

Telling Stories

BY ELLEN MICHEL

How often have you heard it: “We don’t do a good enough job of telling our stories.” Like references to “the new normal” or the current never-ending chaos of political intrigue, there’s truth to the claim—at the same time, it runs the risk of limiting us, becoming an excuse or a cliché. What will it take to do a better storytelling job? And whose stories do we pay attention to?

This issue of *Cooperative Grocer* is, like each of them, filled with news about food co-ops and the communities that build and support them. These are telling stories: they give us an overview of some of the larger efforts at work in our retail niche. We’ve focused here on development—retail expansions and remodels, and the annual Up & Coming conference for startup food co-ops. We also offer advice about how to cultivate strong leadership in times of organizational stress. Good timing, right?—given the even newer normal of intensified upheaval out there.

We’ve reported here on positive efforts, with a list of some (but not all) the successful startup food co-ops of recent years. Dill Pickle has a beautiful new location in Chicago, having paced themselves from almost the beginning to expand their footprint. Allie Metzner writes about Expo West, where the National Co+op Grocer Climate Collaboration Awards were given to some of those co-ops and food producers who work hardest to offset climate change. David Thompson outlines the 2018 achievements of the Twin Pines Cooperative Foundation, administrator of the Cooperative Community Funds used by many food co-ops to invest in co-op development and support local giving.

Each of these articles is just the tip of the iceberg, suggesting the many stories, anecdotes, and relationships associated with those achievements. If you dig deeper—on the web, the phone, in conversation, or within our relevant archive at Cooperative Grocer Network (CGN) you can further unpack some of those back stories. Most importantly—you can tell your own.



The CGN board of directors hunkered down in Milwaukee in March, the day and a half before Up & Coming, to spend time strategizing about the future of this organization. At the end of our retreat we toured the Outpost Natural Foods stores, and on Saturday some of us heard Outpost GM Pam Mehnert describe the ways her multi-store co-op remains visible, viable, and strong—maintaining a strong internal culture in the second most competitive grocery environment in the U.S.

That work begins with carefully sizing up the competition (“did she just say 19 Aldis in the Milwaukee metro area?!”) and finds completion on the store floor, where promotions and merchandising are maintained with meticulous attention to customer appreciation and detail.

Lisa Malmorowski, director of brand and store development, and Diana Schmidt, merchandising and promotions manager, described the many ways they work with the entire Outpost team to keep the store experience fresh and engaging.

Diana described the vertical “ribboning” they use to bring blocks of color to displays of fruits and vegetables or to promote cross-merchandising or temporary specials. Outpost staff develop recipes to feature in *Graze*, the co-op’s quarterly magazine: their love of food is evident and real. There’s no better place to look for an example of a co-op that knows how to tell its story well: with signage, civic engagement, and mission-driven innovations.

If you are interested in food co-ops of all sizes all across the country (the world!), you can help preserve our common cooperative institutional memory. Consider becoming more involved with CGN. If you are able to attend CCMA 2018 on May 31-June 2 (another great place for unpacking grocery stories), look for our table there and come prepared to tell a tale of your own. And here’s a thought: consider a run for the CGN board of directors. Our smart, thoughtful team of directors from across the country share a passion for our profession and the well-being of food co-ops. Join us when we head back to Milwaukee for Up & Coming 2019!

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