

A Woman's Place Is...the Co-op!

BY DAN NORDLEY

Let's see if I can man'splain this:

When it comes to food co-ops, our success will depend on giving women what they want and hoping they'll speak well about the experience.

At least that's what I've figured out (finally!) after some 40 years of watching our food co-ops evolve from counter-cultural roots. No matter what my vantage point—whether as shopper, trucker, board member, designer, publisher, or Cooperative Grocer Network manager—it's clear our food co-ops are primarily used, promoted, and led by women.

This is great, since co-ops are inherently a feminist economic model that values community, fairness, and trust as much as financial success. A more fair and honest economic model provides for more equitable economic and social transactions, and it gives us all hope for a more sustainable future for our kids.

Mothers and mothers-to-be seem especially hardwired to value what co-ops can do for the next generations. They, and the men and women who love them, are the heart and soul of our food co-ops.

Women are also the core consumer for just about every other household retailer. In her intriguing book, *Why She Buys: The New Strategy for Reaching the World's Most Powerful Consumers*, author (and 2014 presenter at the Consumer Cooperative Management Association) Bridget Brennan writes:

"It's no secret that women make or influence the majority of consumer purchasing decisions for the home—about 80 percent in the United States. Women are the primary shoppers for their households, which means they're buying not only for themselves but also for everyone else—spouses, kids, friends, family, colleagues, and often their older parents—which multiplies their buying power and influence."

It's also no secret that many companies have awakened to the market appeal of our co-op brand of building healthy communities and a sustainable environment.

Gender appeal

In describing principles of gender appeal in her book, Brennan observes:

"Generally speaking, women are drawn to products and services that make them feel like they're making the world better in some small way. Research shows that both cause marketing and 'green' campaigns find their strongest audiences in women.

"Women volunteer at higher rates than men do across all age groups and education levels. Whole Foods Market, which bases its marketing on the premise, 'Feel Good About Where You Shop,' is a textbook study in this concept. The company actively communicates with customers about its products and practices and makes people feel as if their trip to the grocery store is, among other things, contributing to their health and that of their family members; helping to improve working conditions for organic farmers; and minimizing damage to the environment. Women who may not

think twice about such things during the course of their normal routines can walk out of a Whole Foods feeling satisfied that they've done their bit for the world and for their own bodies, just by doing something as simple as buying organic meat and potatoes for dinner...

"Most companies can't take social responsibility to the level of Whole Foods, but even small efforts—such as supporting local organizations in your own community—can have a big impact on women's perceptions of your brand. And take some cues from Whole Foods, such as educating customers about where your products come from and who makes them; those are applicable to companies of every size."

Yikes! As much as we are all grimacing that Whole Foods is cited as the textbook example of social responsibility, this is an affirming example of our equitable business model, and more importantly, encouragement for co-ops to keep on leading.

In our "new normal" market environment, food co-ops are going to be increasingly challenged to compete with more locations providing our core natural foods products at lower prices. However, co-ops should have some great intrinsic advantages in authentically positioning our enterprises as the "fairest of them all" among women.

Co-op values and principles

Co-ops have a long, long tradition of commitment to core values and principles that are in full alignment with sustainability and fairness. These are cooperative values: self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, solidarity, honesty, openness, social responsibility, and caring for others.

The first four cooperative principles—open and voluntary membership, democratic governance, consumer ownership, and autonomy—create a profoundly different corporate and governance structure. Our inclusive membership, each member with one vote, elects a board with no financial or personal conflicts of interest to direct the business in a way that generates common wealth for a community of stakeholders who use it the most: consumer owners, workers, neighborhood residents, and partner suppliers. This is the textbook blueprint for a regenerative economy.

The second set of cooperative principles guides our practice:

- Education: our direct communications, marketing, and merchandising are crafted to empower our consumers to make right choices rather than exploiting their ignorance or impulsiveness to buy what they don't need or can't afford.
- Cooperation among co-ops: when we can, we don't compete, we join together to preserve resources and increase the opportunities we have to work together.
- Concern for community: Besides the obvious appeal to women of making life better for everyone, this principle underscores that the co-op recognize its community as a diverse and multi-stakeholder field of membership. "In women's culture, the entire world is a community, where people connect with one another to help others realize their potential inside and out, and to make life happier for everyone." (Brennan)

With what other community concerns can co-ops engage and show leadership? How about racial and economic equity? Community economic development? Health care? Or, affordable child care—now that's something our co-op parents (and co-op employees) could get excited about!

