

Reaching Out at Moscow Food Co-op

Tapping into the passion and energy of members

BY CAROL SPURLING

Cooking and wellness classes. Taste fairs. Farm and field days. Store tours for local schoolchildren. All are familiar and important outreach tools for food co-ops.

But just as it's important to change endcap displays often, it's necessary to refresh outreach programs regularly. Evaluate what's working and what's not. Create new programs to meet new community needs and to tap into the passion and energy of your members.

Tweaking existing programs that are not traditionally considered "outreach," such as the member newsletter or charitable giving, can also provide a lot of outreach bang for the buck.

The Moscow Food Co-op in Moscow, Idaho, has long had membership responsibilities assigned to someone on staff, but outreach efforts were fragmented. In 2008, as part of our membership's strategic planning and visioning process, we created an outreach and membership coordinator position.

As the first to fill this position, I've learned how rewarding outreach can be and how it differs from marketing or advertising. Outreach responds to needs, it doesn't seek to create them. It helps people lead fuller, more meaningful lives; it is meant to help people plug into the community. Most importantly, outreach is the most visible means by which we differentiate ourselves from a regular grocery store. Outreach is how we walk the talk.

The best outreach programs satisfy on many levels. Our new Farm Advocacy Co-op Team (FACTs) volunteers create recipes using local and in-season produce, our kitchen cooks them, and the team actively samples these dishes in the produce department on our high-traffic days, handing out recipes and information about our producers.

This works because our farmers and staff are too busy to do this outreach work themselves; customers love samples and are more willing



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uled on the heels of Michael Pollan's speech at a nearby university, packed the theatre. Afterwards, the excitement and optimism about our capacity to change the food system was palpable. Of course, it was also gratifying to see moviegoers exiting the theatre and heading to the co-op's produce and meat departments.

"Mad City Chickens" inspired our urban chicken coop tour last fall, which garnered us a slew of positive media coverage. Six co-op owners (myself included) volunteered to show off

to try the produce; our kitchen gets new recipes to use; and our volunteers get to cook and be social for a cause. It's a winner all around.

Using volunteers for outreach activities, by the way, has revitalized our volunteer program and really beefed up our outreach efforts. Now we can put up posters, attend wellness and sustainability fairs with our traveling display, attract new businesses to our business partner program, and organize more classes, usually with just a few emails to coordinate our volunteers.

Our Good Food Film Series and its related book club also educate the community about food issues. We've arranged with our downtown nonprofit theatre for a monthly screening, normally on a Thursday, when they would otherwise be closed. We pay reduced rent for the facility plus their staffing costs, and then receive all of the ticket sales proceeds.

We are able to bring great food-related films like "Dirt!," "Home-grown," "All in This Tea," and "Mad City Chickens" to town, options that the theatre otherwise couldn't afford to schedule. Our January screening of "Fresh!," sched-



their chickens and their coops; the food co-op provided the snacks and beverages for each host to offer; and ticket holders were provided with a map for their self-conducted tour. The tour sold out; we even had people drive from several hours away to attend.

Coincidentally, the city was in the process of revising its urban poultry ordinance at the same time—so those of us involved in planning the coop tour were invited to help craft the new ordinance, and several city council members came along on the tour. We hope this icebreaker has ushered in a new era of cooperation between us and the local government. At the very least, a lot more people are aware that backyard chickens are legal in our community, and they associate that with our co-op.

Parents of young children appreciate our free Co-op Kids! activities offered twice a month in the deli area or outside in nice weather. A team of volunteers organizes a simple activity for preschoolers, and the co-op provides the materials and snacks.

Now we're adding a new dimension to Co-op Kids—the Mamas and Papas group—for expecting parents and parents with newborns. The need for moral support during this life-changing time is huge; why not encourage people to gather together (during one of our deli's slow times on a weekday morning) by offering them a free drink, product samples, and the presence of an experienced parent volunteer who has been through it? Occasionally, we bring

in special guests to speak on topics such as baby sign language, but mostly it's an informal gathering, designed to lighten the load for new parents, not add to it.

Old programs, new tricks

Endless requests for donations are a fact of life, so we embrace our role of giver, using requests as bridges to build new relationships.

Whenever possible, we don't just send money to organizations we decide to support; instead, we talk with the organization to determine which of our resources—money, food, expertise, or volunteers—would be most helpful for them. This encourages organizations to think of the co-op as a partner, not just a piggy bank.

In December, for instance, we decided to match all the contributions made to the food bank shelf in our store. But we didn't just send the participating food banks a couple cases of whatever we had as our match; we took the time to discuss their particular needs with them before making our donation.

Sometimes our giving takes the form of sponsorship of a fundraising event, especially if a meal is involved. For instance, the members of the Palouse Potters Guild make lovely handmade bowls for their annual Empty Bowls hunger

up like a purchase at the cash register. It's like having a whole counter full of collection jars, without taking up any space.

