

# Peer Conversations Boost Startups

BY JACQUELINE HANNAH

**F**ood co-op startups are helping each other out through regular conversations. “What do you all want to focus our call on next month? What challenges are front and center for your startup right now?”

Every call ends with these questions. Most of the call participants are on the line over their lunch break—on this particular call, one is home with a sick child, and we can hear the sounds of toddler babble in the background now and then. The participants are computer programmers, retired people, nurses, college students, parents, project managers, and wedding photographers. They also are board members and staff members of startup food co-ops.

Peer calls are not a new phenomenon in the world of food co-ops, but this particular iteration of calls, aimed expressly at the needs of startup food co-op organizers, started in late 2014 and is, arguably, uniquely effective. “The peer calls are actionable! I get off the phone and start using the tips and lessons immediately, whether it’s sprucing up our Facebook feed, crafting better messages in our newsletters, or working to grow our membership,” raves Margie Michicich, vice chair of the board of directors at Wild Root Market, a startup food co-op in Racine, Wis.

The peer calls for startups were founded by Bonnie Hudspeth, the member programs manager at Neighboring Food Co-op Association (NFCA) and formerly the project manager of the Monadnock Food Co-op through its development and opening in early 2013. Said Hudspeth, “At Neighboring Food Co-op Association’s annual member meeting in the spring of 2014, we convened a peer conversation for startups and talked with our associate member startups about how we could better connect throughout the year for shared learning and support. And, I was working directly with Food Co-op Initiative (FCI) staffer Suzi Carter on how we could better coordinate and leverage our network of start up co-ops for regional support.”

The partnership evolved into one monthly call for just three startups in the New England region that NFCA served. Three years later, there are seven call groups happening in three regions of the country, serving two dozen startups plus requests for calls in more regions. Three regional cooperative development centers are organizing these calls currently: NFCA, the Indiana Cooperative Development Center (ICDC), and the University of Wisconsin Center for Cooperatives (UWCC).

If you’re a food cooperator, chances are you’ve been on peer calls. And perhaps, much as you enjoy your peers, you weren’t necessarily excited for the calls when they showed up on your calendar. The startups that participate in these calls feel a little differently. “The peer calls have been a tremendous asset and support to my work!” shares Heather Avella, project

manager for Manchester Food Co-op in Manchester, N.H. “We often would joke about these calls being our ‘therapy.’ Wise tips and knowledge are gained, but even more invaluable are the relationships developed with people walking in similar shoes.”

Corey Auger, board member at Urban Greens Co-op in Providence, R.I., also praises the calls, but for slightly different reasons. “One of my favorite parts of each call—and what I find incredibly valuable—is when we get to hear from special guests who are experts in the topic of discussion that month. Whether that topic is capital raising, membership driving, general manager hiring, or governing, there is an expert on that subject within the greater co-op community who is willing to volunteer their time to speak with us and answer our questions.”

## How the calls work

The magic of these calls is the combination of both the peer factor and the expert factor. Overall, there are four key factors:

**Partnership:** Regional cooperative centers organize the calls. “We play both a facilitation and education role in the peer calls,” says Kelly Maynard, outreach specialist with UWCC. “We hold the ‘space’ (conference line) for a group of co-ops in similar stages of development to check in with us and each other once a month.” The regional organization reaches out to the startups in their area and then partners with FCI to find presenters who can speak to the call group’s chosen topic or identify needed topics for the group’s stage of development. This allows regional centers to deepen their connections to the startups in their area and at the same time leverage the free expertise of FCI, which often develops unique content to meet the call group’s need. In turn, FCI gets to stay in personal contact with more startups and keep its finger

on the pulse of emerging challenges for startups.

**Peer-driven, co-op developer-led:** When you put a bunch of peers in any industry on a phone line and leave them to it, often what you get is dead air or conversations that drift far off topic. The startup call groups are focused on the startup leaders. They pick the topics each month and always get to lead the Q&A session at the end in any direction they need—but the facilitator plays a very active role in keeping groups on topic and asking every group to share. If the call group is at a loss for their next topic or only has a loose idea, the co-op developer works with FCI to flesh out the idea or fill the gap.

**Access to experts:** The calls are not just peer conversations. After each group checks in about their current challenges and progress, an expert presenter gives a 15–25-minute presentation or talk on the chosen topic, followed by 10–15 minutes of Q&A. Experts are diverse and can be: >

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- city staff from a town that has experience working on a food co-op project sharing how to partner well with your city;
- consultants with targeted expertise in general manager hiring;
- an FCI team member sharing a custom presentation on ownership growth; and/or
- startup leader peers who are further along in the process.

Having access to a wide array of experts is due to the regional co-op developer's and FCI's circle of connections and makes the calls rich. Additionally, being able to process the expert advice with peers at the end of the call makes it even more valuable.

"We use the calls to float ideas and learn from others' experience. And, if I'm being honest, it sparks my competitive side a bit," said Clay Whitney, board vice president at Granite City Grocery, a startup in Barre, Vt. The friendly competition and peer pressure to remember expert advice and stick with it are key, driving positive development that builds up in the region.

Do the calls make a difference? "Oh, most definitely," states Deb Trocha, executive director of the ICDC, who leads three regional call groups. "The process of creating a food co-op can often feel very lonely and isolating. It's important for organizing groups to get together to share ideas and to learn from each other. It's helpful to have a sounding board."

The model of these calls can be replicated for any peer group. In the spirit of "Principle Six," we'd love to share more details about how these calls work or even invite you to be a guest on one of the calls. But be warned, we'll also likely put your expertise to work presenting on one of the startup peer calls! □

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