives Build a Better World.

Find downloadable resources—writing samples, posters, videos, and more—at www.coopmonth.coop/.

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- Wine Spectator, 2016



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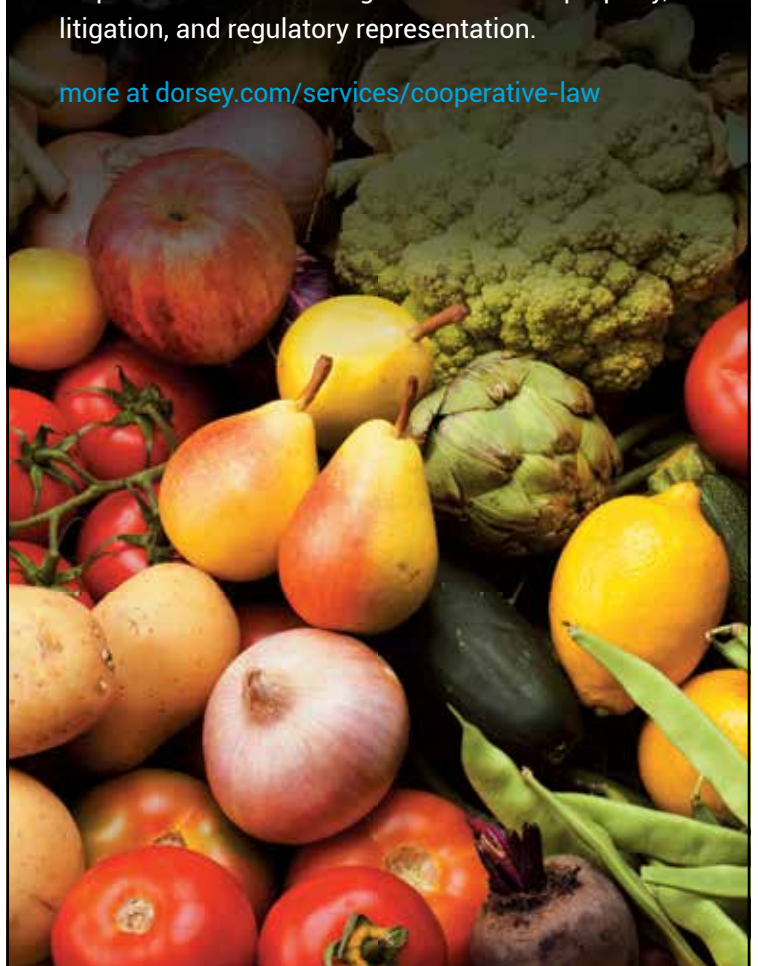
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First Impressions and Long-lasting Relationships:

The rewards of great customer service

BY MICHAEL MCCARY

Providing an unbeatable shopping experience is no longer optional for cooperatives—it is imperative. In the growing and increasingly competitive world of natural foods, cooperatives need to perform better than their competitors, especially in providing outstanding customer service. Customer service is one of the key areas where cooperatives can differentiate themselves from other natural-foods stores.

Customers make a conscious decision to shop at your store, and you should strive to make the customer's entire experience excellent. Your front end department needs to be a shining example of what excellent customer service looks and feels like. After all, your front end staff are the stars of the show. They have the most interactions with your customers, and they make the greatest and most lasting impressions. They are one of the most visible representations of your brand. How do you ensure the customer service experience at your store is top-notch?

Vision questions

First, the co-op needs to have a vision for what customer service looks like and how it feels. Determine how customer service is defined at your store and how that is reflected in its front end department.

Consider the following specific questions: What expectations are given to new hires? What kind of customer service training is provided to staff? Do you gather feedback from customers? How is customer service being measured? Do you reward excellent customer service?

The aim of such questions: if customer service is to become the most important part of the job, then we must make it the most important part of the job.

Leadership

Customer service begins and ends with leadership. Ideally, your front end manager has a service-centric mindset, demonstrating a high level of emotional intelligence, such as the ability to interpret body language and respond to it. The front end manager should model comfortable interactions with customers, demonstrate excellent active-listening skills, be capable of making the most difficult customers happy, and lead by a positive example. A front end manager's ability to model excellent customer service will support the entire front end staff.

Defining customer service

Your organization needs to define what customer service looks like. It is okay if your cooperative's idea of customer service is different from that of another co-op. In any case, it is important to create a policy that clearly defines your customer service expectations.

