

Mighty Marketers

BY ANNIE HOY



I've been at this gig so long that I can remember when there wasn't National Co-op Grocers (NCG) and there wasn't *Marketing Matters*. Marketing and membership people first began meeting in a cramped basement conference room the day before the annual Consumer Cooperative Management Conference. We've come a very long way since then.

NCG supports marketing and membership staff fully now, with shared resources, a co-brand, a common lexicon, and one of the best conferences around. NCG recognizes the importance of well-trained and empowered marketing and membership staff. Word is getting around—this year, in Boise, when asked if this was their first *Marketing Matters* conference, nearly half of the 120+ attendees raised their hands!

Each year *Marketing Matters* has so much inspiration that the challenge is picking one or two of the best ideas to implement when arriving back at our home co-ops. My co-op has embraced so fully some of the freely shared ideas that most of our managers think we came up with them—I'd call that a good thing.

For me, the most important new knowledge I brought back this year was about the market's new normal, based on the excellent presentation from NCG's Dave Olson. The new normal is the increasing pressure food cooperatives are feeling from competitors entering a food world that once was mostly ours. They're bigger and well-financed, and they're pulling a good number of our shoppers away from us because of price, convenience, and just plain curiosity. Data shows that our usually loyal customers and co-op owners routinely shop in at least two to three other stores.

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Over the years, co-op marketers have become fluent in Hartman Group research that segments our market into three kinds of shoppers: core, mid-level and periphery. Recent studies find that our most loyal core and mid-level owners and customers really don't have to shop primarily with us. The policies, pricing strategies, and marketing plans that are based on the old normal won't work anymore. Food co-ops have to shift if we are to rebound, and it's going to be a dogfight, internally and externally. We must become better grocers in order to compete.

At *Marketing Matters*, we were offered some great strategies for attracting new customers—especially mid-level shoppers, the segment with the most potential to bring food co-op sales up from the doldrums. Panels and other presenters shared their success stories, and we all got ideas to borrow, adapt, or just steal outright.

I would be remiss if I didn't also mention the importance of down time at *Marketing Matters*, when some of the best collaboration and information sharing happens. Whether over beers, donuts, whiskey, or food, the bonding and camaraderie builds among attendees. Those of us with many years in this business enjoy the wide-eyed optimism and enthusiasm of the newbies. We anticipate continuing close friendships and giving advice as well as learning new tricks from those with less silver hair. Next year, we'll hear new success stories and receive another inoculation of marketing goodness—see you then! □