

# COMMUNICATING THE CO-OPERATIVE DIFFERENCE

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*Co-operatives can't just be different or better and hope the world sees. We need to intentionally manage the co-operative image.*

Charles Gould, Director-General, International Co-operative Alliance, in *The Communicators Guide to Co-operative Identity* (2013)

Food co-ops have been innovators in healthy, organic and natural foods, local and fairly traded products, bulk buying, consumer education and supporting our communities. Today, food co-ops face growing competition from retailers that have taken on similar messaging and many of the same products and services that we pioneered. However, as co-ops, we have a unique advantage: **Our Co-operative Identity**. How can we be excellent food stores, competing on the same ground as mainstream grocery stores, as well as excellent food co-operatives, promoting what makes us different in a manner that reinforces our competitive advantage in the marketplace? How can we communicate to people what makes us special while inviting them to join their local food co-ops?

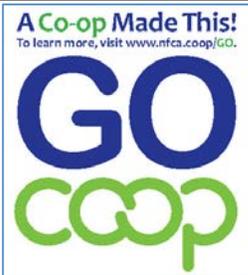
What is your **elevator speech**? How do you communicate in a nutshell what makes your food co-op different? Here is our attempt:

*Our food co-op is about **great food**, but it is also about **building a better world**. It's a different kind of grocery store — one that is **locally owned** by people **like you** who care about **community, healthy, affordable food**, and supporting **good jobs** and the **local economy**. It's not just a great place to shop; it's a great thing to be part of because **we own it — together**. Because it is owned by people who live here, our food co-op is focused on **building local wealth** and **meeting local needs**. Every time you shop at your food co-op, you're helping to build a **stronger community**, a **more sustainable food system**, and an **economy that is more fair** for everyone. And that's just the start! Our food co-op is part of a regional network of food co-ops that are locally owned by **90,000 people like you**. You're **welcome to shop** at the co-op, even if you are not a member. And **we'd love for you to join**.*

Today's event is about sharing ideas on how we can be more effective in marketing our food co-ops. Below are a few ideas to help your food co-op integrate the co-operative difference into your marketing and messaging as you promote your food co-ops as an excellent grocery store and an excellent co-operative. We welcome your ideas on how we can work together to increase our shared success.

TACTIC	WHY?	HOW?
<b>Emphasize "Co-op" in Your Name</b>	There is renewed interest in co-operative business and studies show that consumers have a positive image of co-ops — even if they aren't sure what a co-op is! Emphasizing "co-op" in your name is an opportunity to set yourself apart from the other "markets" and "groceries" that you compete with. Promoting your store proudly as a "food co-op," "co-op market" or "co-op grocer" is a simple way to set your business apart while encouraging consumers to think of our food co-ops as part of a system or whole that benefits the entire region, rather than as isolated businesses.	If your food co-op does not currently use " <b>co-op</b> " in its name, consider incorporating it into your name, logo, and messaging. If you already do, explore ways to raise its visibility within your logo and other branding. Remember that any negative perceptions of the word "co-op" are also a positive opportunity for community education, engagement, and promoting increased understanding of the Co-operative Difference. It is also a chance to emphasize that while we share certain values and principles, all co-ops are unique, responsive to their communities, and driven by meeting member needs.
<b>Internet Identity</b>	The internet is probably where our co-ops are "seen" by the most consumers — and especially by young people in our communities. The ".coop" url makes it easy to promote your Co-operative Identity online, in e-mail communications, and in social media.	If you do not yet use the <b>.coop domain</b> , you can now apply and get your first year free. Many food co-ops to use a format for their url that links "food" and "coop": for example, "monadnockfood.coop". <a href="http://www.domains.coop/special-offers/1-year-free/">http://www.domains.coop/special-offers/1-year-free/</a>
<b>The Co-op Marque</b>	Using "co-op" imagery in marketing and materials promotes our shared identity while communicating the diversity, scale and breadth of the co-operative movement. The Twin Pines are commonly used in the Americas as a symbol of co-operative enterprise. In 2013, the ICA launched its "Co-op Marque" (see below) as a simple and effective tool for promoting the co-op identity across sectors on a global level. 	The "Co-op Marque" provides a new opportunity to generate interest in co-operative enterprise. Once you have obtained your .coop url, you can also apply to use the <b>Co-op Marque</b> on marketing materials, in ads, websites, etc., at <a href="http://identity.coop">http://identity.coop</a> . In addition to existing slogans such as "co-operative enterprises build a better world", you can create your own, such as the logo the NFCA created for our Healthy Food Access program: 
<b>Co-op Messaging</b>	As <b>member owned</b> businesses, our core purpose is to serve member-owner needs and goals in keeping with the Co-operative Identity. Using accessible co-op language in our messaging communicates what is unique about our food co-ops, reinforcing member loyalty, and making it more difficult for our messaging to be co-opted by the competition. For example, terms such as "member owner" communicate use, belonging and participation in a community business. Likewise, the Co-operative Principles and Values are an opportunity for co-ops to express why we do what we do in a unique way.	Emphasize terms such as " <b>member</b> " or " <b>member-owner</b> ," which communicate participation, rather than conventional business terms such as "investor," which describe profit-driven business models where owners control decisions by investing more money. When promoting your co-op and its activities and events, consider how to align your message with the <b>Co-operative Principles and Values</b> . For example, supporting a local non-profit can be an expression of "Concern for Community," member loan drives of "Member Economic Participation," and collaboration with other co-ops of "Co-operation among Co-ops."