Start with a mission or vision statement. For example, at Wheatsville Co-op in Austin, Texas., they strive to be the "friendliest store in town"; at BriarPatch Food Co-op in Grass Valley, Calif., we talk about the ABCs of customer service: Acting honestly with integrity, Building positive relationships, Caring genuinely about customers' needs, and solving problems attentively.

This "mission statement" becomes the front end compass, and from there you can elaborate upon what it means to be the friendliest store in town, or what it means to care genuinely about customer needs. Through vision work and collaboration, you can have a clear and robust definition of what customer service looks and feels like. You will have something you can teach, reward, and measure.

Customer service training

Once you have defined customer service, you can start training and setting clear expectations. Most likely the co-op has a staff with varying levels of experience and skill. But everyone who joins the staff should receive the same information on customer service, have the same expectations, and receive the same training.

From day one, an employee should know exactly what customer service looks like at your store. Remember, employees are the co-op's representatives and ambassadors, and you want to make sure that they have the tools to perform their jobs. Most stores have training materials on how to operate the registers, how to stock the shelves, how to cull produce, and what to do during the slower times. Be sure you also have a customer-service training program in place.

Customer service is an art. At the most basic level, you need to teach the importance of specific behaviors: eye contact, smiling, body language, and common courtesies. When teaching these concepts, focus on the why: Why is eye contact important? Why is a smile important? What message are you sending through body language? Why is it important to show gratitude?

It is important to teach the techniques and just as important to >



*We only get one chance
to make a first impression.*

talk about the psychology of customer service. Ultimately, great service is about making first impressions and building relationships. It is about treating customers with respect and showing gratitude. We only get one chance to make a first impression. Your staff may have hundreds of interactions a day, but for the customer it is only one—and that one needs to be the best.

Once you have made your first impression, you get to build a relationship. We build relationships by remembering names, asking open-ended questions, sharing enthusiasm, having gratitude, and using positive language versus negative language. For example, instead of saying, “I don’t know,” you can say, “That’s a great question—let’s go find the answer.” Or, instead of saying, “No problem,” you can say, “Absolutely, I would love to help.”

Hiring for customer service

Consider motivational fit when hiring, and look for individuals who display natural customer service tendencies. For the front end department, look for people who can handle four-to-eight hours of talking to the public while handling the customers’ money, food, complaints, and other various comments. The ability to multitask is key!

When you interview, be prepared with the criteria you are looking for in a candidate. Look for candidates who are friendly, respectful, able to make eye contact, courteous, and confident. Body language tells us much about a person. During interviews, watch for clues in a candidate’s body language, and use behavioral interview questions. For example:

- Describe for us a time when you went out of your way to help someone or to make their day.
- What part of work gives you the greatest feeling of achievement and satisfaction?
- In three words, describe yourself.
- What does excellent customer service look like to you?

Share with us a time when you displayed or experienced this.

Measuring customer service

How to measure customer service? This one is easy! First and foremost, listen to your customers. What sort of feedback are they giving you? To better track customer service feedback, have suggestion and comment forms readily available for customer use.

Use the feedback customers provide as a way to track how well you are meeting their needs. This can be a very useful tool, but only if you are following up. Develop a system through which you document the comments

and ensure appropriate follow up. You can create a simple spreadsheet that tracks the comments coming in and, if followup was needed, what actions were taken.

Mystery shoppers can also give you great feedback. A mystery shopper is a third-party person who comes in at varying times and provides feedback based on the criteria you want them to evaluate. Valley Natural Foods in Burnsville, Minn., uses member volunteers as mystery shoppers, and National Co+op Grocers has an inexpensive mystery-shopper program tailored specifically to cooperatives.

If you decide to use a mystery-shopper program, it is important to understand that their feedback is a snapshot of one point in time. It is important to look at the whole picture and not single out an individual. If

someone does receive poor feedback, make your own observations, and, if needed, have a private, constructive conversation with the individual. More times than not, a customer service complaint is a reflection of your store’s culture, not a critique of a single person.

Rewarding staff

Another way to measure customer service is by having a peer-recognition program in which staff can give shout-outs to coworkers when they observe someone going above and beyond. Acknowledging and rewarding staff for going above and beyond is a great way to reinforce the fact that the co-op takes customer service seriously.

