

Marketing Matters 2010

Telling your co-op story

BY ELLEN MICHEL

Marketing Matters 2010 took place in New York City, May 11–13, bringing together 75 co-op marketing and member services attendees, plus presenters and National Cooperative Grocers Association (NCGA) staff. The list of the 56 co-ops represented (from Abundance to Weaver Street, by way of Hunger Mountain, Roanoke, Tidal Creek and Viroqua) hints at the local flavor of individual stores. The new “Co+op, stronger together” brand underscored the common ground among us.

The first afternoon was spent exploring Manhattan and its retail food suppliers, with treks to Brooklyn for visits to Flatbush and Park Slope Co-ops. Sessions during the two full conference days included presentations by Kelly Smith, NCGA director of marketing and communications; Chris Ryding, NCGA national perishables program manager; Charli Mills of Valley Natural Foods; and Allie Mentzer of Linden Hills Co-op. Co-op representatives on two member panels explored kids’ programs and strategies for teambuilding.

Keynote speakers opened and closed the conference. The project of effectively telling the co-op story to a wide range of consumers and constituents emerged as a unifying theme. We talk about building a story-telling platform for our stores: What might that look like? And who are we talking to?

Toward a more holistic notion of wellness

June Jo-Lee, director of strategic insights with the Hartman Group, opened the two days of presentations. In a talk called “Beyond Natural/Organic: Emerging Health and Wellness Trends,” Jo-Lee visited the Hartman consumer segmentation model food co-ops use to better understand customers. She discussed updated research involving consumer

classifications, describing varying levels of intensity and involvement with the health and wellness market segment: core shoppers (13 percent), mid-levels (62 percent), and periphery (25 percent).

Researchers with The Hartman Group have backgrounds in ethnography, anthropology, sociology and psychology, as well as traditional marketing. They study food and beverage consumers in the environments of their homes, stores, and lives, drawing conclusions based on relationships between food and culture. (And they take photos of the inside of people’s fridges.)

“Culture goes beyond trends,” said Jo-Lee. “We look at how consumers really live, and at the differences between what they say and what they do, and what they aspire to. Core, mid-level, and periphery shoppers are drawn to different attributes of



Julie Huffaker and Brad Robertson of On Your Feet described the power of story telling to convey a store brand.

products, settings and services. Knowing about the differences among them can help you think about communicating more effectively with them all.”

Food co-ops are often a home base for core shoppers, people who are incubators of food trends and who have developed a holistic understanding of wellness. Mid-level consumers, while less focused on the broad connections between food choices and the public good, take smaller steps in the direction of local, organic, and sustainable products. Periphery consumers may discover the co-op when they begin to search for fewer “bad” foods, reacting to an allergy or newly diagnosed medical condition.

Jo-Lee emphasized the goal of communicating effectively with each consumer segment, becoming aware of those occasions that speak to their particular needs. Directing most of your marketing ►

Take it from here: cool marketing implements for 2010

These tips, tools, sites and strategies were all shared at this year's Marketing Matters. NCGA members may log in to the NCGA website for details. Take it from here to help your co-op make more of an impact in the upcoming year.

1. Learn what your customers are saying:

NCGA developed a survey tool in 2008 with Cooperative Development Services and Survey Research Center at the University of Wisconsin. In 2009, 11 co-ops fielded NCGA's shopper survey; a results report can be found at the NCGA website. The survey and accompanying manual are available for use and customization in both paper and electronic formats. As more co-ops make use of this tool, we will learn more about our individual stores in relation to a national average.

2. Pay attention to the trends: Writing a business plan? Check out NCGA's "Trends Report" for a compilation of consumer and industry trends.

3. We are Co+op, stronger together:

Sometimes referred to as "Co Plus" (Co+), the new national brand has its own online brand guide. An access point for transitioning to the Co+op, stronger together brand, the brand guide will be updated as new tools and information are available. Current customizable assets include posters, a 30-second radio spot, print ads, a television spot, direct mail pieces, shelf talkers, a color palette, a photo library, and information about typefaces (hint: Gills Sans rules). Many of these new templates can be customized through the On Demand system, which can be accessed free of charge during 2010.

The transition to Co+op, stronger together food brochures, gift cards, and packaging will take place in phases as existing inventory is depleted.

But wait, there's more! Charli Mills of Valley Natural Foods (Burnsville, Minn.) gave a presentation on co-branding that underscored the way the Co+op, stronger together resources can help create marketing efficiencies in our stores. To encourage implementation of the new national brand, NCGA is sponsoring both a T-shirt design contest and a brand implementation contest.

4. Coming soon, a consumer website: Hand in hand with the new brand will be the launch of a consumer website: www.strongertogether.coop. Filled with information about food as well as individual co-ops (including listings of local growers associated with particular stores), the developed content is educational and informational in tone, with interactive features that allow for persuasion and engagement around hot-button food issues. Communities will be able to form at the site, encouraging co-op interaction across the country.

5. Co-op Deals appeal: NCGA's new promotions program, Co+op Deals,



Liz McMann of St. Paul's Mississippi Market and other attendees of Marketing Matters participate in a round of co-op story telling.

will launch later this year. The flyer will transition to the new brand and more frequent publication in September. The national coupon book will transition with the September/October book and new member coupons with Q4 sheets.

6. Eat Local, America! Based on feedback from participating co-ops, the challenge language has been removed from the national Eat Local America! campaign, which co-ops are encouraged to promote during the peak harvest season of June through September. New NCGA Marketing Program Specialist Jeanne Lakso is the lead on this project. NCGA will be updating the website (www.eatlocalamerica.coop) and providing promotional templates and public relations material.

