

Marketing Matters Draws Largest Audience

BY GRETCHEN ADDISON

A record 100 attendees representing 66 food co-ops from across the nation convened in Minneapolis, Minn., May 4–5 for the National Cooperative Grocer Association’s (NCGA) annual Marketing Matters conference. The theme of this conference was storytelling and the importance of telling co-op stories.

Being new to my job in outreach at Ashland Food Co-op, this was my first time attending Marketing Matters. On the afternoon of May 3, prior to the conference, I and about 60 other co-op marketers participated in one of three bus tours to some of the Twin Cities co-ops. Getting a flavor of the bounty and diversity of food co-ops in the area was a perfect way, especially for a newbie, to kick off the conference.

As the meeting got underway, I was surprised to find myself among so many other first-time attendees and thrilled by the opportunity to network with and learn from many people in the same field of work. Throughout the conference, I was blown away by the creativity and trail-blazing knowledge and information the guest speakers and member panels had to offer.

Keynote speaker Michael Margolis spoke on the importance of telling epic brand stories as a means of effectively communicating co-ops’ brands to the public. Margolis explored with attendees the stories the public associates with co-ops (including outdated stories based on history, myth or plain misunderstanding) as well as the unique stories that could and should be told to accurately represent co-ops today. He noted that despite the continued movement towards healthful eating, including local and organic, co-ops, which have been at the forefront of this movement, are not communicating stories that reinforce and affirm their leadership status. Latecomers to this movement, however, are telling their stories and are getting leadership recognition. He asserted that it is our job to change that.

The Kitchen Sisters, independent producers Davia Nelson and Nikki Silva, shared stories and insight from their NPR series, “Hidden Kitchens.” They encouraged participants to tell the stories—and, importantly, the interesting back stories—from our communities. During their presentation, they turned the tables and asked participants to tell the story of how food co-ops got started—but collaboratively: one line at a time per person. The story that emerged was a beautiful hodgepodge of historical scraps sewn together into an intricate quilt, proving



The Kitchen Sisters, Nikka Silva (left) and Davia Nelson, at Marketing Matters 2011.

further that it’s the way you season an experience that makes the story so good.

Breakout session speakers, chef and documentary filmmaker Daniel Klein and social media activist and author Barth Anderson, offered specific tips and techniques for storytelling within their respective media. For Klein’s documentary-style videos (*The Perennial Plate*, www.theperennialplate.com), he avoids following a strict plan or story board and interviews subjects while they’re working to minimize nervousness and capture better footage. He emphasized that it’s not necessary to relate a story from start to finish in narrative form to capture the heart of the story. Anderson shared his experience and perspective as a blogger at www.FairFoodFight.com, where he offers opinions and criticism of big ag. He also shared favorite sustainable-food-movement resources and offered tips on telling effective stories, engaging and educating followers, and empowering citizens to take action on important and complex advocacy issues.

NCGA members shared their knowledge and expertise in a number of sessions. Two panels continued the storytelling theme, focusing on outreach and local stories, while another panel and two sessions focused on the challenges, successes, and recommendations for integrating the Co+op brand and Co+op Deals into stores. A session on market

research surveys offered nuts-and-bolts information on effective survey implementation, particularly as it relates to NCGA’s shopper survey.

One of my favorite parts of the conference was being able to pick the brains of other attendees to learn how other co-ops function and why they work for their respective communities. I found myself constantly comparing what people said about their co-ops to my own experience. After my first few interactions, I realized that just because my co-op does it one way doesn’t mean it’s the best or the only way. Through the formal sessions and informal conversation, I came away with a better appreciation for how each individual co-op serves its community, through its values and the food it provides, as well as the specific marketing and outreach activities, whether through clear signage and store branding or cooking classes and farm tours.

I look forward to integrating much of what I learned at Marketing Matters over the coming year and especially to hearing some of the amazing co-op stories we have in our midst—the remarkable stories that take place regularly at our stores and that can bring a better understanding and appreciation to a broader audience about what makes our food co-ops so different, so meaningful, so special. ■