

Bag It!

Co-op's campaign generates friends and impact

BY CAROL SPURLING AND JESICA DEHART

There are always lots of reasons not to take a risk—even when it's the right thing to do. The Moscow Food Co-op (Moscow, Ida.) recently took one when we launched a month-long campaign to reduce our use of plastic bags.

The risk was worth it. The Bag It campaign—our biggest single-issue campaign to date—surpassed all our expectations. We feared our customers would be annoyed; they loved it. We thought our store would only ban plastic t-shirt bags temporarily; our store management unanimously agreed to get rid of them forever. We feared outsiders would see it as evidence that we are still just a bunch of fringe radicals; our conservative city government unanimously passed a resolution in support of the campaign.

Sadly, invitations to our town's big boxes and larger grocery stores to join us in the campaign were met with stony silence. Sometimes, all you can do is plant the seed of an idea. Our own campaign stayed in the seed stage for a very long time.

For years, we have offered a 10-cent cash refund for each reusable bag or coffee cup customers used. The usage of reusable bags went up for a couple years, but then reached a plateau at a level too low to satisfy us.

We wanted to be like other cool co-ops that no longer offer plastic bags—Ashland, Bellingham, Fiddleheads, Park Slope, PCC Natural Markets, the Wedge

(to name a few)—but, I admit it, we hesitated. We felt that such a radical operational change might not be possible, even though it supports one of our store's main strategic goals: modeling environmental sustainability.

No other grocery store in town had taken this step; might we hand them a new advantage? Also, our store's front end was understandably concerned about how much time they might have to spend explaining.

So we began slowly, raising the issue's profile over the course of a year. We polled our customers about their feelings regarding plastic bags. We noted in various ways our preference for paper over plastic. We offered reusable bags at a very low price.



THE CAMPAIGN TO REDUCE OUR USE OF PLASTIC • 2011

Throughout April, for Earth Month

BYORB (Bring Your Own Reusable Bag) to these stores * in April and get a raffle ticket for the **Bag It! Raffle** at the Moscow Food Co-op

Dozens of great prizes!

From local vendors Moscow Glass and Awning, Natural Abode, Yarn Underground, Fast Foodie, Paradise Creek Bicycles, Moscow Yoga Center, Buy Local Moscow as well as:

Snack Taxi • Big Dipper Candles
Laptop Lunches • Clementine Art
Klean Kanteen • EcoBags
Vessel Drinkware • EnviroSax
Happy Tiffin • Now Designs/Bambu
Built • Chico • Kids Konserve
Keep Leaf • Mimi the Sandline
New Wave • Down to Earth
Overseas Connection • Eco Sac
Earth Lust • Human Gear/Go Tube
Sugoi • Fred Products • BlueQ
Sunbeam Candles and more!

Good for business - good for you - good for the earth.

Raffle entry box will be at the Co-op at the new front desk. Raffle drawing will take place the first week of May, all ages welcome (if you're old enough to shop, you're old enough to carry a reusable bag!)



The Bag It documentary was visited by the Bag Monster, who appeared on the streets of Moscow in front of the theater.

The Bag It! raffle created buzz about being bagless.

Then the *Bag It!* movie came into our lives, like a bolt of lightning, or should we say a ray of warm sunshine. Once we learned of the “Bag It!” documentary, presto, our seed of an idea blossomed into reality. There’s nothing like a great film with an equally good website resource to act as the kickstart for an operational change and the supporting framework for an entire month of educational displays, product demos, raffle contests, and fun.

Collaboration was another key to success for our Bag It! campaign. Our store’s mercantile buyer was wondering how she could improve her sales. Working with outreach and promotions on the Bag It! campaign was the perfect solution. Mercantile sales shot up 20 percent.

Outside the store, the graduate student

organization at the University of Idaho (UI) decided, all on their own, that reducing the use of plastic bags was a worthy cause. Serendipitously, they approached us for assistance, and we provided Chico bags with our logo on them as a gift for graduate students.

The students hooked us up with the UI Sustainability Center, which led directly to working with our city’s Sustainable Environment Commission, which shepherded a resolution of support for the campaign all the way through to the city council. We also had moral support from Buy Local Moscow, a group of local businesses.

