

Solutions

Volume 4, No. 3

Summer 2004

Emerging Systems in Our Sector

BY PATRICIA CUMBIE

In Natalie Goldberg's book *Writing Down the Bones*, she writes that when you bake a cake you have ingredients—flour, sugar, eggs, milk—but putting them in a bowl and mixing them up doesn't mean you have a cake. You have goop. You have to add some kind of energy (heat) to finish it. The resulting product is something utterly transformed from the raw ingredients.

As cooperators work to create new systems for collaboration in the food co-op sector, the makings for something really good are now being assembled. In April 2004, members of the regional Co-op Grocers Association's voted to reorganize as one entity into the National Co-op Grocers Association (NCGA). It's an important step in the evolution of food cooperators' commitment to working together—but the work has really just begun. The "cake" is not finished yet.

"We need to think about our sector's development in stages," said Marilyn Scholl, CDS consultant who worked with the NCGA on the reorganization plan. She cited a study by the University of Wisconsin Extension about multi-community collaboration, and how the sharing of resources occurs across a spectrum of partnerships that range from simple elemental networks to formal collaborative structures that include policies and procedures, as well as a significant commitment of resources.

"Each region is coming together at different stages of development," said Holly Jarvis, NCGA's board president. "Some are maturing and others are getting started taking collaboration to the next level. Now there is momentum and opportunity that didn't exist before. The process of getting to the vote led us to



feeling inspired and excited about the possibility before us."

Robynn Shrader, NCGA executive director believes one of the strengths food co-ops have is the foundation for collaboration created by the regional associations. "Food co-ops have been practicing collaboration in very successful ways, and are familiar with what can be achieved by taking it to the next level."

At this stage in the NCGA's development, resources are focused on helping co-ops operate better to meet the goal of "thriving retail food co-ops." But it's not an all-or-nothing situation, according to Jarvis. "If NCGA's vision was only operations, that's not going to carry us very far," she said. As the food co-op system develops it is critical to involve the many stakeholders: managers, boards, members. Scholl concurred, "There needs to be a balanced focus on the most critical relationships."

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Co-op Creators

"A viable neighborhood is a community; and a viable community is made up of neighbors who cherish and protect what they have in common."

—Wendell Berry

Wendell Berry defines a viable community as a place where the common good is protected, and this is manifested economically through equitable and charitable business practices. According to Berry, a community focused on sustainability will seek to apply these principles not only to its local community, but extend them to regional and global communities.

In this issue we examine the meaning of greater collaboration in the food co-op sector. Systems are being built to enhance the strengths of the whole and uphold the integrity co-ops bring to the marketplace on behalf of consumers. A very exciting dialogue is beginning that starts to answer the questions about how food co-ops can do this most effectively.

Cooperators are seeking ways to meet shared needs locally that take into account "neighbors" who might not even be next door. As Brattleboro board president Mark Goehring recently asked his board: When it comes to having a sustainable community, are we creators or consumers? "We determined it was much more exciting to create something rather than buy something," he said. Read more about how this board and other organizations have set about designing a new food co-op community.

—Patricia Cumbie

Our Mission

CDS is dedicated to building and strengthening cooperative businesses by providing consulting, training and development services.

CDS includes a network of independent consulting professionals experienced in all aspects of developing food cooperatives. CDS consultants have worked on over 500 projects and will tailor their services to fit your needs and deliver results.

Expansion and Growth of Cooperatives

CDS provides a full range of services to assist your cooperative in growing your business and in the planning and implementation of expansion/relocation projects.

Leadership Development

CDS works to support and strengthen the leadership team—governance and management. Our work builds organizational alignment and enhances the working relationship between board and management.

Improving Performance

CDS identifies areas for improvement and develops strategies for results in organizational and business improvements.

Strengthening the Cooperative Advantage

CDS believes that the cooperative difference is your competitive advantage. We help co-ops build member investment and loyalty. We contribute to co-ops benefiting from collaborative networks while retaining local ownership and control.

Emerging Systems *continued from page 1*

As food cooperators move forward, there are things that leaders have suggested are areas of focus that would help develop those relationships that build the system. First, there needs to be “an influx of intentionality,” according to Scholl. What do food co-ops want to intentionally affect, and then plan for it, give it a time frame, allocate the resources for it, and establish the collaborative networks that can realize those goals.

“It’s important to keep our purpose clear,” Scholl said. “We are independent co-ops collaborating for the greater good, not trying to be the same or identical. Each co-op creates its own experience. We need to have a system that helps us do that more efficiently.”

Ron Shaffer, community development economist with the University of Wisconsin Extension noted in his work that “collaboration involves strong linkages among members.” Part of doing that is the necessity of “delegating considerable autonomy to the collaboration.” He argues that real alliances involve “more intense” linkages than may have been the tradition for groups, and that collaboration implies a “shared destiny.”

Some cooperators have suggested that ways to achieve full collaboration in food co-ops will be the ability to:

- support the system by being generous with resources, especially in finding ways to meaningfully help other co-ops
- believe that the success of all is critical to the success of the individual co-op
- involve others in contributing to the vision

Supporting collaboration surely means putting up dollars, but beyond that, the need for flexibility is a big part of building support for the emerging systems. Being able to listen to other points of view, dropping turf battles in favor of compromising in a collaborative way by taking a look at what’s good for the sector, all contribute to that aspect of cooperation.

“We have the potential for far reaching impact on food, community and even categories of social problems with an effective collaboration in communities if we are able to see beyond our own limited part of it,” said Scholl.

Jarvis noted that food co-ops have been seriously challenged by competition since

Congratulations Honored Cooperators Stephen Wolfe and Marilyn Scholl



CDS consultants Marilyn and Stephen were given awards at this year’s CCMA conference in recognition of their vision, dedication and work that has contributed to the success of many cooperatives.

