

Is 'Green' a Cooperative Principle?

BY PAULA GILBERTSON

Green is all the buzz, and it's been growing louder for some time. But just where does "green" fit into the cooperative principles? Perhaps it is the seventh cooperative principle, concern for community: "Cooperatives work for the sustainable development of their communities through policies approved by their members." Perhaps "green" is an overlay for all responsive and responsible businesses in the year 2009. It was a revolution when we were first involved, but we share it with everyone now.

Our consumers and members expect care for the Earth and efforts toward sustainability from every business to one degree or another, and sometimes they are even willing to pay more for it. We need to do our part as guardians of the integrity of green principles and claims. We can do this in part through enacting the fifth cooperative principle, "education, training, and information," helping consumers to sort through the claims, the statistics, and desired outcomes.

Our first job as leaders should be to educate each other and our organizations to determine the honesty and depth of green claims, create the ability to judge value, and help our consumers sort through the maze of information.

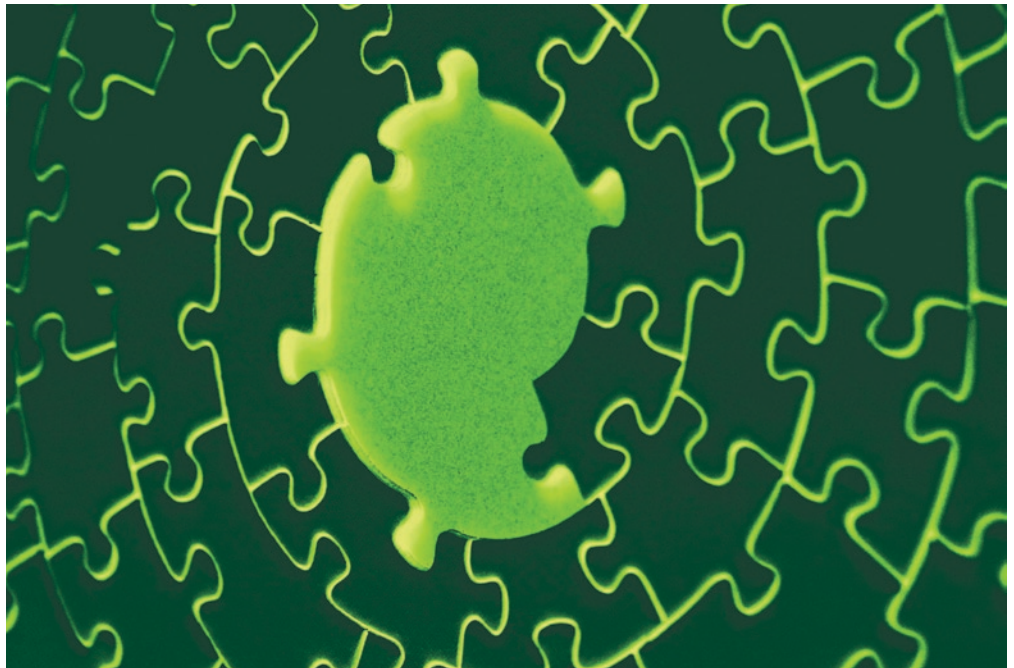
Know your ends

While at Linden Hills Co-op, I often turned to the organization's Ends policies for direction. I had them posted on my office wall and in several places throughout the store, including the board meeting room. Reviewing these policies allowed me as the general manager to evaluate how we—the staff, the management team and the board—balanced our everyday operations with the world we are trying to create.

Linden Hills Co-op:

- Provides and promotes healthful choices for its members and shoppers.
- Provides, uses and promotes Earth-friendly, sustainable products.
- Encourages activism on sustainability, health and nutrition-related issues.
- Builds community within Linden Hills and neighboring communities.

I used these statements as a guidepost and at times a conversation starter: How and where does an idea fit into our ends? If we do this project, implement this idea, follow this path, how will the world and the Linden Hills neighborhood become better places? The engagement of staff, managers, board members and consumers



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often educated me in how the general population was thinking on a particular topic. At Linden Hills, we learned to use this discussion to explore possible options and came to see that the process is as important as the product.

In spring 2002, our local electric provider (not a cooperative) began offering "windsourse" energy as an option. For a seemingly slight price increase, a business or residence could purchase and help to green the grid with energy from wind, in 100Kw increments. This option seemed promising, but one of the unspoken balancing points of the cooperative's Ends policies is to examine costs. After a little number crunching, we learned that the co-op would incur an additional cost of approximately \$8,000 per year at the current "windsourse" rates. While I had decided to sign up for this option at my home, it did not seem wise to do so for the store.

