Organizing a Rockin' Online Co-op Annual Meeting

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many food co-ops have moved their Annual General Meetings (AGM) to online platforms as part of their efforts to keep their communities healthy and safe. In addition to keeping Members informed and updated about operations, a remote AGM offers an opportunity to involve your Membership in new ways. Looking forward, online meetings (and/or hybrid in person and online meetings) are likely to become a permanent fixture in the activities of our food co-ops and efforts to ensure that Member-owners are actively engaged in the success of their co-operatives.

Central to the mission of the Neighboring Food Co-op Association (NFCA) is working together to share ideas, strategies, and innovations to support shared success and impact. This guide to organizing a successful online AGM was prepared by Bonnie Hudspeth, NFCA Co-operative Development Coordinator, based on observations from attending and facilitating a number of our Member Food Co-ops' AGMs during the COVID19 pandemic. It was further developed in collaboration with NFCA Staff and with input from leaders from Androscoggin Food Co-op, City Market / Onion River Co-op, and Hunger Mountain Co-op. As stated below, state co-op law and food co-op bylaws vary, and we recommend that you ensure that your AGM complies with any legal requirements.

Thanks to our Neighboring Co-operators for sharing their wisdom and tips to help all of our co-ops succeed!

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I.   Ensure Compliance with Legal Requirements & Bylaws

Co-operatives are legally incorporated enterprises that are jointly owned and democratically governed by their Members — the people who actively use the business to meet their shared needs and goals, together. Your Annual General Meeting (AGM) is a legally required event in which the Board of Directors and Management report to your Membership on the activities of the previous fiscal year, financial results and plans for the coming year, to elect directors, and to discuss other matters of relevance.

It is important ensure that your co-op is complying with any legal requirements contained in state co-operative statutes, such as when your AGM is to be held, notice required, and quorum for any votes taken. Given the health risks presented by the COVID-19 pandemic and in-person gatherings, online Annual Meetings are a reasonable alternative and there is little risk that a decision to postpone or hold a meeting remotely in these unusual circumstances would be challenged. You should, however, review your Co-op's bylaws to ensure that an online AGM is not expressly prohibited. We also recommend that, if possible, you do not make any major decisions during your remote AGM such as amendments to your Articles or Bylaws, or considerations of a merger with another co-operative.

If you are planning to offer your AGM online, it's important to consider how you can set up the meeting in a way that accommodates people who may *not* have a computer with a camera, such as allowing members to call in only. It's also important to communicate a good explanation of why the meeting is being postponed or

done remotely. Ensuring easy access to your remote meeting will reduce the chances of conflict, and encourage stronger participation and engagement.

The AGM is also where your Members elect your Board of Directors and it will be important to ensure a good process with plenty of lead time, sufficient information on candidates, and options for voting. We suggest you begin planning early and consider using a secure online service with a good reputation and experience with co-operatives, as well as mail-in and in-person options, if possible. For example, NFCA Member Co-ops receive a discount on the services of [Simply Voting](), which offers online, instore, and mailed ballot options.

Co-op Tip: Discuss with your Board of Directors in advance suggestions on format, options, and come to agreement on the structure for the meeting. *Ex: City Market/Onion River Co-op began planning in June for their AGM in October.*

II.   **Choose Your Online Platform**

Choosing the remote platform for your online AGM will help you create a meeting that will achieve your Co-op's overall goals and support a successful meeting. Some of the online platforms used by food co-ops include Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and GoToMeeting. For smaller Member Co-ops, NFCA may be able to provide support services.

Aspects to consider when choosing an online platform include:

- The platform should have the capability to record the meeting, and also allow for interaction, questions from Members, and, if desired, breakout sessions for dialog.

- Estimate the level of participation: Are you expecting less than 100 people? Regular Zoom with more interaction should work fine! More than 200 people? The level of interaction will be less and using Zoom Webinar feature, GoToMeeting, or Microsoft Teams platform (if your Co-op already uses this) may be more appropriate.

- Once you've picked your tech platform, figure out how you're going to use it and how your Members will engage with it. For example, will Members be able to ask questions and communicate during the meeting, or do you want to save the interactions for a specific time? You can also choose to disable Q & A function so all communications will be in one place, e.g. the chat function, and you can direct Members to a specific channel of communication.

- **CO-OP TIP 1:** Plan in advance (months early) and get in thorough planning and lots of practice. Have a number of practice run-throughs (at least 2) on the platform you'll be using with all speakers involved.

- **CO-OP TIP 2**: Set up your AGM with a ~30-minute cushion in advance of the official start time and offer "tech support" for members new to your online platform to logon early and make sure they are comfortable using the online platform.

- **CO-OP TIP 3**: Identify and gather all necessary tech equipment. Depending on how you set it up, you might need to find extra microphones, a web camera, etc.

III.   Tools for Member Engagement Throughout the Meeting

How can you create opportunities for member engagement in a remote setting? Ideas include using polls, chat, visual interaction, and breakout rooms.