Staff recognition can be offered in many forms. It can be as simple as verbal feedback, or maybe a special button/pin for the employee’s apron, a customer service badge, a gift card, or a written note sharing your observations and your appreciation. Taking the time to share your appreciation of a job well done is a great way to foster a culture of customer service.

Your front end department is the face of your organization. They are the ones who get to build and maintain relationships with your customers. Often they are the first and the last impression a customer has of the co-op. Make sure that front-end staff are the shining examples of what your store is all about. A great first impression can lead to a longstanding relationship that the co-op can foster and grow.

Through leadership, having a clear definition of service, staff training, performance measuring, and peer recognition, your store’s customer service can be top notch. Customer-service skills are life skills that improve the quality of life of the individual and the community. □

Through vision work and collaboration, you can have a clear and robust definition of what customer service looks and feels like. You will have something you can teach, reward, and measure.

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A Woman's Place Is...the Co-op!

BY DAN NORDLEY

Let's see if I can man'plain this:

When it comes to food co-ops, our success will depend on giving women what they want and hoping they'll speak well about the experience.

At least that's what I've figured out (finally!) after some 40 years of watching our food co-ops evolve from counter-cultural roots. No matter what my vantage point—whether as shopper, trucker, board member, designer, publisher, or Cooperative Grocer Network manager—it's clear our food co-ops are primarily used, promoted, and led by women.

This is great, since co-ops are inherently a feminist economic model that values community, fairness, and trust as much as financial success. A more fair and honest economic model provides for more equitable economic and social transactions, and it gives us all hope for a more sustainable future for our kids.

Mothers and mothers-to-be seem especially hardwired to value what co-ops can do for the next generations. They, and the men and women who love them, are the heart and soul of our food co-ops.

Women are also the core consumer for just about every other household retailer. In her intriguing book, *Why She Buys: The New Strategy for Reaching the World's Most Powerful Consumers*, author (and 2014 presenter at the Consumer Cooperative Management Association) Bridget Brennan writes:

"It's no secret that women make or influence the majority of consumer purchasing decisions for the home—about 80 percent in the United States. Women are the primary shoppers for their households, which means they're buying not only for themselves but also for everyone else—spouses, kids, friends, family, colleagues, and often their older parents—which multiplies their buying power and influence."

It's also no secret that many companies have awakened to the market appeal of our co-op brand of building healthy communities and a sustainable environment.

Gender appeal

In describing principles of gender appeal in her book, Brennan observes:

"Generally speaking, women are drawn to products and services that make them feel like they're making the world better in some small way. Research shows that both cause marketing and 'green' campaigns find their strongest audiences in women.

"Women volunteer at higher rates than men do across all age groups and education levels. Whole Foods Market, which bases its marketing on the premise, 'Feel Good About Where You Shop,' is a textbook study in this concept. The company actively communicates with customers about its products and practices and makes people feel as if their trip to the grocery store is, among other things, contributing to their health and that of their family members; helping to improve working conditions for organic farmers; and minimizing damage to the environment. Women who may not

think twice about such things during the course of their normal routines can walk out of a Whole Foods feeling satisfied that they've done their bit for the world and for their own bodies, just by doing something as simple as buying organic meat and potatoes for dinner....

"Most companies can't take social responsibility to the level of Whole Foods, but even small efforts—such as supporting local organizations in your own community—can have a big impact on women's perceptions of your brand. And take some cues from Whole Foods, such as educating customers about where your products come from and who makes them; those are applicable to companies of every size."

Yikes! As much as we are all grimacing that Whole Foods is cited as the textbook example of social responsibility, this is an affirming example of our equitable business model, and more importantly, encouragement for co-ops to keep on leading.

In our "new normal" market environment, food co-ops are going to be increasingly challenged to compete with more locations providing our core natural foods products at lower prices. However, co-ops should have some great intrinsic advantages in authentically positioning our enterprises as the "fairest of them all" among women.

Co-op values and principles

Co-ops have a long, long tradition of commitment to core values and principles that are in full alignment with sustainability and fairness. These are cooperative values: self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, solidarity, honesty, openness, social responsibility, and caring for others.

The first four cooperative principles—open and voluntary membership, democratic governance, consumer ownership, and autonomy—create a profoundly different corporate and governance structure. Our inclusive membership, each member with one vote, elects a board with no financial or personal conflicts of interest to direct the business in a way that generates common wealth for a community of stakeholders who use it the most: consumer owners, workers, neighborhood residents, and partner suppliers. This is the textbook blueprint for a regenerative economy.