Collaboration is always a little extra work, but the amplification of the campaign throughout the community was worth it. For example, outside entities can’t send a direct email to all 7,000 UI students. But the UI Sustainability Center emailed them info about the Bag It! campaign, and they

even developed a lovely poster listing our Bag It events as well as theirs, distributing them all over campus.

Once we were underway, it was obvious that we had underestimated our customers. One week into the campaign, the front end informed us that they had not had a single complaint or annoyed customer. Customers either didn't notice the absence of plastic bags or were visibly pleased.

At two weeks in, our management team decided not to bring the plastic bags back, ever. It was a thrilling moment in our co-op's history.

Bag It! film and monster

We kicked off our Bag It! campaign with a screening of *Bag It!* This wonderful film is appropriate for all ages, fun to watch, and jaw-droppingly informative.

The University of Idaho Sustainability Center sponsored multiple screenings of the film that were free for students.

The *Bag It!* film website provided the facts on plastic that our city councilors read before deciding to vote in favor of the resolution supporting the Bag It campaign.

The Chico Bag company lent us a Bag Monster costume, which arrived just in time for one of our volunteers to wear at our *Bag It!* screening and then at subsequent in-store events throughout April.

The Bag Monster represents the average plastic bag consumption of one family during one year: about 500 bags. The costume speaks for itself, so it was more effective if the person inside kept quiet. He just walked around the store, smiling and silently giving out reusable bags to customers who didn't have one in their carts.

Promotions and demos

A small group of co-op volunteers created a series of informative, themed displays about all the ways to reduce plastic usage. We focused on "At Home," "On the Go," "Health and Beauty," "Cleaning/Maintenance," and "While Shopping."

Each week throughout April, we promoted different products that offer a nondisposable alternative to throw-aways: lunch boxes and food containers; cloth bags for bulk, produce, and shopping; wooden brushes and utensils; glass bottles and non-BPA baby products; and similar mercantile items. Our vendors were generous in providing products for demos, and in return we gave them lots of Facebook coverage and in-store visibility.

Staff benefitted, too, from vendor generosity. Every employee got his or her own Bambu spork!

We also gave away reusable bags with the store logo to new members who joined the co-op during the campaign.

Before the campaign, we contacted our mercantile vendors and local businesses for raffle prizes and garnered dozens of great prizes that we used to create gift baskets. We used colorful string bags instead of plastic wrap or cellophane to cover the baskets.

The co-op and participating member businesses of the Buy Local Moscow organization handed out a raffle ticket to customers every time they used a reusable bag, bulk container, or coffee cup. The

raffle entry box was at the co-op's demo counter, and every week at a set time we drew several tickets. We posted photos of the happy winners with their baskets on Facebook.

To generate enthusiasm among store staff, we had an internal raffle every week, just for employees. We gave away lots of donated reusable water bottles, and now the cashiers, who often used to drink from disposable cups with lids, set a great example with their cool canteens and non-spill mugs.

"The competition of the raffle created such a buzz with the customers and staff that it was palpable," said Jessica DeHart, our product promotions

and education coordinator. "Even customers who always use reusable bags found ways to make their shopping practices greener, especially in the bulk department."

We gave away over 100 raffle prizes that ranged from reusable bags and mugs to larger gifts like a SodaStream.

At the end of the campaign, we had one final contest: guessing how many raffle tickets we had collected throughout the month. Winners posted their guesses on Facebook. In the end we had over 9,000 tickets—more than 18 bag monsters' worth of disposable plastic bags and containers that our customers kept out of the landfill. ■

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What this program really serves is taking the intellectual basis from which co-ops came from 160 years ago and carrying it forward to a new generation of leaders, and that's not just a business strategy but also a way of organizing an economy. This program is very important. It has tremendous potential. My hat's off to the people who created it. The world's a better place because of it."

Sean Doyle,
General Manager, Seward Co-operative,
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Tom Webb, Program Manager
Larry Haiven, Program Co-ordinator
Master of Management – Co-operatives and Credit Unions
Department of Management, Saint Mary's University
Robie Street, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada B3H 3C3

Application deadline May 31 for
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Information and Student Profiles:
www.mmccu.coop

Tom.webb@smu.ca
902 496 8170 or 902 634 4536
larry.haiven@smu.ca 902 420 5082

www.mmccu.coop



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