1. Polls:

A simple poll can help you check the pulse of your members and give opportunities for engagement throughout the meeting. Polls can also be used for decisions, such as approving the Annual Meeting minutes. Beyond using basic Zoom polls, visual engagement tools are helpful such as **Mentimeter** which includes live polls, visual word clouds, Q&As, and more to get real-time input.

Example Poll Questions: Questions that people want to answer/engage with:

- At Beginning: How long have you been a member of the Co-op? (Mentimeter or basic poll)
- What is one word or phrase that comes to mind when you think of X Co-op? (Mentimeter)
- What are your some of your favorite products at the Co-op?
- At end of session: One-word recap**:** word clouds to pick up how your members feel the meeting went (Mentimeter)

Speakers Amplify & Interact with Polls: After poll results are shared, share back-and-forth banter between co-op leaders (such as Board president and GM/other staff), commenting on poll responses, and tying the responses to your Co-op's programs, mission, and to personal stories, Co-op stories, etc. This creates a way for co-op presenters to remotely interact with participants and makes the meeting more engaging and entertaining.

2. Facilitate Robust Discussion:

It is important for meeting organizers to allot time for questions during the actual meeting (not simply submitted in advance). Setting up a fair procedure to manage questions in advance and communicating that to member participants at the beginning of the meeting is important, in case there are duplicate, inappropriate, or simply too many questions. In a hybrid meeting where there are several methods of participation, no particular group should be disadvantaged. In addition, members should have a mechanism for talking to each other during the meeting (such as via chat/private messages). Make the best use of your "chat" function for better engagement! Having too many channels for "chatting" or typing questions is confusing to participants and harder to track and monitor, so disabling the Q & A function so all communications will be in one place, the chat, and you can direct members simply to use that one channel of communication.

CO-OP TIP: Making sure one person's entire job (in addition to the meeting facilitator) is to **monitor and respond to the chat in real time**. Ideally, this is a Membership/Outreach staff or someone handling basic questions about the meeting and the co-op. This person can also "private chat" or direct message questions to the appropriate person for them to follow up with in the chat or respond to them during the Q & A portion of your meeting. When a member says something nice or celebratory, this chat point person can respond and acknowledge them, and add on something tied back to Co-op's core values, mission, ENDS, etc.

3. Visual Solidarity:

We're all feeling some level of isolation and wanting a little more connection, right? If it's possible with participant numbers, set your meeting up so members can see each other on video. Also consider asking Members to bring something to the meeting for a group photo, such as making a sign to hold up:

<div align="center">

WE ❤ OUR CO-OP!

</div>

4. Breakout Groups:

For startups and for established food co-ops with fewer attendees, consider using "breakout rooms" as another way for members to engage around a question or topic related to their Co-op's mission, core values, or future planning. If you plan to use breakout groups, make sure you have someone familiar with how to use them who can be in charge of assigning members to breakout rooms and bringing them back together in a timely fashion.

5. Randomized Interactive Raffle/Door Prize Winner Tool:

Use a **"Wheel of Names"** for interactive online raffles. You can customize the music it plays, sound, visuals, responses, etc. Try it out: https://wheelofnames.com/

IV.   Leading up to The Annual Meeting

In the months leading up to your AGM, plan a number of ways to inform and engage co-op Members leading up to your meeting. Also determine which pieces of your meeting you want to record in advance of the live event. Ideas include:

- Post or distribute Annual Reports in advance of meeting.
- Consider a brief recorded Annual Report overview in advance of the meeting with GM/key staff talking through a PowerPoint of Annual Report highlights. Encourage attendees to watch the Annual Report overview and submit questions and comments early by email. Communicate the plan to include as many comments and questions in the meeting as time allows.
- Consider holding a "roundtable-style" discussion before the annual meeting for members who would like to discuss the business reports and have additional questions.
- Determine: what portions should be done live versus prerecorded video? Having Board members or award recipients pre-record is a good idea.
- Then: make a plan for recording these videos and how they'll be shared.
- For open co-ops: consider providing Snack Packs (see more details below) and promote them in coordination with annual meeting notices and registration.
- For Startups: create a fun themed food or drink (such as a cocktail/mocktail or cookie recipe) and tie it to your Co-op's core values or accomplishments. Announce that all members who register will get their names put into a drawing for a special (COVID safe) delivery drop off of either a tin of cookies or special drink ingredient right before the Annual Meeting kicks off. Take a photo of said member and share during Annual Meeting.

V. Content & Structure

When thinking through the structure for your online AGM, keeping meetings between 1 – 1.5-hour range seems to work best. What time works best for your Members? For many of our Member Co-ops, meetings on an evening weeknight (vs. weekend) seems to work well when doing a remote meeting.