These groups must meet certain basic criteria, and in the application they are also asked to briefly discuss how their mission relates to ours. This makes the application process educational for them and for us. A volunteer committee comprised of a staff member, a board member and some participating members evaluates the applications.

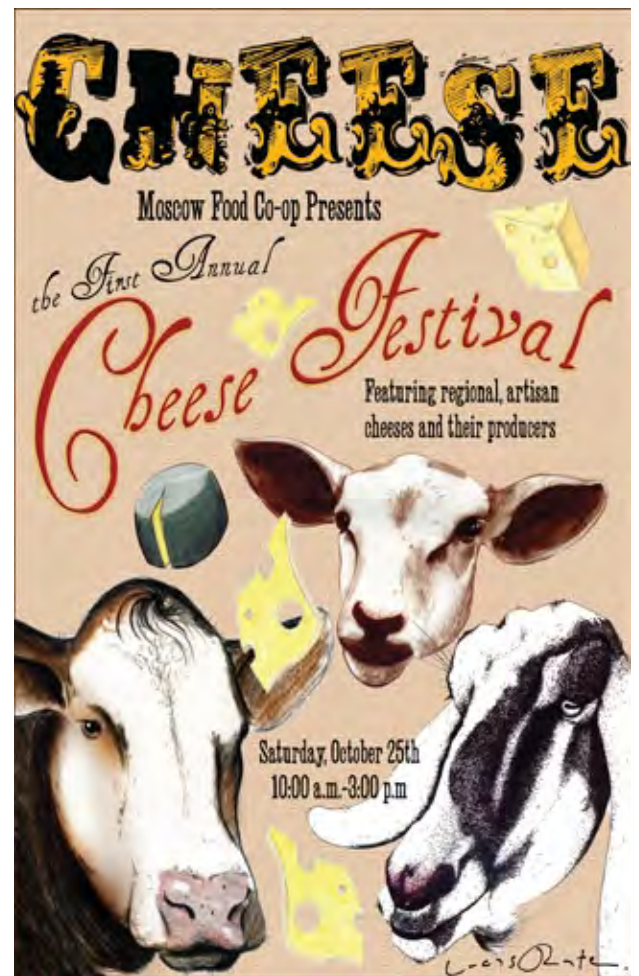
Our other charitable program, A Dime in Time, has a dual purpose: to benefit local organizations and to encourage shoppers to use cloth shopping bags and reusable coffee cups instead of paper or plastic. We give a dime refund for every reusable bag or cup used, then offer the customer the option of donating their dimes to our recipient organization of the month.

The Dime in Time program, which replaced our old 2 percent Tuesdays, has consistently awarded around \$425 each month to a local nonprofit; organizations apply and are evaluated for participation by the same volunteer committee as the Impulse Giving program. I've heard numerous times from these volunteers how much they enjoy this work. Customers, too, appreciate how the programs make every shopping trip a multi-faceted opportunity to do something good.

Twenty-five years ago, volunteers launched our monthly newsletter. Always a source of information for members, over the years, the newsletter's role has expanded to include outreach functions. Volunteers still produce most of our newsletter's most interesting content. They profile local producers, discuss special diets and provide recipes, profile our staff members and volunteers, promote alternative transportation, and discuss sustainability. Our cartoonist and illustrator and a crew of talented writers are our best advocates. Their newsletter work helps them engage with the co-op and gives them a voice in it.

We also include short articles from non-profit organizations at no charge to help them publicize their special events, programs and activities. It's a valuable and much-appreciated service that gives the many members of those organizations one more reason to feel connected to us, not to mention one more reason to pick up the newsletter.

The discounts given to newsletter volunteers are a significant expense and a point of contention. Currently, most newsletter volunteers



are awarded either a 13 or 18 percent monthly discount for their articles, recipes, artwork, or photos. We've mitigated that somewhat by restricting the newsletter's growth to its currently sustainable level and by using newsletter content to enrich our website and to simplify our marketing efforts.

Guided by our professional yet volunteer editor, it's a high-quality group effort; our recent readership survey showed that the newsletter gets read cover to cover by a significant number of people. As a way to meet community needs while also educating and engaging members, the newsletter is truly low-hanging fruit. ■

EXAMPLES SHOWN

- Poster for the Tuesday Growers Market
- Logo for A Dime in Time, through which shoppers can donate a dime to local nonprofits each time they bring a reusable bag
- Good Food Book Club flyer
- Cheese Festival poster—What began as a general celebration of artisan and farmhouse cheeses from all over has become a regionally focused event with cheesemakers from Washington, Idaho and Oregon personally sampling out their cheeses to hundreds of enthusiastic cheese lovers. Handling the crowds is the co-op's main challenge for this type of event.

relief benefit. Attendees gather for lunch, buy a bowl of soup and a piece of bread for \$15, and take home the bowl. Donating soup and bread from our kitchen and bakery is a natural way for us to participate, and we also handle the publicity side of things, so the potters can focus on making bowls.

Our Impulse Giving program allows customers to donate any amount of money at any time to our participating local nonprofits by ringing it