

BY PAUL HAZEN

# Reaching the Next Generation



[Below: excerpts from a column in Cooperative Business Journal (Sept./Oct. 2011) by Paul Hazen, who is president and CEO of the National Cooperative Business Association.]

Hazen recently announced he will soon step down from his position after 25 years of leadership and dedicated service to cooperatives. Food co-ops and many others are indebted to Paul Hazen—who believed that there is a cooperative solution to meet every need. —D.G.]

Young people are hungry for co-ops, even if they don't always know it. And with the United Nations' declaration that 2012 is the International Year of Cooperatives (IYC), we have a chance to address that lack of knowledge.

Cooperatives must tap into the growing desire for ethics and sustainability that is now common on campus. When young people finally grasp the reality—and the potential—of co-ops, they often get excited, and sometimes they are hooked for life. Reaching out to young people must happen at every level, from global initiatives down to your own co-op's marketing efforts.

The youth of the world are looking for something like the cooperative movement, and the movement as a whole must let them know that we take them seriously if we want them to take us seriously. Co-ops must articulate how we can transform our communities in whatever way is authentic to those communities. We must go deeper and cultivate the interest of the next generation. Co-ops are a diverse movement, so not everyone will have the same message. But we all need to have a message of some sort.

Here are some key elements for consideration as you plot your co-op's youth outreach and engagement for IYC:

First, you must have something interesting to share. This means both holding events that

are likely to attract “a younger crowd” and living your principles in everyday operations.

Secondly, you must share your news. Kids these days communicate intensely through social media, and if our co-ops don't tweet and post to Facebook, we might very well be overlooked. It is essential to do this with focus, as a presence must be built up gradually through persistent two-way communication.

At the same time, we have a great opportunity to complement social media with formal educational channels. We must insert cooperatives into the curriculum at all levels, and address the serious lack of attention paid to the cooperative business model. There should really not be a single high-school graduate—let alone MBA candidate—who is not familiar

with co-ops.

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I have built many connections over the course of my career, and they serve me well in a leadership role in which I must bring a large and diverse movement together. At the same time, I realize that my age is a liability. The future of cooperation is not something that

I'm likely to discern on my own. That vision is more likely to come out of youthful enthusiasm and cooperative engagement between generations.

As always, our hope is the generation that comes after us. They will have to live with the consequences of our economic situation for longer than we will. They also have had less time to get used to the status quo and are therefore better able to think outside the box. Youthful enthusiasm may need to be occasionally tempered with worldly experience, but neither can really succeed without the other.

If we don't seize this opportunity, not only do we lose our best hope at finding managers, staff and board members to replace the current generation. We also run the risk of allowing another generation to grow up in disillusionment, caught in the belief that there is no economic alternative to a system that is showing its weakness more every year. ■

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