

Co-op Helps Build Local Business Alliance

BY PAM MEHNERT

A few years ago, I traveled to a large city with a group of friends for a women's college basketball tournament. During the course of our stay, it became apparent that there wasn't much about the city we were in that was different from other cities we had visited. The same chain hotels, the same chain restaurants, and the same chain retailers lined the streets of the city, so much so that we could have been "Anywhere USA."

Assuming that some really great local places did exist there, we had no way of easily finding them. It concerned me to think that people coming to my home city of Milwaukee, Wisconsin might have a similar experience and would never get to enjoy the great local places that make Milwaukee a great Midwest city.

I returned home motivated to do something that would make a difference in my community. But what could I do, or what could my co-op do, and how could it actually make a difference? At Outpost Co-op, our board of directors had already created several Ends policies related to our owners having a sense of connectedness to the community, with "local commerce" being a prominent factor, so the direction had been established. But we needed businesses other than Outpost to be interested in similar results.

Our first step was to bring together community leaders and business owners at an informal gathering at Outpost to talk about how we each relate to our shoppers as a local business different from our chain store counterparts. That first meeting included a local coffee roaster, a bookseller, a natural foods store/café, a credit union, a local theater group, and Outpost. Despite how different our businesses were, we quickly established our common interest: to tell our shoppers, friends, and visitors to Milwaukee why our local businesses are part of what make our city unique.

Our group continued to do what we do best in the co-op world—we continued to meet. We invited two other businesses into our discussions, a local brewery and a local sporting goods store. We talked about our vision, what we hoped to create; we wrote a mission statement and talked about the words we did or didn't want to include. We each started to reach out into our own business sectors. We visited other stores that did well in competitive chain store



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environments, learning what they did to differentiate their businesses and to build awareness among their shoppers of what "locally-owned" means.

Our networking brought us an awareness of existing local networks and alliances in other cities—the Twin Cities Independent Business Alliance, Austin Unchained, Local First Chicago, and Sustainable Connections, among others. From there we contacted BALLE (Business Alliance for Local Living Economies), became a member of their group, and purchased their Local First Campaign "how to" kit. We decided our message would be "pro-local" and not "anti-chain." Soon our campaign was really starting to take shape.

Milwaukee Magazine ran an editorial piece in the November 2007 issue titled, "Milwaukee Sucks?" discussing how easy and acceptable it is for the media to trash our own city or paint it in a negative light. The article ended, however, with a list of places that made our city a fascinating place where you can find a concertina bar, great authentic ethnic restaurants, and an art museum with wings.

One month later, we introduced our community to "Our Milwaukee," the city's first local business alliance, which at that time had only eight members. Our coming out event got us a world of free coverage in local papers, on local radio stations and TV morning shows. We spent zero dollars on what must have amounted to more than \$10,000 worth of media coverage, simply because we had a message the media felt was worth hearing. That message is that local businesses provide a genuine quality experience that's not only important to find but important to maintain as we add to our city's unique character.

Fast-forward to today, and after less than one year Our Milwaukee boasts 43 independent business members. We did all of our development work without a budget, with many in-kind contributions from the marketing people in our group and graphic artists willing to work for gift certificates from our businesses. We've held two major events so far, a buy local campaign last holiday season, and a "celebrate your independents" week this past July. During the second event we convinced a local independent movie theater to run a free screening of the movie "Independent America," a documentary that tells a back road story of how the character of many of our cities is being lost. We packed the theater and began to create greater awareness of exactly who our independent businesses really are.

While we in the co-op sector continue our work, locally and nationally, to build the co-op name and prominence in our communities, I believe an alliance with other independent businesses is just as important. I've found that many of our local businesses share common co-op values such as education and concern for the community. When Our Milwaukee developed its list of criteria for membership, one of the most important to us was that a local business would participate in community activities or make local charitable contributions. We didn't come together only to promote our businesses, we came together to create the community we want to live in!

For more information on joining or starting a local business alliance, contact BALLE at www.livingeconomies.org. Visit Our Milwaukee at www.ourmilwaukee.net. ■