

Share Your Expertise:

When it comes to co-ops, we are all subject matter experts

BY ELLEN MICHEL

Many of us are planning to attend CCMA (Consumer Cooperative Management Association) or other training events in the next few months, including the National Co+op Grocers (NCG) Marketing Matters or NCG Convergence. The chance to meet with peers in person produces a great kind of synergy and excitement.

Cooperative Grocer Network (CGN) took shape as a place to collect and recollect those moments, the stories, questions, and conversations. You can follow up on bits of information learned and follow through with new connections. CGN also exists because not everyone is able to go to these events. Glimpses of the experiences there can benefit many other people in our co-ops.

Here are some additional observations about posting and engaging on the CGN site:

Get to know colleagues and peers—all across the food co-op landscape

CGN is a place where staff people can connect with their peers and also gain insights based on the board member perspective—and vice versa. Large and long-experienced co-ops connect with startups, perhaps tuning in to some of the boots-on-the-ground energy the new co-ops have.

Stores going through transformations of all kinds can figure out how it is done, with advice from peers and from other industry experts, including consultants working for co-op support organizations. That's the context—broad and inclusive, yet focused on our retail niche. CGN is a portal where each of you can make a difference to others across our diverse landscape.

Check your user profile, write a bio, upload a photo

Keep in mind that you can refine your profile or change your password at any time. Set your “Notifications” according to your own preferences. And don't neglect your “Photo & Bio” page—this is where you tell others something about yourself, sharing an image that connects your face with comments and contributions. Work against the anonymity factor by adding more value to your interactions.

Explore information provided by co-ops and associate member organizations

Use the powerful search engine—it can collect documents by topic or type, searching even inside text. Check out job listings and articles from this magazine. When you search a topic (such as open book management), information from all of our archived material will come up. Scroll through to see what is useful to you.

Start discussions or ask a question

If there's something on your mind, ask an open-ended question. Recent discussion topics have included parking lot management, volunteer turnover, tech issues, and communication tools. Can anyone recommend a good steam cleaner for grocery carts or other equipment? What's the trade-off when faced with limited quantities of product from a local supplier?

Share and analyze your situation

Did your store have a particular success, or did something unexpectedly go awry? Tell your story and analyze what you think did or didn't go well. Be specific when you describe your situation. This form of sharing provides a powerful source of learning for everyone, encouraging a problem-solving, solution-oriented perspective.

Share resources you've created

CGN is a place where you can archive tools and templates: examples of newsletters, email blasts, advertising flyers, postcards, social media promotions, press releases, store photos, business plans, job descriptions—the list goes on.

These can be finished pieces or works in progress. Include links if you wish. Unlike social media sites, the intellectual property archived at CGN remains under the ownership of co-ops.

Offer your subject knowledge

When it comes to co-ops, we are all subject matter experts. Maybe you know how to create images in Illustrator, to write compelling copy, or to design an ad featuring your bulk department. You might be a full-animal butcher, an organic gardener, or a chef who has developed a great cooking class. You are a board member who has guided your co-op through a major transition, or an IT manager familiar with point-of-sale systems, or a consultant who can help people reach consensus concerning a difficult issue. You get the idea: share your expertise!

Make it meaningful, habitual; ask for help—and consciously build your peer network.

The mission of CGN is to build community and encourage the creation and sharing of resources. This is a place where you can make friends and influence people.

One last note:

I've been working with CGN account managers to do some housekeeping on user rosters and am happy to help anyone who has questions about these. Please feel free to contact me anytime at ellen@grocer.coop. Whether we meet in person at a conference or online via our platform, I look forward to these future connections! □