

BY DAVE GUTKNECHT

Next Act: Network Merger



The year 2012 marks a new stage in the history of this magazine, one that will lead to improvements in web-based services for food co-ops. Following is one view (skewed, naturally) of how we got to this juncture.

Cooperative Grocer was launched in 1985 during the ongoing consolidation and decline of consumer cooperative distributors but with the essential help of these regional businesses. I had edited their trade magazine, *Moving Food*, for the prior six years. During that period, many of our links with older co-ops were lost. With a few exceptions, consumer food co-ops from previous generations had closed or were heading that way.

We benefited more than we realized from the legislation and best practices established by our cooperative predecessors, and we replicated more than we realized the history and business lessons of earlier grocery co-ops. That mirrored history and its lessons included attempts at standardization and integration among retail co-ops and their regional distributors; development of a national co-op brand and product line; and pioneering in consumer-friendly label information and cleaner ingredient lists.

Our countercultural grassroots stores emphasized natural foods—though never exclusively or consistently. (What's natural to me may be unnatural to you.) Organics evolved to become a new standard for top quality and co-ops' niche, yet most products in many co-ops did not qualify. At the same time, competition from privately owned stores was growing strongly.

Following the demise of most older consumer co-op organizations, these few hundred independent co-ops needed their own network and trade publication. During the 1990s, arising from growing recognition of their common challenges and potential, and enhanced by deepening professional needs and impact, food co-ops launched new organizations. While *Cooperative Grocer* reinforced a diverse but professional identity, those retailers and cooperators created regional and national co-op structures as well as independent but essential services in co-op data sharing and training.

For the past decade and more, these cooperative networks and services, along with our national allies in Washington, D.C., have

shaped the food cooperative business landscape. The common direction of all these efforts has been stronger cooperative economies through deeper sharing of resources.

Ten years ago, I sought to recover some of my financial investment in *Cooperative Grocer*. Our co-op sector finally had established national associations that could be a home for the magazine and website. The Cooperative Grocers' Information Network (CGIN), a nonprofit based in its member co-ops, was providing web-based services that could be viewed as an extension of this magazine's efforts. But at the time, the best fit was the National Cooperative Grocers Association (NCGA), which had evolved from regional associations. NCGA acquired the name and rights to *Cooperative Grocer*, then contracted with Triangle Park Creative in Minneapolis for its print and website production.

Last year, when management of CGIN services was awarded by its board of directors to that same design firm, the move enabled publisher Dan Nordley and me to develop a proposal to transfer ownership of *Cooperative Grocer* to CGIN while integrating the two websites into one—reducing overhead for both and enhancing search functions and other services. The proposal also calls for modifying membership requirements to make it easier to reach out to more than 150 co-ops that are not members of CGIN, groups that likely will need help from more experienced cooperators to further strengthen our co-op sector.

Thanks to Dan Nordley for his vision and persistence in developing this exciting new direction and to the NCGA and CGIN boards for supporting it. In spring 2012, after months of discussion and preparation, both the NCGA board of directors and the CGIN board approved the shuffle. Our new network effectively merges *Cooperative Grocer* and CGIN, a move I believe will soon yield visible and tangible improvements in services to food co-ops everywhere.

CGIN resources will be relocated to a redesigned *Cooperative Grocer* site called **Cooperative Grocer Network**. Food cooperators will have an opportunity to create identities on the site and connect directly or through groups. Listserves will be transitioned to web-based forums that can better capture discussions as content, and content will be curated into wikis. For more details, see page 10. ■

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