The second set of cooperative principles guides our practice:

- Education: our direct communications, marketing, and merchandising are crafted to empower our consumers to make right choices rather than exploiting their ignorance or impulsiveness to buy what they don't need or can't afford.

- Cooperation among co-ops: when we can, we don't compete, we join together to preserve resources and increase the opportunities we have to work together.

- Concern for community: Besides the obvious appeal to women of making life better for everyone, this principle underscores that the co-op recognize its community as a diverse and multi-stakeholder field of membership. "In women's culture, the entire world is a community, where people connect with one another to help others realize their potential inside and out, and to make life happier for everyone." (Brennan)

With what other community concerns can co-ops engage and show leadership? How about racial and economic equity? Community economic development? Health care? Or, affordable child care—now that's something our co-op parents (and co-op employees) could get excited about!

Co-op: “Exception to the rule”

I’m really annoying about my charitable giving. I have lots of opinions, personal connections, and rules about how I give my (limited) dollars to causes I believe in.

For example:

- 1) no giving at the door;*
- 2) no giving on the phone;*
- 3) no giving to those tenacious youngsters in vests with their clipboards on the street;*
- 4) no rounding up or adding on or giving tiny amounts at the register...except...*

Except, I’ve been rounding up every time I check out at Seward Co-op and they ask if I want to support the nonprofit they have chosen for that month’s SEED program. Sometimes I’ve never heard of the organization. Sometimes I don’t even know what the organization is! I am impervious to guilt-trips and peer pressure when it comes to giving. So why am I doing this? I realized the answer is trust.

I love Seward Co-op. I’ve been a member there for 10 years, and I shop there every week. Seward leads the way on labeling, access, and support of local farmers, and they work hard to create a truly welcoming experience. I feel a very personal connection to the co-op—it’s part of how I nourish my family and support my community. I know where everything is, and I invariably run into friends there—its comfortable and comforting. I trust them. And so, I trust that if they have a program where they’ve selected a nonprofit to support each month that I should help them do that.

Seward also does a great job of sharing the success of this program—they publish the amount of money they raise at the register each month for the selected nonprofit. Which shows me that my 56 cents is a part of a much bigger impact. And makes me feel like I’m part of a collective action, which in turn brings me closer to the co-op, deepens my trust.

It’s interesting to me to think about what lessons we might learn about fundraising from this experience. Step 1: spend 10 years building trust, engaging your constituents, and creating a sense of belonging. Step 2: ask them for 56 cents!

Perhaps that’s not a viable strategy for your fundraising effort. But, actually, I think that is the lesson. The reason this program works, the reason I feel compelled to give at the register is precisely because Seward Co-op didn’t set out to build trust and connection just as a fundraising tool. They did it because it’s an authentic manifestation of their mission. That’s what makes me break my own rules and give money to the SEED program. Because it feels real, not gimmicky, and like a small action I can take to be a part of the co-op’s mission.

*~Laura Zabel, Leadership and Community blog (6/03/2012):
<http://www.leadershipandcommunity.com/2012/06/04/exception-to-the-rule/>*

Co-op leadership

In *Why She Buys*, Brennan cites figures (from 2009) illustrating the gender gap in business. Men occupy 97 percent of all Fortune 1,000 CEO positions, two-thirds of top chief marketing officer positions, and nearly all the head creative director roles at the major advertising agencies. Men hold 85 percent of clout titles (those higher than vice president) in the Fortune 500.

On the other hand, the national leadership of the food co-ops and allied co-ops is pretty much flipped from this pattern. Some examples, in alphabetical order of acronyms:

CDS Consulting Co-op: Marilyn Scholl

Co-op Fund of New England: Rebecca Dunn

Cooperative Grocer Network: Ellen Michel

Independent Natural Foods Retailers Association: Corinne Shindelar

National Co+op Grocers: Robynn Shrader

NCBA/CLUSA: Judy Ziewacz

Principle Six: Allison Hermes

Shared Capital Cooperative: Christina Jennings

UW Center for Cooperatives: Anne Reynolds

Although I do not have stats on individual stores, I’d bet dollars to tofu that food co-op general managers and middle-management are majority female.

That’s additional evidence to indicate our co-ops should be appealing to women consumers. It suggests we are in a unique position to craft the story to better-world consumers (the target market?) that we can be TRUSTED to do the FAIR thing for her and her COMMUNITY. It’s what co-ops do and who we are. Structure does count, and co-ops are requisitely structured to live the promise outlined in our principles. Our co-op’s promise can’t be overruled when speculative markets complain.

