

A Touchstone Event for Startup Co-ops

Up and Coming, Up and Running 2013

BY ELLEN MICHEL

As hosts of the annual “Up and Coming, Up and Running Food Co-op Conference,” participants from Bloomingfoods Market and Deli Cooperative (Bloomington, Ind.) are keenly aware of the many challenges facing groups working to open new co-ops. Up and Coming, Up and Running (UCUR) was designed to address these challenges, becoming an annual touchstone event for those committed to getting new stores up to speed. It has also become an integral training opportunity for our co-op, where many people on staff, including General Manager George Huntington, serve as planners, presenters, and attendees.

Now in its fourth year, UCUR 2013 (held Feb. 28–March 2) was bigger than ever, attracting 91 participants, 24 presenters, and a three-person videography team. With participants from 35 co-ops in 14 states, this conference assembles consultants, steering committees, and board members; it promotes the value of education and training; and it encourages networking among emerging, new, and established food co-ops. And its name is a homophone with Euchre, a fitting coincidence in a state where that game has many local variations!

One UCUR goal is to assess the landscape: What are we all doing, collaboratively, in the effort to open new stores? What sets the co-op environment apart from that of mainstream grocery? What hinders our progress or discourages the best efforts of those working to build new food stores in their communities? And is there a framework that can help us advance our goals with fewer setbacks?

Preconference events

An optional preconference day offered intensive workshops on member recruitment (with Jake Schlachter of Food Co-op Initiative) and project management (with George Huntington and Jenn Hileman from Bloomingfoods) as well as behind-the-scenes tours of three Bloomingfoods stores. The new Bloomingfoods Elm Heights project gave project management participants a real-time glimpse into the task of designing a store with strong perimeter features.

Art Sherwood, CDS consultant and Bloomingfoods board president, led a Thursday-night “research and development roundtable” for



PHOTO BY ISAAC SMITH

conference planners. Sherwood’s workshop was organized with the help of Keith Taylor; both are visiting scholars with the Indiana University Vincent and Elinor Ostrom Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis, where they conduct research on cooperative entrepreneurship.

“Remember that scholars need data from us in order to do research on co-ops,” Sherwood advised. “If we want to be visible and want people to write about what we do, we need to be willing to share that data—and our opinions and insights—with researchers and analysts.” Sherwood, who also offered very popular conference workshops on developing a positive board/GM relationship and cooperative strategic leadership, noted that startup co-ops are a unique entrepreneurial phenomenon. (Find more on the co-op research topic in the upcoming issue of CG.—Editor)

Four cornerstones provide a frame

From its inception in 2010, UCUR has used the “Four Cornerstones in Three Stages” conceptual model developed by Bill Gessner of CDS Consulting Co-op. Considering Vision, Talent, Capital, and Systems on each step of a time-tested, years-long process, topics are divided between two tracks. The first, “Laying the Foundation,” focuses on establishing a co-op vision; recruiting a steering committee; amassing capital and member equity; and assessing feasibility, while working to build and open the doors of a store.

The second track, “After the Paint Dries,” addresses operational concerns for beginning stores. Many participants have returned to the conference with different needs each year, as their projects move along what NCGA’s Dave Blackburn identified as “a continuum of care.”

Resources extend the impact

An opening resources panel set the groundwork for all attendees. Marilyn Scholl described the webinars and services available through CDS Consulting Co-op. Stuart Reid noted that Food Co-op Initiative (FCI) is typically the point of entry for new groups, helping them assess and organize their efforts. Debbie Trocha, coordinator of UCUR, executive director of the Indiana Cooperative Development Center, and board president of Cooperation Works!, spoke about guidance available through co-op development agencies.

Dan Nordley invited attendees to discover the Cooperative Grocer Network (CGN), with website, listserv, and *Cooperative Grocer* magazine resources. Dave Blackburn outlined the development services offered by NCGA to stores that have successfully opened their doors and then achieved a measureable level of success.

“UCUR doesn’t exist in a vacuum,” Trocha explained. “We send participants a resource list, encouraging them to investigate all of the resources available, including webinars through CDS and Food Co-op Initiative. This year we’re ▶

The Quality, Integrity & Efficacy of Herb Pharm...

Brought to You in Vegetarian
Capsules & Softgels



For more than 30 years, Herb Pharm has brought you authentic herbal healthcare products that you can use and recommend with confidence.

Our new line-up of encapsulated herbs is made with the same meticulous approach to traditional herbalism that you've come to expect from us.

- SUSTAINABLY CULTIVATED & WILDCRAFTED
- HARVESTED AT THE PEAK OF READINESS
- EXTRACTED WITHOUT SYNTHETIC SOLVENTS
- VERIFIED BROAD-SPECTRUM CHEMICAL COMPOUND PROFILES



FOR MORE INFORMATION

Contact Herb Pharm Customer Service at **800.348.4372**, and ask about our opening order special for new capsule customers.

find us on 



www.herb.pharm.com

◀ happy to say that FCI provided funding to videotape many sessions, in order to further develop the archive of startup tools. Nobody needs to start from scratch.”

Two tracks along a planning continuum

“Laying the Foundation” topics included a case study with Rochelle Prunty, general manager of the very successful River Valley Market in Northampton, Mass., a store that was in development for nine years. Other topics in this track including sessions on membership, leadership, recruitment, and a team approach to project management, plus capitalization strategies and logo design.