<b>Social Media</b>	Social media is an easy way to share information on the wider co-op movement and promote your Identity, especially to younger people who tend to engage more with social media. The participatory aspect of such platforms is a good match for Co-operative Values, and an opportunity to link up with other food co-ops as well as co-ops and credit unions in other sectors.	Emphasize <b>co-op messaging in social media</b> , and use hashtags such as #Coop, #GoCoop, #TodayAtTheCoop. "Like" the NFCA's Facebook page and follow us on Twitter, and share news and posts from other food co-ops, co-op associations, and other co-ops. <a href="https://www.facebook.com/Neighboring">https://www.facebook.com/Neighboring</a> <a href="https://twitter.com/NeighborCoops">https://twitter.com/NeighborCoops</a>
<b>Employee Engagement</b>	Employees interact with members and shoppers on a daily basis and are ambassadors for the Co-operative Difference. Being part of something special makes us all feel better about our work. The better employees understand what makes co-ops unique and feel connected with Co-operative Principles, Values and History, the better they can help communicate your difference to shoppers — encouraging members to be more loyal to their co-op and non-members to join!	Encourage <b>employee membership</b> and active <b>participation</b> in your food co-op. Provide <b>training opportunities</b> for employees in the co-operative movement. Encourage staff to consider co-op management training opportunities such as Saint Mary's University's online programs. Use the NFCA's online materials or invite NFCA staff to give a presentation on the co-operative movement and communicating our difference to shoppers. <a href="http://nfca.coop/presentations">http://nfca.coop/presentations</a>
<b>Community Education</b>	Despite our impact, food co-ops are often overlooked by educational institutions, community development non-profits, local government, and in dialogs on food systems and the economy. Your food co-op can be a hub for education on co-operative enterprise and benefit in the process by reinforcing your difference and contribution to your local community.	Share <b>educational materials</b> with local organizations and offer to do a <b>presentation</b> at a local event on the co-op movement. The NFCA worked with the New England Farmers Union to develop a youth & adult education curriculum, "Co-operatives: The Business of Teamwork," which is available for free download at: <a href="http://www.newenglandfarmersunion.org/co-operation/">http://www.newenglandfarmersunion.org/co-operation/</a>
<b>International Co-op Day</b>	Every year on the <b>first Saturday of July</b> , the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) and the United Nations celebrate International Co-op Day. Recent themes for the day include: Youth Empowerment, Food Security, and Confronting Climate Change. This year's theme is "Choose Co-operative, Choose Equality."	Use the NFCA's customizable <b>press release</b> on the theme of Co-op Day to promote what your co-op and co-operative across our region are doing in the area of the theme. And, email Erbin or Bonnie to tell what you have planned so we can help spread the word & link your event to other NFCA co-op events.
<b>Co-op Month</b>	October is Co-op Month in the US and a great opportunity for our food co-ops to promote the Co-operative Identity that we share with other co-ops and credit unions. Each year, NCBA invites co-ops to coordinate their marketing around a special theme to increase our impact.	Every year, the NFCA develops special "Go Co-op!" materials and press releases around the annual <b>Co-op Month</b> theme for our member co-ops to use in October. Email Erbin or Bonnie and let us know what you have planned so we can help spread the word & link your event to other NFCA co-op events.
<b>Measure and promote our Shared Impact</b>	Our food co-ops have a profound impact on the regional food system and economy. When the NFCA commissioned a study of our shared impact in 2008, we were able to promote to consumers, activists and policymakers just how great an impact we have. By compiling and sharing this data, we have been able to raise the profile of our member food co-ops as important contributors to a more healthy, just and sustainable regional food system.	Every year, the NFCA collects <b>shared impact data</b> from our member co-ops such as revenue, membership, employees, purchases from local producers and other co-ops, community donations, and posts them on our website. By collecting and sharing this data, your co-op can better communicate its own impact — and enable us to demonstrate our shared impact. And by linking to our site, you can help communicate that your food co-op is part of something bigger. at <a href="http://www.nfca.coop/about">www.nfca.coop/about</a> .
<b>"Go Co-op!"</b>	Our Co-operative Identity not only makes us unique, it is also a powerful tool for business success. The better our members and customers understand and engage with the Co-operative Principles and Values and understand the impact of co-ops across sectors and industries, the more committed they will be to effective participation and support of their business. This increased loyalty can be an important advantage in a competitive marketplace as we seek to be excellent grocery stores as well as excellent co-ops.	The NFCA's "Go Co-op" initiative has been recognized by the International Co-operative Alliance as an example of how co-ops can work together to communicate our difference. See the NFCA's "Go Co-op" page for ideas on how you can be involved ( <a href="http://www.nfca.coop/go">www.nfca.coop/go</a> ): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use NFCA's "Go Co-op!" shelf tags (see left) to identify co-op made products in your food co-op.</li> <li>• Invite other co-ops and credit unions in your area to table during a busy shopping day or special event.</li> <li>• Organize a study group for members around a book specifically on co-ops.</li> <li>• Organize small group dialog at your Annual Meeting on Co-operative Principles or Values.</li> <li>• Integrate the Co-operative Identity into your co-op's governing documents, mission, and ends policies.</li> </ul>



As we work to promote our food co-ops as great grocery stores, we also have an opportunity to set ourselves apart as great co-operative businesses, strengthening our position in a competitive marketplace. We welcome your ideas on how we can all "Go Co-op!"

*An ethical approach and social agenda are not the sole property of co-operatives.  
Many of our competitors lay claim to these and that's why, to casual observers, we all look the same.  
But add our principles and you have something very different.*