7. My Co-op Rocks contest: Offering passion, creativity, and a chance to shout out the best about your co-op, the My Co-op Rocks video contest will be held again this year, with a video submission deadline in September and voting continuing through mid-October. Check out the archive of 2009's two-minute videos to get ideas for this year's contest at www.mycooprocks.coop.

8. Focus on Fresh: Also available at the NCGA site, in the Prepared Foods section, are seasonal recipes and quarterly Fresh Focus newsletters, offering many suggestions for promotions that can effectively showcase the fresh departments in our stores.

9. Light a fire under demos, and develop programs to connect with kids: Allie Mentzer (Linden Hills Co-op, Minneapolis) discussed her "Recipe for a Successful Demo Program," complete with insider advice about best practices. Especially helpful is her in-store demo request form, which facilitates communication with vendors about setup and publicity.

Meg Klepack (City Market, Burlington, Vt.) and Mariah Rose-Dahl (Honest Weight Food Co-op, Albany, N.Y.) offered presentations on kids' programs, emphasizing the importance of early nutrition education and demonstrating how co-ops can reach young people in fun and engaging ways.

10. Building a Team: Successful marketing initiatives begin with convincing others to work on a common project. Three diverse presentations took a look at team building and leadership.

Monica Cuneo described the experience of working at People's Food Co-op in Portland, Ore., where there is a collective management structure. Lisa Smith (Neighborhood Food Co-op, Carbondale, Illinois) offered strategies for presenting clear and compelling trip reports and project proposals. Joe Romano (GreenStar Cooperative Market, Ithaca, N.Y.) described his co-op's ambitious rebranding project and the challenges involved in moving ahead with aesthetic changes. How do we honor our history while remaining relevant and open to the future? That question is a perennial one for our organizations.

◀ to one particular group (such as the core) may signal exclusivity and make other customers (including some staff members) feel less than welcome in our stores.

"Sustainability awareness works from the inside out," said Jo-Lee. "Consumers begin by paying attention to their personal health, to what they put into their bodies. Now there are key non-food categories that represent gateways to greater health and wellness, as the evolving consumer makes decisions to use nontoxic body care, pet, and household products."

Jo-Lee offered a list of retail audit touchpoints that communicate authenticity and emotional connectivity across consumer groups. Her advice to co-ops? "One recommendation would be to be inclusive rather than exclusive. You can partner with consumers on their health and wellness journey, no matter where they may be."

Authenticity, emotional connectivity, and story

"Food is part of a broad cultural conversation," summarized Jo-Lee, drawing a thematic link to the final keynote session. An interactive workshop called "Walking Your Talk: Branding Through Story," it was led by Julie Huffaker and Brad Robertson, brand consulting experts with On Your Feet who have backgrounds in experiential marketing, organizational behavior, and improvisational theater.

"Every consultant needs a four-quadrant grid," quipped Robertson, using their four-quadrant Story Plotter as a structure for eliciting anecdotes from the group. "The Story Plotter is meant to be a simple, sensible way to organize and classify stories, helping businesses live their brand and find alignment."

Huffaker described the "fat words" that organizations use to define themselves: abstractions like leadership, customer service, and quality.

While often based on real beliefs and a foundational vision, these words tend to describe what an



**Park Central Hotel in Manhattan,
site of Marketing Matters 2010.**

entity wishes to be rather than what it currently or consistently is. Such aspirational language sounds alike from company to company, diluting its meaning. "Because we all interpret these words differently, the language of 'fat words' often fails to help employees think about how they make decisions, respond, or act," said Huffaker. "When customers have experiences that contradict the language of the brand, they are quick to see the gaps between talk and walk."

Using the Story Plotter, Huffaker and Robertson first asked attendees to tell Stories of Fact. These are positive stories that unpack moments when abstract values come alive: the time someone went back to the kitchen to add ingredients to a packaged salad for a newly wowed customer, or when a synchronized shopping cart team made a parade crowd scream with joy. ("They weren't yelling, they were

screaming.") The way a co-op member-owner thanked the staff for creating a place where, even during a time of uncertainty, she felt happy and safe.

Stories of Contradiction gave us a chance to capture and examine moments when actions fall short of aspirations—a staff person comments: "You'll never catch me doing that for a customer!" or a guest picks up on a muttered insult. "Stories of contradiction help you identify guardrails for your company, places where you may draw the line," Huffaker said. "They also help you think about how to bring actions into better alignment with your values. How can you turn your actions into a great Story of Fact?"

Two other kinds of stories—Stories of Possibility and Stories of Fear and Anxiety, provide structure for imagining both positive and negative futures. "Stories of Possibility can help you envision the next dimension of your business, or capture ingenious ideas and solutions," Robertson explained. "Stories of Fear and Anxiety give you a way to reveal anxieties and give them words, releasing tension and opening a path to dialogue."

The Story Plotter can be a grid for thinking reflectively about the emotional connections that are forged in our stores and retold in our stories. The tales told in the final workshop echoed many conversations that had taken place throughout the conference—during walks in Central Park, while comparing member-owner messaging, and when foraging for New York City pleasures. Now we had a taxonomy for them.

As always at Marketing Matters, we connected with peers, made rich and compelling confessions of both successes and mistakes, and filled out the details of the daily lives of our co-ops. We conjured strategies to build more authenticity and value into what we do, speaking directly to the needs and concerns of diverse stakeholders. We came home with buckets of cool marketing implements, too: find more of them in the sidebar on page 11. ■

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