

Cooperate and Differentiate

BY DAVE GUTKNECHT

Many of today's food co-ops lead their community and marketplace in key ways, though they do not have a dominant share of its total grocery sales. Co-op leadership can be seen in support for local producers and clean product offerings, in knowledgeable staff and outstanding service, in organizational transparency and democratic governance, and in broad ownership and community ties.

Differentiation in the local market continues to be much sought after by the evolving national network of cooperative stores—led by National Co+op Grocers and its “virtual chain” of nearly 200 stores, but also including new co-ops being launched every year. At the same time that it is essential to cooperate and benefit from joint buying and shared professional resources, differentiation is required in local landscapes where many of the co-ops' offerings are also available at other stores.

What makes your co-op stand out? Price and product matter, but so does having knowledgeable staff eager to talk about ingredients and local sources. Providing excellent service is basic, but community ties and democratic ownership have impact too. Putting it all together, cooperative service must be understood and embraced throughout the organization, and cooperative ownership must reflect and be embedded in the local community.

Can co-ops build on their strengths in order to manifest such differentiation? That notion is built into the unique curriculum on co-op management at Saint Mary's University in Halifax, reported here by Erin Hancock—an internationally rich program that continues to benefit U.S co-op managers and other co-op leaders.

In addition, we feature two contributions toward a theme of broadening access and deepening cooperative services. One is an example of a co-op that is working hard to improve its accessibility and market appeal, expanding services while fulfilling or even strengthening its mission. The other report urges cooperatives to integrate their ownership values throughout a deeply service-centered organizational culture.

From Willy Street Co-op in Madison, Wis., Kirsten Moore describes its investments in new products and services, especially for low-income residents, since the co-op's 2016 opening of a full-sized store in an

economically diverse neighborhood. Willy Street owners, board, management, and staff supported an expansion of the co-op's services and its financial commitments and a cultural shift. The co-op put its model of collective ownership and its mission of meeting member needs ahead of an inflexible insistence on product standards. Now, the many new Willy Street Co-op owners and customers are invited every day to participate in a democratic organization, and they are exposed to a store inventory dominated by clean, local, and organic foods.

In Brittany Baird and Rebecca Torpie's report, co-ops are urged to thoroughly embrace and train for mutual service, an outlook to be shared in all organizational relations, internal and external. Its foundation is shared ownership and values, and ongoing training is essential to maintaining what the authors describe as a Cooperative Service culture. Again, the resulting improvements can help differentiate the co-op in a busy marketplace.

To take some of these thoughts a bit further and reiterate a point: Our community-based cooperatives are essential examples of evolving enterprise/associations based on trust and mutual benefits, and we should consciously articulate and nurture that trust and those benefits. A cooperative enterprise/association serves and is owned by its community, and this is a differentiating identity.

In today's degenerating political environment, fundamentals are worth asserting as well as re-examining. Cooperatives must uphold principles of open membership and non-discrimination; exemplify the democratic sharing of responsibilities and rewards; and strengthen the community in which the cooperative thrives.

These tenets sound like platitudes until you are threatened with their loss. A painful absence of trusting community relations can and does occur, sometimes with subtlety and sometimes suddenly. Democracy, for that matter, is absent or much degraded outside of a few organizations such as cooperatives. Grounded in shared values and everyday practice, cooperatives are important community assets at all times—but they are especially needed during times of stress in the community and the body politic. •

Brittany Baird is a member of CDS Consulting Co-op, specializing in operational and financial improvement.
Brittany.baird@cdsconsulting.coop 12

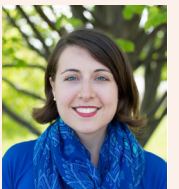


Michael Feiner and Paul Feiner are the principal owners and operators of Power Play Assets Protection, LLC, and members of CDS Consulting Co-op, specializing in safety, security, and loss prevention. Michael lives and works in Vermont, and Paul recently became the store support manager in charge of safety, security, and operations at Sacramento Natural Foods Co-op.
feiner@cdsconsulting.coop 10



Dave Gutknecht is editor of *Cooperative Grocer* magazine. dave@grocer.coop 4

Erin Hancock is manager of promotion and partnership for the Co-operative Management Education program in the Sobey School of Business at Saint Mary's University, Halifax, N.S.
cme@smu.ca 6



Jacqueline Hannah is a development specialist at Food Co-op Initiative, which assists startups across the country. Jacqueline@fci.coop 22



Allie Mentzer is an advocacy specialist at National Co+op Grocers. allie.mentzer@ncg.coop 5

Ellen Michel is executive director of Cooperative Grocer Network and managing editor of *Cooperative Grocer* magazine. ellen@grocer.coop 25

Kirsten Moore is cooperative services director at Willy Street Co-op in Madison, Wis.
k.moore@willystreet.coop 18



Sheila Ongie is the Sustainability Specialist for National Co+op Grocers, focused on Co+efficient, a program for NCG co-ops to measure, analyze, improve, and share their impacts.
Sheila.ongie@ncg.coop 5



Rebecca Torpie is a member of CDS Consulting Co-op, specializing in marketing and brand strategy.
rebeccatorpie@cdsconsulting.coop 12