Co-op leadership

In *Why She Buys*, Brennan cites figures (from 2009) illustrating the gender gap in business. Men occupy 97 percent of all Fortune 1,000 CEO positions, two-thirds of top chief marketing officer positions, and nearly all the head creative director roles at the major advertising agencies. Men hold 85 percent of clout titles (those higher than vice president) in the Fortune 500.

On the other hand, the national leadership of the food co-ops and allied co-ops is pretty much flipped from this pattern. Some examples, in alphabetical order of acronyms:

CDS Consulting Co-op: Marilyn Scholl

Co-op Fund of New England: Rebecca Dunn

Cooperative Grocer Network: Ellen Michel

Independent Natural Foods Retailers Association: Corinne Shindelar

National Co+op Grocers: Robynn Shrader

NCBA/CLUSA: Judy Ziewacz

Principle Six: Allison Hermes

Shared Capital Cooperative: Christina Jennings

UW Center for Cooperatives: Anne Reynolds

Although I do not have stats on individual stores, I'd bet dollars to tofu that food co-op general managers and middle-management are majority female.

That's additional evidence to indicate our co-ops should be appealing to women consumers. It suggests we are in a unique position to to craft the story to better-world consumers (the target market?) that we can be TRUSTED to do the FAIR thing for her and her COMMUNITY. It's what co-ops do and who we are. Structure does count, and co-ops are requisitely structured to live the promise outlined in our principles. Our co-op's promise can't be overruled when speculative markets complain.

So, one key strategy to spreading our story is equipping women such as Laura Zabel, a member-owner at Seward Co-op, with experiences that she wants to talk about with her networks and, even better, in social media posts (like the one in the sidebar) that revel in the TRUST she has in her food co-op.

Here's one more quote from *Why She Buys* that reinforces the strategy of equipping our core constituency with a great story of our co-ops:

"Women can help grow a flat industry. If you're in a product category or industry that's hit a plateau, focusing on women may help bring in new customers and revenues. Women are key to the next generation of customers. If you want children and teenagers to participate in an activity, get their mothers excited about it. Women's participation has a multiplier effect in terms of people and purchases."

As our competition scrambles to position itself as sustainable enterprises using marketing speak and signage, co-ops live it every day with our structure, practice, and leadership. That's our co-op advantage for creating the kind of trust that our core members, and retail's prize consumers, want to talk about. And women don't have to feel it, they can own it. □

Editor's note: For more on women in retail, see this Co-operative News report: <http://www.thenews.coop/107774/news/co-operatives/co-op-support-women-retail/>]

Co-op: "Exception to the rule"

I'm really annoying about my charitable giving. I have lots of opinions, personal connections, and rules about how I give my (limited) dollars to causes I believe in.

For example:

1) no giving at the door;

2) no giving on the phone;

3) no giving to those tenacious youngsters in vests with their clipboards on the street;

4) no rounding up or adding on or giving tiny amounts at the register...except...

Except, I've been rounding up every time I check out at Seward Co-op and they ask if I want to support the nonprofit they have chosen for that month's SEED program. Sometimes I've never heard of the organization. Sometimes I don't even know what the organization is! I am impervious to guilt-trips and peer pressure when it comes to giving. So why am I doing this? I realized the answer is trust.

I love Seward Co-op. I've been a member there for 10 years, and I shop there every week. Seward leads the way on labeling, access, and support of local farmers, and they work hard to create a truly welcoming experience. I feel a very personal connection to the co-op—it's part of how I nourish my family and support my community. I know where everything is, and I invariably run into friends there—its comfortable and comforting. I trust them. And so, I trust that if they have a program where they've selected a nonprofit to support each month that I should help them do that.

Seward also does a great job of sharing the success of this program—they publish the amount of money they raise at the register each month for the selected nonprofit. Which shows me that my 56 cents is a part of a much bigger impact. And makes me feel like I'm part of a collective action, which in turn brings me closer to the co-op, deepens my trust.

It's interesting to me to think about what lessons we might learn about fundraising from this experience. Step 1: spend 10 years building trust, engaging your constituents, and creating a sense of belonging. Step 2: ask them for 56 cents!

Perhaps that's not a viable strategy for your fundraising effort. But, actually, I think that is the lesson. The reason this program works, the reason I feel compelled to give at the register is precisely because Seward Co-op didn't set out to build trust and connection just as a fundraising tool. They did it because it's an authentic manifestation of their mission. That's what makes me break my own rules and give money to the SEED program. Because it feels real, not gimmicky, and like a small action I can take to be a part of the co-op's mission.

~Laura Zabel, Leadership and Community blog (6/03/2012): <http://www.leadershipandcommunity.com/2012/06/04/exception-to-the-rule/>