So, one key strategy to spreading our story is equipping women such as Laura Zabel, a member-owner at Seward Co-op, with experiences that she wants to talk about with her networks and, even better, in social media posts (like the one in the sidebar) that revel in the TRUST she has in her food co-op.

Here’s one more quote from *Why She Buys* that reinforces the strategy of equipping our core constituency with a great story of our co-ops:

“Women can help grow a flat industry. If you’re in a product category or industry that’s hit a plateau, focusing on women may help bring in new customers and revenues. Women are key to the next generation of customers. If you want children and teenagers to participate in an activity, get their mothers excited about it. Women’s participation has a multiplier effect in terms of people and purchases.”

As our competition scrambles to position itself as sustainable enterprises using marketing speak and signage, co-ops live it every day with our structure, practice, and leadership. That’s our co-op advantage for creating the kind of trust that our core members, and retail’s prize consumers, want to talk about. And women don’t have to feel it, they can own it. □

Editor’s note: For more on women in retail, see this Co-operative News report: <http://www.thenews.coop/107774/news/co-operatives/co-op-support-women-retail/>.

Strategic Alliances and Consolidations:

Exploring cooperation among cooperatives

BY ART SHERWOOD

New competition. Shrinking margins. Tighter supply. Rising labor costs. Saturated advertising. Poaching of great employees. Competing in the natural-foods market place is just plain hard. As the market's "new normal" intensifies with the rush of conventional retail players and new competition into our traditional space, there has been increasing interest in exploring the strategy of Principle Six: cooperation among cooperatives.

However, these strategies are not new to the U.S. food co-op world. A well-known strategic alliance is National Co+op Grocers, a joint venture owned by 150 independent food co-ops operating over 200 stores in 38 states. Originating as collaboration among six regional co-op associations in 1999, then consolidating and becoming a cooperative in 2004, this second-tier co-op serves to improve both the purchasing power and operating performance of its owners.

Other recent examples include the consolidation of People's Food Co-op in Lacrosse, Wis., and Rochester, Minn. as well as Central and Tacoma co-ops in Washington.¹ And recently, the boards of three Minnesota food co-ops—Eastside, Linden Hills, and Wedge—announced their proposed consolidation in the Minneapolis metro area.²

Why is this happening? Because these types of strategic alliances and consolidations offer the potential for co-ops becoming stronger together. Yet, they are not without challenges and risks, and this is critical to realize. These are strategies that can be appropriate or completely inappropriate. The key is to ensure that you do the hard work of determining the right strategic thinking, planning, and implementation.

As a researching professor, I've spent the last 20 years studying cooperative strategies, and as a CDS Consulting Co-op member-owner I have spoken to many co-ops about potential strategies. In neither role am I an advocate for these strategies—rather, my colleagues and I urge our co-op leaders to fully think through all the options and implications, drawing in trusted advisors where needed. In this article, I will define some terms, address why co-ops might be considering these strategies, illustrate the range of options, explore the risks, and provide thoughts on variables important to success.

Terms of engagement

Let's get some definitions out of the way before we move on.⁴

Strategic alliances are "formal or informal relationships between two or more parties to pursue a set of agreed-upon goals or to meet critical business needs while remaining independent."³

Defining consolidation, on the other hand, is a little trickier since it varies according to state statutes—it is important to look at the specific state-level language. Here, I use definitions that are fairly common among those who regularly study and work with these strategies.

Consolidation is when two entities merge to form a new entity (common definition of merger) or when one of the existing entities is integrated into another organization often involving purchase with capital (common definition of acquisition). In a merger, both original entities legally dissolve to

form a new one, while in an acquisition the acquired entity dissolves and the acquiring firm survives.

Cooperation among cooperatives, as shown below, can be put on a continuum of less integrated to more integrated, using what is known as the 5C model.⁵ A key point is that there are many more options than just consolidating!

On the left and least-integrated side, cooperation among co-ops starts with: Communicate, where different organizations begin to meet with one another, share information, and exchange ideas; Collaborate, where they might start to mutually support efforts; Coordinate takes an additional step and starts to actually officially do things together, from shared events to timing promotions together to mutually supporting a cause; Cooperate, where we find strategic alliances; and Consolidate speaks for itself, covering mergers and acquisitions. These latter options, cooperation and collaboration, will be the focus of the rest of this article.

