

# Marketing Matters 2008:

## Focus on community and service

BY ELLEN MICHEL



**M**arketing Matters 2008 moved to the southwest, home of La Montañita Co-op. Held in Albuquerque, N.M. on May 14–16, the conference focused on marketing leadership and customer service, carrying forward many of the themes of the previous gathering of October 2007.

Featured sessions included an opening titled “Legendary Service at the Ritz-Carleton” by William Kamaka, assistant director of Human Resources at the Ritz Carleton, Lake Las Vegas. Kamaka offered a polished philosophy of “gold standard” customer service, rich with advice about staff empowerment and service excellence. “Customers want value,” Kamaka reminded us. “They expect five things: a one-of-a-kind experience; the immediate impact of a ‘wow!’ environment; fast access to knowledge and wisdom; utility and a total lack of hassle; and convenience and respect for their time.”

An intensive brand workshop led by Katherine Jones and Randall Macon of Milkshake Media helped attendees actively reflect on both the current and the desired state of our co-op communities. Using worksheets to chart the specific ways people connect with and belong to enduring social groups, participants worked together to consider common experiences, shared values, symbols, conversations and actions made possible by their co-ops.

“Milkshake Media is working with NCGA to help us build the co-op brand and develop its potential,” explained Kelly Smith, NCGA director of marketing and communications. Notes from the workshop will be used to move that work forward, as will interviews with general managers from selected stores.

Ari Weinzwieg, co-founder of Zingermans’ in Ann Arbor, Mich., offered a session on Servant Leadership, back by popular demand. Weinzwieg emphasized the power of creating a mission statement that can serve as “true north,” orienting all other business goals. The Zingermans’ business perspective puts its mission and vision into practice with effective systems, a healthy corporate culture, and the cultivation of common guiding principles. Results are measured as “great food, great

service, and great finance.” Weinzwieg and his long-term partners work to create a culture based on a powerful training compact. “Trainees take responsibility for the effectiveness of their training, with trainers agreeing to document clear expectations, provide training resources, and recognize and reward performance.”

Responsibility was also the theme of a participatory session I led, focusing on the daily demands met by marketing and member-owner services staff. Small groups looked at scenarios representing the many dimensions of the marketing job: advertising, promotions, merchandising, outreach, education and public relations. Each scenario required the ability to analyze, prioritize, decide and act; in a large group discussion we shared strategies for approaching common marketing situations in order to minimize conflict and create desired results.

A session by Lynn Falk of Solterra Studios shifted focus to the aesthetics of the retail environment. The writer and producer of *Healthy Style*, a one-hour special for public television on healthy, eco-friendly design, Falk offered visual merchandising tips, techniques and trends, illustrated by slides from the many retail environments she has helped design.

Retail audits of Albuquerque stores, including Whole Foods, La Montañita and Sunshine Farmers Market, also gave attendees a chance to consider the importance of creative merchandising. “Retail audits are always fun, because brand managers get to know one another quickly in a scavenger-hunt-like exercise,” said Kim Kusnier, NCGA marketing programs specialist. “We’re able to share stories while asking questions such as, ‘Why haven’t these shelves been fronted and faced?’ and ‘Look at those ingenious pull-out pasta drawers!’ It’s possible to gather a lot of great ideas in a short period of time.”

Two member panels were a particular highlight of the conference. The first, “Marketing on a Shoestring Budget,” included a presentation by Allan Reetz from Hanover Co-op Food Store about the effective use of radio advertising. Erin Swystun from GreenTree Co-op Grocery (Mount Pleasant, Mich.) and Lisa Smith from Neighborhood Co-op Grocery (Carbondale, Ill.) provided dozens of practical, ingenious ideas.

A panel on “Community Collaborations” featured Jeanne Lakso, who described the Linden Hills Co-op Rays the Roof solar panel project in Minneapolis, Minn. April Marlow talked about developing a Food to Grow curriculum to teach children in kindergarten through fourth grade, in the three-county area surrounding Tidal Creek Cooperative Market in Wilmington, N.C.

Special kudos went to Robin Seydel, membership director of La Montañita Co-op Food Market in Albuquerque, Santa Fe, and Gallup, N.M. Robin gave a brief history of the ways La Montañita has used volunteers over the course of its history, from the early days when they formed the backbone of operations. After an early 1990s Department of Labor decree against using volunteers in any position deemed a “wage-labor” job, La Montañita began to focus on allowable volunteer outreach opportunities.

Today the co-op connects with 130 local agencies in a new volunteer program called Building Community Capacity. In addition to co-op events and board opportunities, volunteer members from La Montañita may share their time and energy with a variety of community organizations in exchange for a limited discount at the co-op. Seydel convincingly described the value of volunteerism in building a web of meaningful community relationships, and she demonstrated the impact of the program on the fiscal health of the co-op.

A session on the CAP customized flyer program and an update from Kelly Smith gave attendees a chance to learn more about NCGA resources, including new store signage options.

Fifty-five participants representing forty-five member co-ops attended the spring conference, organized by NCGA’s Kelly Smith and support staff Tim Barnes, Kim Kusnier and Mari Roseman. Examples of newsletters, ownership materials, signage and swag were shared at much-examined display tables. Most important, relationships were forged among the attendees, who maintain conversations on the CGIN Marketing and Membership listserve and in other forms of ongoing peer support.

More information, including downloads of conference presentations, is available to NCGA members at [www.ncga.coop/marketingmatters](http://www.ncga.coop/marketingmatters). ■