Membership Growth Strategies for Startups

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Gaining members quickly and efficiently is a major hurdle for most startup co-ops. A co-op is selling a dream when it has no store, minimal (if any) staff, and, when organizing in areas that don't have other food co-ops, no credible examples to refer to. This can make membership growth slow and painful. Nevertheless, some startups have had robust membership growth.

Suzi Carter and I, in a project funded by Food Co-op Initiative, analyzed membership growth strategies of some of the more successful startups and also looked at some community organizing methods, in order to identify key concepts and ideas that startups can use to build membership more quickly and easily.

Our first step was to analyze efforts that weren't successful. Some of the unproductive actions we identified were:
- lnundation of potential members with too much, unfocused information;
- lack of a cohesive plan for membership growth;
- failure to train the people leading the membership growth efforts;
- inability to engage the community and build momentum
- lack of accountability; and
- poor communication, both within the membership growth team and with the co-op members and community.

Perhaps it doesn't need stating that groups that struggled unsuccessfully to grow membership also didn't seem to be having much fun.

Success features
Many successful groups shared some key features:
1) **They had clear and compelling messages that resonated with their community**. Their messages were authentic and upbeat, and these groups became great at articulating them because they did it over and over. They evolved their messages for different audiences. They developed these messages by working together to build a vision for how their co-op will make their community better, and they practiced these messages—a lot.
2) **They broadcast and targeted simultaneously.** While building broader awareness of their co-op through tabling, group emails, social media, posters, etc., they also identified and recruited specific people to join the co-op. Such people often were influential in the community or provided linkages into groups that shared values or interests with the co-op. These co-ops also made sure they had a system to gather and track contact information—as their broadcast audience kept growing, they were able to track and follow up with people they had targeted.
3) **They elicited before they solicited**—meaning that before asking people to join, they listened, found common ground, and shared the co-op's vision, thereby building a stronger connection to the co-op. Heart, head, and hands: build an emotional connection and make a wise rationale before asking people to act by joining the co-op.
4) **They set clear goals with precise deadlines.** "30 members in 30 days!" is a lot more exciting and achievable than, "We'd like to get some more members by spring," both for the community and the people working on growing the co-op's membership. Kiwi fruit and teddy bears should be fuzzy. Membership goals should not be.
5) **They met people where they are**. This can be and should be interpreted in multiple ways. The primary concept is that people respond to ideas in different ways and at many different speeds, and rarely does anyone become a member the first time they hear about the co-op. Instead, interest grows over time and with repeated exposure to the co-op. One aspect of meeting people where they are is providing different ways of interacting with the co-op that allow engagement wherever people are in their awareness of and comfort with the co-op. Over time, people have

Level of participation	Motivation	Participatory activity	Benefits to the co-op
Membership	Inclusion	One-on-one meeting Buys member share	Grows membership Potential to increase participation
Increasingly engaged	Curiosity	Engages through social media Attends a house party	Builds trust in and attachment to the co-op
Tentative	Surprise: "A co-op? What is it?"	Visits a table at an event Provides email address Picks up a brochure	Creates awareness Grows email list (for later prospecting)