Why pursue a strategic alliance or consolidation?

In the area of strategic alliances, there are many innovative approaches. Common ones include: licensing, joint research and development, start-up assistance, joint production, joint marketing, joint support activities (human resources, accounting, legal, etc.), enhanced supplier relationships, distribution agreements, franchising, industry-standard groups, outsourcing, and joint ventures. Once again, a key lesson here is that there are many options.

What are the reasons co-ops might engage in these strategies? Most of the reasons are about improving the co-op business and its ability to better serve customers/owners and to successfully compete. Earlier this year, I conducted a workshop with a variety of food co-op leaders, and here is what they said in response to the question, "Why would you consider either a strategic alliance or consolidation?":

- competition (mainstream, new players, and inter-co-op)
- need for differentiation
- need to pay competitive salary/living wages
- Principle Six is a value
- gaining consistency in branding
- taking the message back from the green-washing competition
- reaching a larger market
- greater coordination
- greater access to capital
- learning, tapping into expertise
- greater career opportunities for employees
- local economic impact improves
- survival
- increased sales
- sharing/driving out costs
- access to resources
- increased local purchasing
- increased innovation

LESS
INTEGRATED



MORE
INTEGRATED

If you take these responses and combine them with what we know from research, we get some common themes driving the interest in strategic alliances and consolidation:

- *increased market power*—through things such as shared promotions, consistent and high-impact branding, and a larger base for word-of-mouth advertising;
- *increased purchasing power*—through things such as larger volume discounts for product and equipment, lease negotiations, and financing;
- *improved efficiency*—through things such as shared overhead, including board and management costs, administrative services, and office locations;
- *improved effectiveness*—through things such as attracting better talent, shared learning and best practices, increased career opportunities/benefits/pay, shared staff development, and building better systems from back end to customer service;
- *increased impact*—through overall improved ability to deliver on overlapping mission/vision of the organizations.

But there are risks

While the above benefits sound impressive, strategic alliances and consolidations are not without their risks—and these can be significant. Below, I review these risks in five foundational areas: vision/purpose, culture, talent, systems, and capital. I urge co-ops to consider these five fundamentals areas, no matter their strategy; doing so provides a framework for risk assessment.

Co-op vision/purpose risk: There is potential for a strategy to diverge from currently held vision and purpose. Strategic alliances may involve compromises that don't sit well with one or another set of stakeholders. Consolidations inevitably lead to different governing and management structures, potentially leading to significantly different places than what preconsolidation leaders expected before they gave up their independent decision making. Finally, there is the risk that the overall consolidation will fail, ultimately closing down the operation, which in reality takes out two co-ops from pursuing the ends for which they were originally organized.

Cultural risk: Clash of cultures has been one of the dominant sources of tension and occasional breakdown of these strategies. Food co-ops tend to have strong local cultures in the first place, and if there is a wide gap between partnering organizations and limited attention is paid to culture clash, this can tank a deal that looks perfect on paper. For strategic alliances, cultures may clash on how to implement projects, how to distribute work, and how to divvy up the rewards. You may hear, "That is just not how we do things around here!"

In a consolidation, expect the question, "Whose name is going to be kept as the co-op's name?" and the deeper issues such questions bring up. People put their heart and souls into building cooperative ventures, and

the reality of having it turn into a different organization can cause significant problems in membership, staff, and the overall community. Fear of the unknown and assumptions about loss of intimacy or control will arise. Problems could range from disillusionment and lost loyalty to outright proactive work against the consolidation, potentially leading to personal attacks and bad blood.

Talent risk: Talent risk ranges from losing good people who are "redundant" to poaching of key employees, stealing of organizational know-how, and stressing out employees who now have become part of the more-efficient system through eliminating like positions while expecting individuals to cover larger organizations. In a strategic alliance, expect that folks may find opportunity elsewhere as they get to know new partners. In consolidations, expect the question, "How am I going to do my job for this larger organization, when I was already slammed with just ours?"

Systems risk: Any time you add additional variables to a system, you add stress to it. Strategic alliances require aligning different and independent systems, which may lead to square pegs meeting round holes. When trying to align or consolidate systems, from point-of-sale to human resources to board policies, you face the risk that the systems will not handle it well and begin to crack. Expect the question, "How come we have to learn this new system, when ours was just fine?"

