

# Reaching Youth at coopsrock.coop

## Website connects with future cooperators through graphic art

BY KEN DAVIS

**W**e live in electronic ether, with the World Wide Web like an infinite canvas. It's an excellent era for the visual arts. Opportunities and audiences abound. The advent of the Internet as a digital medium has opened up a whole new world to artists and their appreciators, as is evidenced by the proliferation of art-school programs that are chock-full of undergraduate and graduate concentrations in computer art, new media, computer illustration, and digital art.

Today, works of graphic design and computer-generated fractal art grace gallery walls. "Flash artist," "Cascading Style Sheet artist," and "Photoshop artist" are legitimate terms of respect rather than just industry-specific esoterica, and talented painters can work in pixels as easily as oils.

Digitally designed graphic art seems particularly hot-wired into the human condition of our youth, resulting in its own unique aesthetic. Theirs is the generation of video games, web cams, video phones and even MTV—still crazy after all these years. And this generation's visual style, which some might contend has no style at all, often has an underlying approach that's both sophisticated and consistent, tugging on the raw emotional nerves that resonate with its adolescent audiences. It can perhaps be best summed up by Andy Warhol: "Art," the iconic pop-culture painter once insisted, "is whatever you can get away with."

This is the not-so-subtle battle cry of the great American teen, and maybe it always has been. You can see it reflected in a MySpace page, a music video, a skateboard or snowboard illustration, or a gig poster for a local band. What appears at first as amateurish and sophomoric often has a razor-blade subtlety and progressive nature that screams a proud individuality and eschews old rules by establishing new ones—or insists there should be no rules at all.

In a nutshell, for our teens and tweens, avant-garde graphic art is part of the visual language they speak, and online is where they often meet to speak it. For those of us who wish to move such an audience to action, it behooves us to speak this language, too, and to meet our audiences where they are. Like at coopsrock.coop.

### Reaching out to future cooperators

The fifth Cooperative Principle states: "Cooperatives provide education and train-



ing for their members, elected representatives, managers, and employees so they can contribute effectively to the development of their cooperatives. They inform the general public—*particularly young people* and opinion leaders—about the nature and benefits of cooperation" (emphasis added).

In our appropriate and well-intentioned zeal to reach out to the members and customers of various market segments, those of us in the world of food cooperatives can sometimes forget

the importance of reaching out to segments of the population that may not yet be part of our market at all.

There are many ways to reach out to young people, of course. The Co-ops Rock website is one method, and it approaches such a challenge by using graphic art as its message and the Internet as its delivery system. It is made primarily for a teenage audience, so by design it is intentionally brief, edgy and visual. It dovetails similar efforts by the National Cooperative ▸

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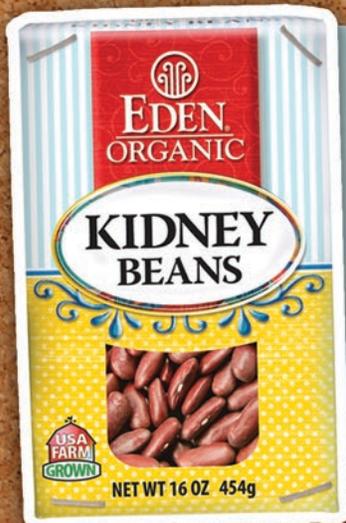
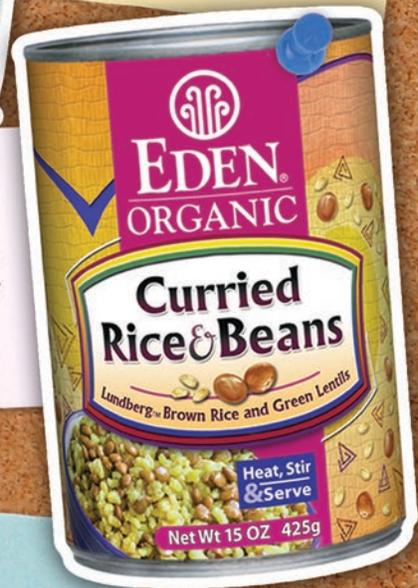


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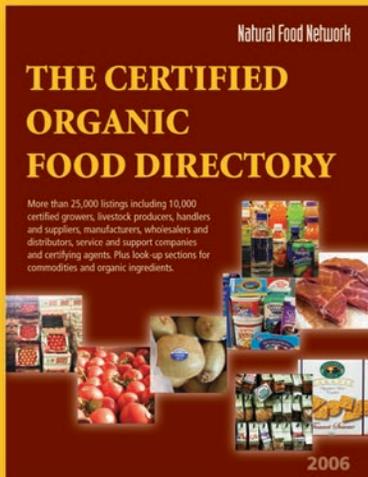
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◀ Grocers Association (NCGA), where the organization wisely and beautifully used the medium of rock music and narrative video to appropriately match its powerful messages with the intended audiences: simple and effective.