Sample Annual Meeting Agenda: 6:00pm – 7:30pm
- **5:30pm:** Early log-on for Tech Support
- **6:00pm**: Welcome with Community Toast
- **6:10pm**: Celebrating Co-op Employees
- **6:20pm**: Diversity Statement from Co-op Board
- **6:30pm**: Awarding of Community Fund/Grants
- **6:40pm**: Review of Annual Reports with Q&A
- **7:00pm**: Co-op Bylaws Update/Other Business
- **7:10pm**: Presenting of Community Award
- **7:20pm**: Closing
- **7:30pm**: After officially ending the meeting, leave meeting platform running for at least 10 minutes--without recording--so attendees have transition time to type in final comments, questions, say goodbye, etc.

CO-OP TIPS on Meeting Content & Structure

1. **Pre-Meeting Tech Support**:
   a. 30 minutes before meeting officially starts, allow people who need technical support/help getting onto or using platform call Zoom in and to get help setting up.
   b. Provide a phone number/email for tech support person visible in chat.

2. **Welcome screen**: Set up a welcome screen featuring beautiful photos of the co-op and staff, members, etc. with zippy background music and welcoming messages:
   a. *"THANK YOU FOR JOINING US. X CO-OP ANNUAL MEETING WILL BEGIN SHORTLY."*
   b. *Rotating Co-op Ends*
   c. *Rotating Co-op Values & Principles*

3. **Opening Member Engagement Questions in Mentimeter (Menti.com)/Zoom Poll**

4. **Share prerecorded video recordings of Directors introducing themselves and sharing**:
   a. How long they've served on the Board of Directors
   b. What they love best about the Co-op

5. **Closing Tips: Wrap the meeting up with a positive and energizing portion of the meeting (so not bylaws):**
   a. Community Award (prerecorded), and then Board commentary tying awardee's strengths to core value of the co-op (such as sharing commitment to racial justice, local food system, etc.)

6. Leave Zoom running for 5-10 minutes after the event for attendees to chat more.

7. Have a more gradual fade out after meeting officially ends (5 minutes or so) out with zippy music.
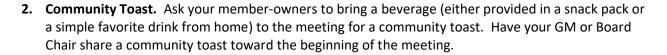
VI. Celebrations

One way to make for a successful AGM is to make sure that you offer opportunities to celebrate together. Here are some examples of how you can add a sense of celebration to your online AGM, including snack packs, community toasts, and holding a raffle:

1. **Snack Pack/Goody Bags/Thank You Bags:** Food Co-ops can work with local vendors to provide **"**Snack packs" or "thank you bags" to their members in advance of the annual meeting. Snack Packs are a great way to get members excited to register, and to weave in an element of celebration to your online Annual Meeting. Snack Packs can be made available to annual meeting registrants on a first-come, first-served basis the week leading up to the annual meeting: "*Snack packs are free but limited to the first X registrants requesting them at customer service desk*."

   Snack Packs Can Include:
   - A sparkling non-alcoholic beverage
   - Co-op made/local products popular with your members
   - Cabot cheddar bites
   - Locally made candle
   - Vermont Smoke & Cure mini salami
   - Yolo popcorn
   - Lake Champlain Chocolates chocolate squares
   - Vermont Nut Free Chocolates in the shape of Vermont

2. **Community Toast.** Ask your member-owners to bring a beverage (either provided in a snack pack or a simple favorite drink from home) to the meeting for a community toast. Have your GM or Board Chair share a community toast toward the beginning of the meeting.

   Example Community Toast from Hunger Mountain Co-op:
   Please raise a glass:
   - *To our employees for their supreme dedication to keeping the store open and us safe.*
   - *To the members and customers for supporting (and shopping at) the Co-op and abiding by our safety protocols.*
   - *To the Co-op council (Board) for their insight and leadership*
   - *To the local producers for providing us with healthy products.*

3. **Raffle**. Have a raffle during your remote Annual Meeting. Share at beginning of the meeting that you'll be announcing raffle winners at the end of the meeting. The raffle could be a basket of goodies, or simply a $100 gift certificate to the Co-op.

VII. Follow Up

1. **Survey**. After the annual meeting, send out an online survey to assess how the meeting went and provide another channel for member engagement and feedback. Survey questions could include:
   - Overall, I had a good experience at X Co-op's remote Annual Meeting
   - It was easy to register and to log into X Co-op's remote Annual Meeting.
   - I could see and hear the presentations.
   - The topics covered were relevant to me.
   - The presentations were clear and informative.
   - The time allocated to the various topics worked for me.
   - I had a chance to ask questions and make comments.

- I would attend another member meeting using online/teleconferencing technology.
- Please share any additional feedback about our Annual Meeting: COMMENT BOX

2. **Follow-up Newsletter**. Following the Annual Meeting, send out a newsletter with a link to the Annual Meeting recording, and a summary of questions asked and responded to, including questions that members sent in leading up to and after the Annual Meeting.

3. **Post Meeting Recording on YouTube**. That makes it easy to reference back to and can be easily linked to in future communications. Here's a [link to Hunger Mountain Co-op's Annual Meeting](#) as reference…

4. **Roundtable Discussion**. Consider holding a follow-up "roundtable-style" discussion after the annual meeting discussion for members who would like to discuss the business reports and have additional questions.