

Let's Talk About Engagement: Changes at Cooperative Grocer Network

BY ELLEN MICHEL

Cooperative Grocer Network (CGN) has always been about connection and engagement. Started in the late '90s, it has morphed with the times, attempting to keep pace with enormous changes in technology and communications. We've witnessed big changes in the food co-op landscape, too. Now entering an era of growth (new startups, multiple stores) and uncertainty (the new normal of an increasingly competitive environment), food co-ops engage through CGN to participate in organic sharing, creating the documentation of our evolving history.

I am writing this fresh from Consumer Cooperative Management Association (CCMA) 2015 in Boise, Idaho, just a couple of weeks into my new role as executive director of Cooperative Grocer Network. I was struck by how many CCMA attendees (many of whom are new to our co-ops) didn't really know what CGN is, or how it can help their efforts. This piece, the first of a regular series of articles in *Cooperative Grocer* magazine, is designed to help.

Who among you remembers the first CGIN, back before we lost that vowel standing for "information"? I talked with Karen Zimbelman (KZ), the first manager of what eventually became a collection of listservs operating with support from NCBA. She reminded me that Cooperative Grocer (Information) Network came into existence as a solution to a problem faced by general managers, who asked, "How can we be more responsive to requests for information in a more efficient way?" Back in the day, these questions often came over the phone and were answered by snail mail, as in: "Send me your job description for a deli manager, please!"

KZ and the next CGN manager, Bella Waters, got those listservs up and running. They began to assemble a deep library of resources, including recipes, job descriptions, pictures of endcap displays, and a toolkit titled "How to Start a Food Co-op." CGN connected cooperators across the country, helping us share information about common tasks and challenges. In my previous role, as a marketing and outreach manager, I met many wonderful peers through CGN. I found a roommate for CCMA, compared various marketing plans with other managers, and made connections that evolved into enduring friendships.

In 2013, under the management of our third manager, Dan Nordley, CGIN.coop merged with CooperativeGrocer.coop (the magazine site) to produce a behind-the-scenes collaboration platform more like LinkedIn. More than 2,000 board and staff members enrolled, creating profiles for themselves and contributing to conversations and wiki pages.

Since moving to the first version of that platform in 2014, we've collected more than 500 discussions on the CGN site. These discussions give you insight into urgent and ongoing issues, as well as solutions at particular stores. The CGN member-only website is password-protected. Not visible to our competition, it supplements the public face of CGN, *Cooperative Grocer* magazine, and a new Cooperative Grocer Network Facebook page. CGN.coop—we own it and we refresh it every day.

In many ways, we've been in testing mode during the past two years. We've learned a great deal about user preferences—and you let us know that you really liked those email listservs. You wanted the ability to start



and respond to discussions via email. Nordley listened to that, directing our web developers to build that capability into the next iteration of the site, set to go live in August 2015.

CGN membership works like this: after your organization joins Cooperative Grocer Network, individuals gain access to the member-only website with the help of a GM-appointed CGN gatekeeper, currently known as an account manager. Your co-op pays modest annual dues, based on a percentage of sales. The gatekeeper/account manager educates staff and board about the resource, inviting participation and helping us fine-tune the user experience on the site.

For those who are engaged, the new CGN website can be vital hub that connects us during the immediacy of our daily tasks, creating more fun and functionality for co-ops. It points us in the direction of resources we've created in the past. It also provides a live audience for current projects, including those of other necessary organizations, such as National Co+op Grocers, CDS Consulting Co-op, and Food Co-op Initiative. As it has from the beginning, it puts peers in contact with one another, facilitating education, information, and training.

I urge you to discover the new CGN, putting it to use for your co-op. Join the CGN board and me at our Annual Meeting, happening via conference call on Wednesday, Aug. 24, from 1:00 p.m. to 2:30 p.m. CST. Please keep in touch with me directly, too, at ellen@cooperativegrocer.coop. I'd be happy to add you to our email list, so that CGN updates land right in your mailbox. □

VISIT OUR FASTER, NEW SITE

The new CGN member-only site runs faster, with new features:

- A fresh new design.
- You can start and respond to discussions via email, with threads sent to your email address nested in chronological order.
- Discussion groups are now called Spaces and can be set up with a moderator and specific group policies.
- Spaces can be divided into subsections. For instance, Operations can have a subsection just for GMs. Your co-op board can have its own subsection.
- To enhance cross-department or topic interest, discussions can be set up to be seen by all CGN members—or, optionally, seen only by members of the Space.
- The SOLR search engine is more like Google. Besides translating spelling errors and incorrect search strings, it can search the content of documents. Searches can be filtered by content type.
- There is a Wiki library on topics such as Open Book Management and Customer Service Training; members can edit Wiki's, which serve as collection points for related content.
- A Food Co-op in the News section.
- A Market section contains Classifieds for selling that used cooler or seeing co-op supporting vendors.
- A robust Job Listings helps when you are seeking a new general manager or have other positions to fill.