Likewise, the premise of the Co-ops Rock website is simple. To be realistic about all the things competing for a young person's attention, the site is only a few pages long, is heavy on progressive graphic design, and it uses phrases that inspire instead of educate—that provoke thought rather than pry into complex cooperative concepts or social history. Let's face it, no one expects a teenager to forego his or her MySpace or Twitter page in order to hang out at a website and read about cooperative history.

As a result, rather than explaining the difference between cooperatives and competing worldviews or detailing key cooperative concepts, the Co-ops Rock website simply strives to portray cooperatives as relevant.

(And in a world in dire need of social and economic justice, cooperatives are as relevant as ever.) The only goal is to spark a young person's interest and plant the seed, entrusting the many other resources within the co-op nation to help that seed to grow to fruition. The site climaxes with what is, in this writer's opinion, an awe-inspiring "Co-ops Rock" video produced by NCGA. Art, music, video and cooperation: a fully functional family.

### Website collaborators

The site itself is a hallmark of cooperation. It started simply as a personal project—created by a cooperator well past his teenage years, with a cat in his lap and a woefully outdated PC in the corner of his bedroom. I thought that a funky looking website loaded with somewhat avant-garde art might appeal to young people and convey important concepts about the cooperative movement. Many long nights later, the site was, in cyberspeak, all dressed up with no place to go. Then the magic happened.

The Hanover Co-op of Hanover, N.H.—which employs the aforementioned cooperator—quickly gave the idea its full support and brought in the project as part of its family of websites, subsequently promoting it to the world at large.

NCGA happily shared not only the "Co-ops Rock" name, which they had coined earlier as part of their own outreach efforts, but also donated a ".dot coop" domain that would make the site much easier for web surfers to find.

Triangle Park Creative—a creative services firm that specifically serves cooperatives and other progressive businesses—donated top-notch secure servers, expert programming assistance, and site-hosting services.

Although the effort is only a few months old, it has already made an impact. A handful of teachers in area schools in and around the Upper Valley of Vermont and New Hampshire started showing the site to students not long after it went live. These teachers taught courses and units on economics, social movements, personal finance, business, and so on, but had never as part of their curriculum taught anything about the cooperative movement. After some gentle grassroots persuasive efforts, they introduced the site in their classrooms and found that it resonated with their students. Several classes subsequently invited employees of the Hanover Co-op to speak to the students about the site and cooperation, and more have lined up to express a similar interest.

As of this writing, Hanover Co-op Education Department employees have delivered one presentation to a lively group of high school

senior economics students, many of whom expressed a desire to become part of the cooperative movement after graduation. And by the time this issue of *Cooperative Grocer* hits the press, the same employees will also have spoken to four more classes at another local high school.

Where the site and its outreach program go from here is anyone's guess. One thing that's clear is that youth outreach needs to go

*The CoopsRock.coop website is a tool that any cooperative can use for its own outreach efforts.*

far and wide and take on many methods of delivery if we're going to inspire a future generation of cooperators. To that end, the Co-opsRock.coop website is a tool that any cooperative can use for its own outreach efforts. Simply adding it to a links page, featuring it on a blog, or forwarding the URL to a teenager are all easy and effective ways to spread the message. For cooperatives interested in outreach in local schools, it is a preexisting resource that's ready and waiting to be used in presentations. An Internet connection and a computer are all that is needed, and most schools today are loaded with both.

Over time, the site's creative team (the cooperator and his cat) hope to add more interactive and animation-based features to the site while keeping to the brief, mostly visual concept. It's a continually developing project, so feedback and ideas are welcome. Just go to [www.coopsrock.coop](http://www.coopsrock.coop), browse through the funky art and messages, and look for "Co-ops Roxanne" to send an email with any questions, suggestions, or ways we can partner our efforts. (Hint, hint!)

If art is whatever we can get away with, cooperation is whatever we can do to ensure we all succeed together and not at the expense of those around us. That's a good lesson for all of us to remember, whether we're teenaged or not. ■