I began to think about what else I could do for less than \$8,000 per year to help the planet. I went to the three Rs: reduce, reuse, recycle. Reducing energy comes first—what could we do to lower our usage? I called our local utility company and asked for their help in the form of an energy audit. The results indicated we had some options, with varied paybacks.

My next call was to our electrical contractor, who looked through the options with me. We decided which ones to cost out and calculated the paybacks of each. We had already implemented an awareness/education campaign through our staff forum, monthly meetings and some in-store signage. This also generated suggestions from staff, including a few really big ideas—installing cooler covers on spots we had overlooked, setback thermostats in a few more separate areas, and an air curtain over our receiving door—and little things like replacing the gaskets on walk-in cooler doors.

We had already rewired the freezer and cooler door heaters to cycle on and off rather than being on 24/7. We changed the store lighting to t-8 florescent tubes and ballasts, and we signed up for a cost rebate on our ability to shed power during peak times with our on-site generator.

The energy saving list included a few other options, several of which had pretty short paybacks: motion-sensitive lights installed in low-

Improving your store energy practices

usage areas; switching out some cooler bulbs and ballasts; display lighting changed to lower-cost/lower-heat output florescent; walk-in cooler adjustments; increasing the heating system filter replacement schedule. This all took four months to implement and saved us about \$4,000 over 18 months.

Materials, technology and lifestyle changes

We all have the incentive of cost savings and lower energy usage as rewards. Try to simplify by breaking down choices and decisions within your store into three basic components: materials, technology and lifestyle changes.

Materials

Environmental impact: Are there products that use fewer toxic chemicals or produce lower harmful emissions during their manufacture?

Health: Are the materials healthy for people, animals and plants?

Availability: Do local items require less effort and expense?

Maintenance: Do some materials require minimal or less upkeep than others?

Durability: If it lasts longer, will less frequent replacement be necessary?

Sustainability: Can it be produced without depleting a natural supply?

Renewability: Can items be harvested repeatedly?

Recyclability: Can it be broken down and used again?

Simplicity: Does it require minimal processing before use?

Efficiency: Does it consume less energy in production and use?

Technology

Technology changes continually. Are there new or upcoming ways to meet your needs that didn't exist the last time you took stock of your green practices?

General areas of exploration should include current and future changes for your electrical, plumbing, heating and ventilation, and cooling systems, as well as insulating, cooking and washing.

Energy consumption: This is always a good place to start; use your local utility company or your favorite electrician as a resource.

Reevaluate resource procurement: We all like to purchase close to home and use the businesses or companies that support the same environmental practices that our stores support. Set aside time during the budgeting process or midyear financial review as a reminder to evaluate your choices and points of influence.

Reduce consumption: Turn it off, insulate, repair,

replace, service, maintain or do without. Do you really need to print that?

Encourage a green culture: Not only does this help you to think about all the little and big things that could be done to help the planet, it helps morale when staff members are empowered to make changes.

Recycle: Beyond recycling, remind staff and members about opportunities like Freemarket, craigslist, or one of your own—becoming a Special Olympics drop site for cell phones, for example.

Lifestyle changes

Can changing your life be as simple as changing your habits? Purchasing choices are decisions made everyday by many people within your organization. Does everyone have the same understanding?

Ask your accountant and utility company whether there are possible tax advantages or rebates.

Be aware of options for eliminating and reducing waste—compost, food waste repurposing—and lead others in this effort locally. Capture water for repurposing, create rainwater gardens, and use gray water for irrigating.

Examine your cleaning routines and supplies—are there greener options? Explore creating or providing second chances for materials—offer packing peanuts to customers or your local packaging store. Use craigslist or your local equivalent of Freecycle when possible.

These are just some of the questions you and your staff should be asking yourselves when making decisions on purchasing, policy, and best practices. Ideally, the co-op's culture will adopt and practice questioning-mind techniques on an ongoing basis.

While the new-wave food cooperatives by their very origins have always been known or thought of by their core members as being sustainable and locally based businesses, sometimes

we aren't even able to live up to the ethical standards that we espouse. This may be due to being in a leased space, a general lack of capital or even just that we are operating in a highly competitive field.

In order to be industry leaders and innovators, we'll need to keep investing in exploratory and at times risky ventures—and we will need to find creative ways to get things done. How does this all balance with the need to be careful custodians of our members' resources?

I don't claim to know the answers, but I do know we can all continue questioning, challenging, adopting the newest best practices, and improving on what we learn by sharing that knowledge with others in the cooperative sector.

That then brings us around to our seventh cooperative principle, concern for community, for our cooperative community, and the health of planet. Yes, I believe that "green" is a cooperative principle—or rather, it's several of our principles. ■

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