1993—competition that has only intensified. She feels the need for collaboration acutely in her role as general manager of Food Front Co-op in Portland, Or. Food co-op market share all around the country has decreased—and a benefit of working together is the ability to strategically develop co-ops in communities that need and want them, as well as effectively compete.

A more aggressive approach to food co-op growth is the focus of an internal study by CDS as they look at a potential model for co-op development that is effective, efficient and profitable, so the onus of co-op development does not fall on isolated, or individual communities alone.

Although the NCGA reorganization is one step in a long-term process, there is currently renewed enthusiasm for what food co-ops can accomplish together. “We continue to have a sense of hope that co-ops can be viable and successful, and that with the cooperative values including self-help, democracy, equality and honesty the world can be a better place. We have to believe in our success and that it matters. This creates and sustains the sparks,” said Scholl. So let the bake-off begin!

CASE STUDY

Brattleboro Defines Sustainability: “Working with Our Neighbors”

When the Brattleboro Food Co-op in Brattleboro, Vermont had an opportunity to potentially move their store's location outside of downtown, the board engaged the membership's opinion. "People spoke eloquently about the co-op in terms of social and community issues, not about the food," said Mark Goehring, president of Brattleboro Co-op's board of directors. "When we reflected on that as a board we realized we really wanted to look outward and make connections to our community."

That led to a year-long process of identifying what having a "sustainable cooperative economy" meant to the Brattleboro Food Co-op. The board had comfortably evolved their board policy process, operations were running smoothly, and the board cast about for what was next. The common denominator was that all the board members were passionate about contributing to the community. "To do this work was very new and exhilarating for the board. How do we work together and improve and build community?"

Synergistic happenstance helped the board achieve clarity on the issue—a CGANE board meeting in October 2003 spurred Brattleboro to invite attendees to their co-op's board retreat in February 2004 centered on the topic of working together for a sustainable co-op economy. "Because of the CGANE

meeting it was an invitation to be involved. We realized we wouldn't be successful without [the other co-ops]."

Goehring describes how co-op board members made a "mind shift" from thinking about the co-op as a singular entity to thinking about the co-op as a member of a community beyond geographic boundaries. One of the things that grew out of the February meeting was that not only are the co-ops part of a larger community, but that the success of one contributes to the success of all.

Goehring noted how the start up co-op River Valley Market in Northampton, New Hampshire affects the success of all the co-ops in the region. "If there's a local co-op in New Hampshire it helps all of us. That changes the kind of support we might think of providing, and not just altruistically, but knowing that we all benefit if they thrive."

The boards in the area are interested in taking the idea of a sustainable cooperative economy to the next level. A few of the co-ops have adopted ends policies through their board governance process to support the work. "We're putting this out as a 25, 50, 100-year vision," said Goehring. "We want to diversify the role and expression of co-ops.

That's our intention.

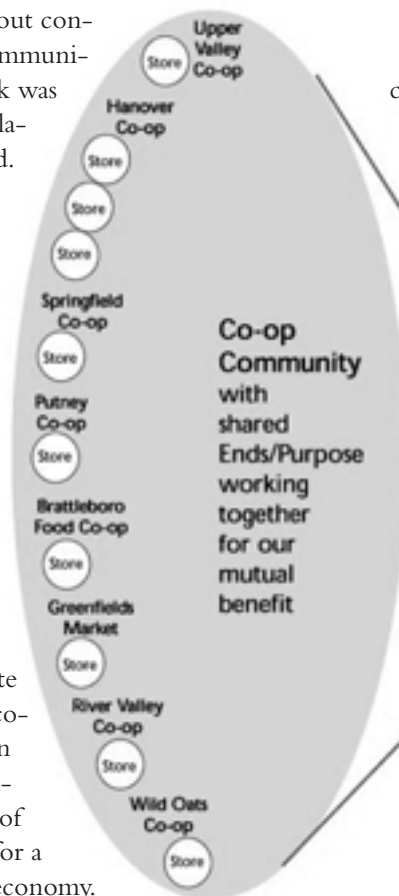
We are working on answering how we fit in with our neighbors, and with them turn back to our communities together to see how we can improve them."

Clear View

(Compelling Long Range Vision)

25-50-100 year plan:

Create a cooperative economy in our region where commerce and environmental restoration are synonymous.



CDS Welcomes Janda Grove



Cooperative Development Services is happy to announce that Janda Grove will be working

with us to enhance the performance of Wellness departments in food cooperatives.

Janda has been successful in a variety of industry settings. She has managed purchasing and merchandising in a variety of venues, including new store setups for Wedge Co-op, Lakewinds Natural Foods, and other stores in the Twin Cities contributing to significant growth in sales and margin while controlling labor and improving turns. She has also worked both at the distributor level, and as a natural products broker.

Currently she works as a trainer and consultant for various co-ops and co-operative organizations. She is a trained herbalist, and worked many years in retail herb and supplement sales and has managed numerous HBC sets and resets.

Janda is passionate about using visual tools and merchandising to make co-ops more appealing and easier to shop. She understands the challenges of retail and can use her experience to help your co-op achieve the results you want.

Janda can work with your store in a manner that best suits your needs. She has various approaches to deal with specific solutions that your Wellness department needs: sales growth, better merchandising (product/category placement, pricing, promotion), margin enhancement, labor control, expansion/relocation planning and staff training.

To contact Janda Grove, please call 612-377-4671 or email her at Jjgrove@aol.com.

The logo for CDS (Cooperative Development Services) features the letters 'CDS' in a bold, white, sans-serif font, centered within a dark red rectangular box.

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