The second track, “After the Paint Dries,” provided strategies for keeping new stores up and running, with a focus on operational concerns. Mac McLaughlin, purchasing manager at Bloomingfoods, organized a vendor panel with representatives from Tiny Footprint Distribution, Indianapolis Fruit Company, Equal Exchange, Tree of Life–KeHE, and United Natural Foods, Inc (UNFI).

Penni Ruben from UNFI gave a presentation on pricing and merchandising strategies. Mel Braverman offered workshops on food co-op finance and key indicators, tailored to the concerns of startups.

Dan Nordley gave a session called “Mirror, Mirror on the Wall... How the Seven Co-op Dwarves Principles Can Guide Your Marketing.” Nordley argued that the primary task of co-op branding is to create both community and trust, drawing on the cooperative principles to build an enduring generative economy.

UCUR also offered a chance to consult with speakers one-on-one, focusing on specific next steps to move projects forward.

Looking ahead

Conference evaluations were once again resoundingly positive. Participants noted that the size and design of the conference is especially

conducive to meaningful training. Attendee evaluations gave the conference an overall rating of 3.89 out of 4.00.

Only the Bloomingfoods food service ranked higher. Food for the conference was prepared and served by the Bloomingfoods Commissary Kitchen, with gluten-free, vegan, and vegetarian options. “We do all this work as presenters and organizers of the conference, only to be outdone in the end by Bloomingfoods food service!” observed Bill Gessner wryly. “What to make of that?”

Kudos came from many quarters. Said Reid, who has been on the UCUR planning committee since its inception: “One of my board members attended the conference for the first time this year and was impressed with how much more sophisticated startup organizers have become. They arrived at the conference with a better understanding of co-op best practices and development strategies. Food Co-op Initiative, Indiana Co-op Development Center, CDS Consulting Co-op, NCGA, and visionary co-ops like Bloomingfoods have worked hard to create a comprehensive startup support network. It is incredibly rewarding to see our work reflected in the knowledge and vision of these co-op founders.”

In addition to support from those co-op development organizations, a significant grant also came from the Howard Bowers Fund this year, which was used to provide 31 partial scholarships to 16 co-ops as well as to offset some speaker fees and expenses.

Additional support came from (in descending order) Organic Valley, Bloomington Monroe County Convention Center, Cabot Creamery, CoBank, Indianapolis Fruit Company, Cooperative Grocer Network, Equal Exchange, National Cooperative Grocers Association, Northcountry Cooperative Development Fund, Triangle Park Creative, and Tree of Life–KeHE Distributors.

Wedge Co-op became the first established food co-op besides Bloomingfoods to lend support. Said Kristi Pluimer, project manager at the Wedge, “Seeing the many resources available for startups is



Isla Vista Food Cooperative
Isla Vista, CA
\$1,200,000 First Mortgage



People's Food Cooperative
Rochester, MN
\$3,000,000 Term Loan

BANKING SOLUTIONS FOR COOPERATIVE GROCERS

Barry Silver
(703) 302-1955
bsilver@ncb.coop

Mike Novak
(510) 496-2232
mnovak@ncb.coop



Products and services provided by NCB,FSB. Member FDIC.

- ▶ Term Loans
- ▶ Real Estate Loans
- ▶ Competitive Deposit Rates
- ▶ Cash Management



PHOTO BY ISAAC SMITH

George Huntington, general manager of Bloomingfoods, and Marilyn Scholl of CDS Consulting Co-op (both at center) discuss the finer points of starting a co-op with conference participants.

inspiring—almost as inspiring as meeting the dedicated people who have made the commitment to start a co-op in their community.”

Regional impact

One remarkable feature of UCUR 2013 was the fact that there were six startup co-ops in attendance from neighboring Illinois, where they are all working within a relatively tight geographic area. Jacqueline Hannah, general manager of Common Ground Food Co-op in Urbana, Ill., helped coordinate their participation.

Said Brad Alstrom, who works on co-op development at Bloomingfoods, “The Illinois story speaks to the power of regional collaboration.

Why go it alone when there are other co-op initiatives nearby with the same aspirations?”

“This was my first time attending the conference, and all the great things I heard about it were more than confirmed,” said Jacqueline Hannah. “The energy was infectious! Every talk I attended was full of great information not only for the startups, but also for those that have already opened their doors.

“I think what I didn’t expect was how rich and powerful the networking was at this event. Every meal was like a roundtable of great minds passionate about starting food co-ops, sharing their challenges and solutions. I watched new co-op startup leaders leave having not only made great contacts, but also great cooperative friendships that will nourish their startup efforts long after the conference.”

Whatever the challenges—whether they involve establishing a clear vision, successfully utilizing talent, raising and managing capital, or developing workable operating systems—the UCUR conference helps attendees to focus on achievable goals.

Knowing that the startup process takes a number of years, and that food co-ops—even the biggest among us—never stop evolving or growing, our common goal is to be a consistent, responsive source of information and support as we develop better training resources, find inspiration, and connect with our peers.

Maybe we can even work a few card games into the mix next year! ■

The 2014 Up and Coming, Up and Running is scheduled for Feb. 28–March 1, with an optional intensive workshop day on Feb. 27. Contact Debbie Trocha at icdc.coop for more information or to become involved.

NEW!

Le Parfait

Jam & Jelly Jars

- Heavy glass for durability
- Faceted jar for easy handling
- One-piece lid fits all jars
- Product of France

brought to you by

1-800-234-5932



To see all of our Le Parfait canning jars, visit DownToEarthDistributors.com