

Co-op Construction: Working on the Dream

Presenting a new discussion of tools, trainings and tips for evolving co-ops

BY STUART REID

Once a year or so, I have been writing about the work of Food Co-op 500 and the newly forming co-ops that we support. Since our program began five years ago, we have worked with hundreds of co-op founders and created an entire library of resources. And while reporting what we do has been important, there is much more that we can offer to this groundswell of new co-ops.

Thanks to the vision of *Cooperative Grocer*, we are excited to introduce a new column that will appear in every issue. You can expect to hear about our toolboxes, publications, and workshops that we create and sponsor—resources for startup organizing groups that can also be used by established co-ops to improve their operations and inform their expansion efforts. From time to time, we will feature innovative and exceptional new co-ops in case study reports.

There may be some editorializing and opinionating—admittedly a rarity in the world of co-ops!—and certainly there will be the unexpected as we learn from the work we do and get your feedback. While the emphasis will be on the needs and news of co-ops in development, do not assume that it is only for startups.

There are many ways to provide information and support. Food Co-op 500 has made low cost and easy access primary considerations in how we offer ours. New toolboxes and FAQ documents are written by co-op development specialists with grant support from our sponsors. Once completed, they are posted to our website (www.foodcoop500.com) in the “Resources and Downloads” section, where they can be accessed at no cost. Some of our most popular resources include the following:

Legal primer for formation of retail consumer co-ops

Do you have questions about the best way to incorporate? Need to know the advantages of the new non-patron-investor structure? Are you considering incorporating in a different state to take advantage of its statutes? Here is the place to start your research. Our primer provides a broad overview of the regulations affecting cooperatives, the options for organizing structures, and warnings for when you need to have your plans reviewed by an attorney. Every state in our country has different statutes, so this can-

not be a complete set of recommendations that work for everyone. However, it will help you to understand your options and know what questions to ask. Templates for by-laws and articles of incorporation are included.

Member loan toolbox

This was one of our biggest projects. We used input from both new and established co-ops, as well as experienced co-op consultants, to create a detailed outline of how to plan, organize, and carry out a successful member loan campaign. The toolbox also includes dozens of sample documents and templates that you can adapt for your own use.

Feasibility study FAQ and checklists

These checklists are designed to help you determine whether you have a viable plan for starting (or expanding) a co-op. More than just a market research report, feasibility involves all the stakeholders and environmental factors that impact a co-op’s potential for success.

Users’ manual for customer and member surveys, survey FAQ

New co-ops and established co-ops alike need to be aware of how their communities perceive them. This manual describes the elements of a reliable survey, how to ensure representative feedback and the relative advantages of different survey methods. The manual was based on work done by National Cooperative Grocers Association for its member co-ops—thanks for their support! The Customer and Member Survey FAQ document is a more concise effort to help you understand the overall survey process.

Sources and uses budget template

One of the most important planning tools for any startup or expansion project is the Sources and Uses Budget. Bill Gessner of CDS Consulting has worked with hundreds of co-ops in all stages of development, and this budget template is the result of his experience. It includes all of the typical sources of income and project expenses, along with benchmarks for typical costs.

Member equity toolbox

This is our newest resource, scheduled to be released shortly after this goes to press. With dozens of options and hundreds of variations in how a co-op can structure member equity

and investment, the toolbox helps to clarify the options and implications of this key strategic decision. Equally important to new co-ops and to established stores that need new capital, this will help you to analyze your choices.

Webinars

With major support from the CDS Consulting Co-op, Food Co-op 500 has presented 18 web-based training presentations on a full range of development needs. A new series entitled, “Starting a Food Co-op? What You Need to Know” will begin on Feb. 16 and continue every other Tuesday through April 27. You can attend any or all of these for free by signing up at www.cdsconsulting.coop/startup-webinar.

All of our web presentations are recorded and can be downloaded and viewed at your convenience.

A food co-op in your community

Food Co-op 500 has produced a 10-minute video presentation featuring both new and established co-op stakeholders talking about what their co-op means to their respective communities. This tool was designed for public outreach, volunteer training and any activity generally promoting the value of cooperatives. You can view a streaming video on our website or request a DVD by contacting us at Food Co-op 500.

Coming soon

There is no end to the information resources that are needed, and every one that we create needs to be updated frequently. We value your suggestions, contributions and input. If you have a tool that you believe should be shared with developing co-ops—even if it may need a little work—please consider sharing it through our resource library.

There are big plans being made for our future work. In the next issue of *Cooperative Grocer* I will talk more about how Food Co-op 500 will be evolving to better meet the undiminished demand for new co-op support. ■

RESOURCES

www.foodcoop500.coop

www.cdsconsulting.coop

www.ncba.coop

www.cgin.coop

For recorded training webinars:

<http://cdsconsulting.centraldesktop.com/fc500registration/doc/1444919/w-FrontPage>