

Stronger Together

New national website provides a virtual meeting place

BY JEANNE LAKSO



As co-op insiders, when we talk about what we do best and how we want to be perceived by our shoppers, owners and neighbors, we use words like local, community, sustainable, responsive, welcoming, and authentic. We hope the people who come into our stores have experienced a warm welcome, the sense of community, and the real “co-op feel” that sets us apart.

But how do we communicate that co-ops are leaders in offering delicious, fresh, local and organic food to folks who might not yet have tasted what we provide? How do we communicate the shared values and common goals of food co-ops nationwide? And how can we reach out to a new and broader audience that may not be familiar with co-ops? Part of NCGA's answer is the **StrongerTogether.coop** website, the newest extension of NCGA's Co+op, stronger together brand.

StrongerTogether.coop is a place for people to gather on their food journeys. It's a place to find out more about what's in your food, where it comes from, where to find great food, how to prepare it, and a whole lot more. It's also a place to talk with others about food topics you're exploring, are passionate about, and even want to get involved in.

According to NCGA Director of Marketing and Communications, Kelly Smith, “The StrongerTogether.coop site is one of the primary expressions of our new Co+op, stronger together brand. Its purpose is to raise awareness of food co-ops and position them as trusted experts by creating a common space for consumers to discover and share information about food, health, and nutrition, the value of local, and the important role these topics play in our lives and communities.”

The site is designed to complement member co-ops' existing websites by providing a virtual meeting place for both those who already know and love food co-ops and those who want a place to learn about them. StrongerTogether.coop will allow co-op shoppers to share their knowledge and enthusiasm with one another, while connecting co-op newbies with their local food community and co-op. With features like the ability to connect through Facebook, “friend” other users, and join your favorite co-op's online group, the site encourages a sense of community. Sharing information and asking

questions through the site's “Conversations” invites both consumers and co-op staff to have dialogues on topics as diverse as, “What's growing in your garden right now?” to “What event in your life has most influenced the way you eat?”

Besides these interactive features, Stronger Together.coop offers articles and information in three broad categories: At the Market, From the Source, and Around the Table, covering hints and tips about how to shop, information on where your food comes from and current farming practices, glossaries of food terms, and, of course, great recipes. Lists of local suppliers, pop-up panels informing users of what's in season in their area (which then connect to recipes using these ingredients), and co-op photo galleries all make the site information-rich and visually engaging for users.

The site's “soft launch” took place in early July, with a consumer launch taking place this fall, including efforts to engage national media attention. Web banners, newsletter copy, and other promotional support materials are available to NCGA member stores on the NCGA website. While currently the site lists only NCGA member co-ops, we will be exploring how we might add other food co-ops to the site in the future.

We encourage co-op staff, board members, and supporters to join the site as active users, and we hope that you'll invite your member-owners and shoppers to do so as well. The strength of the site lies in the community created by its users; truly, we'll all be stronger, together. ■



Celebrate Co-op Month!

Help create more food co-ops that are local, trusted, and serving you! Pick a busy day in October (Co-op Month) as Howard Bowers Day and designate 1 percent of your sales that day to the Howard Bowers Fund.

All Howard Bowers Day contributions will go to education and training for new and about-to-open food cooperatives around the country. Since this focus on new co-ops as recipients of Howard Bowers Day contributions was started in 2008, Howard Bowers Day contributions have made it possible for the Bowers Fund to give 11 grants totaling \$19,200 to 10 new and about-to-open food co-ops and one for a regional workshop for new food co-ops.

For more information, see www.cdf.coop/node/63 or contact Ellen Quinn at 703/302-8094 or equinn@cdf.coop.