Financial risk: Consolidation takes investment of money, and it is possible in a strategic alliance that your partners may not deliver on their promises. In a consolidation, not hitting the pro-forma projections can lead to significant loss of wealth or loss of the business itself. Working with humans is expensive and hard to predict accurately in its hidden costs—not to mention all the extra time it takes to manage the deal versus doing the day-to-day. Expect folks working on the design to ask, "How are we supposed to accurately project the costs of this thing?" And, if things go awry, "Why didn't you know this in the first place?"

Overall, there is the risk of "deal heat." This is when the momentum of the idea becomes so strong that we feel compelled to make the deal happen—rather than take all the appropriate steps we need to truly act with due diligence and to prepare for a potentially very different strategic situation and organization.

These factors in combination can create a very difficult situation that co-ops ultimately need to escape—risks potentially so damaging as to threaten the survival of the businesses themselves.

Sound scary? I would rather you take the above as areas of concern to which you should pay attention in order to minimize the risk of the proposed deal. Risk is part of business, and consolidation strategies are no different. Once we have chosen to pursue a strategy, it is our job to understand the risks and minimize them to the best of our ability. It is also our responsibility NOT to pursue the strategy if the risks are judged to be too high—even if the pressure is on to do the deal. >

Best practices and pitfalls

There are many potential best practices and pitfalls, and I want to specifically highlight three.

Trust, character, and competence: Trust is essentially the willingness to make oneself vulnerable to another. Strategic alliances and consolidation have vulnerability written all over them. In order to help people accept this, it is critical that both the character and competence of all involved are demonstrated. Character here involves demonstrating positive intent—helping people see why you are doing what you are doing and that you are the kind of people and organization that will not stab others in the back. Competence is about demonstrating you have the knowledge and abilities as individuals and as an organization to hold up your end of the bargain. Trust is not assumed—it is built consciously with communication, data, and attention to process.

Alignment: This is not “buy-in,” which is making the decision and then trying to convince everyone you are right. Rather, alignment is about building the conversations with stakeholders early, building shared understanding of the organizational purpose, its vision for the future and the means by which it will move in those directions. Building alignment starts internally with board and management and grows over time to include owners, staff, and overall community. This is part of the larger strategic work and is not associated with just one of these strategies. Co-ops that have been doing this alignment work for years will fare much better than those that start only when trying to implement one of the strategies—in the latter case, you may be forced into the buy-in corner.

James Morrell

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Driving the interest in strategic alliance and consolidation:
increased market power,
increased purchasing power,
improved efficiency,
improved effectiveness,
and increased impact.

Due diligence: This is essential. While due diligence is important when proposing a strategic alliance, it is particularly critical when considering consolidation. Some or all of the following organizational information may be important: history, reputation, products, research and development, strategic relationships, marketing/sales/distribution, operating systems, customers, competitors, management and staff, ownership structures, and financials. Due diligence particular to legal consolidation includes: organizational records, stock records/documents, financial/financing records, material contracts and policies, personnel matters, intellectual property matters, real estate, insurance, legal matters, compliance with laws, and environmental and general business information.⁶

The cooperative strategic toolbox

Our mission is stronger co-ops making a difference in their communities. There are many ways to make that happen, and we believe a co-op's leaders and decision makers should be open to considering a range of options to address the “new normal” marketplace competition. Alliances and consolidation are worthy of consideration in our cooperative strategic toolbox. As long as we understand that they sit next to other tools we should also consider diligently, they can become a useful part of our overall competitive and cooperative success. □

¹<http://www.grocer.coop/articles/merger-two-co-ops>; <http://www.grocer.coop/articles/central-and-tacoma-co-ops-merge>

² <http://www.startribune.com/wedge-eastside-and-linden-hills-co-ops-exploring-merger/383709651/>

³ Nevin, Mike. *The Strategic Alliance Handbook: A Practitioners Guide to Business-to-Business Collaborations*. Gower: Burlington, VT USA, 2014.

⁴ Adapted from my own research and Faulkner, David; Teerikangas, Satu; and Richard, J. Joseph. *The Handbook of Mergers and Acquisitions*. Oxford University Press: Oxford UK, 2014.

⁵ Thank you, Marilyn Scholl!

⁶ Adapted from Miller, Edwin L. *Mergers and Acquisitions: A Step-By-Step Legal and Practical Guide*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc: Hoboken, NJ USA, 2008.



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