

Marketing Matters 2012

Co-op brand managers gather in Portland

BY ELLEN MICHEL



PHOTO BY ELLEN MICHEL

Marketing Matters, the annual conference organized by the National Cooperative Grocers Association (NCGA) marketing team, focuses on brand management and development among food co-ops across the country. What do we have in common, despite our diverse markets? How do we manage change and inspire one another, while making sense of trends and opportunities in social media, cultural evolution, wellness, and food?

This year's event took place May 8–10, 2012, in Portland, Ore., a city famous for its roses, rivers, bikes, and Do-It-Yourself exuberance. We gathered in the historic Benson Hotel, a few minutes' walk from Powell's Bookstore and other Pearl District curiosities. Food cart culture is ahead of the curve in Portland, with impressive examples a block or two from our base.

Boot camp boogie

New this year was a complimentary three-session marketing boot camp, created in recognition of the many people attending last year's conference who were new to their marketing jobs. Filling the room to capacity, the audience included both new marketers and many who've been at the job for a number of years.

Kelly Smith, NCGA director of marketing and communications, provided a boot camp

Scenes of Portland framed the conference, with street art, food carts, and free transit to visit the city's many retail hubs.

The three-session marketing boot camp (right) was popular with new and experienced marketers alike.

overview of the Hartman model of the wellness shopper, a still-useful point of departure for thinking about customer segmentation. Kelly Miles, NCGA merchandiser lead, gave pointers about signage and effective displays. Lisa Smith, brand development manager for Neighborhood Co-op Grocery, offered a session on marketing plans and budgeting, complete with advice about how to make the planning process less arbitrary or nerve-wracking.

"I led the final Q & A of the day," said Smith, "and the questions were amazing! The best part for me was how we all, speakers and participants alike, worked together to share experiences, tips, and new approaches, effectively answering the questions with a spectrum of solutions. None of us has all the answers, but all of us working together can effect positive change like no other type of organization can. The feedback we got was outstanding, with several questions about what topics next year's boot camp will cover."



PHOTO BY MARI ROSEMAN

Retail audits

Marketing Matters includes an afternoon spent exploring the host city in teams. We caught the famous Portland free transit and scavenged for exciting ideas, visiting Food Front Cooperative Grocery's two locations, Alberta Cooperative Grocery, Rogue Ales Public House, New Seasons Market, and other competitive landscape leaders. Marketers such as Mindy Dwyer of Port Townsend Food Co-op could not resist the lure of retail oddities not on the official list of audit locations, including VooDoo Doughnuts, "where branding turns to cult." Check out their website and be tempted to plan a vacation that includes a full array of yeasted forbidden foods, tempered by delicious amounts of irony.



Conference keynote speaker Tim McAlpine of Currency Marketing gave two presentations on using social media in transformative ways.

Retail auditing returned as a topic during a conference presentation by Lisa Malmarowski, director of brand and store development at Outpost Natural Foods. She detailed a leadership-team auditing process with report forms and follow-up action plans, describing the Outpost system as one that encourages ownership, accountability, and recognition for upholding brand and customer service standards.

Peer brilliance

Each day of the conference featured co-op marketers with creative solutions for particular situations. A panel on Ownership Strategies included Jennifer Luhmann of St. Peter Food Co-op, outlining a successful owner capitalization campaign. Ahzjah Netjer-Simons described pitching a tent inside Sevananda Natural Foods during Taste of Sevananda owner-recruitment events. Joann Tomasulo of Lexington Food Co-op shared the process of making a 40-year-anniversary film, using bits of ephemera borrowed from owners. *Locally Grown, A Lexington Food Co-op Story* carried forward the work of previous Marketing Matters gatherings with its suggestion to invite shoppers and staff to share memories and memorabilia from our stores.

A second panel, “Ready, Set, Grow! Positioning Your Brand for Growth,” included strategies for expansions and brand updating. Wendy Westmoreland showed how Community Food Co-op in Bozeman, Mont., prepared for a second store. Jessica Miller from Food Front

Co-op in Portland talked about creating a more vibrant brand. Joshua Kendall from Community Mercantile described how The Merc is working to rebrand itself in the face of new competition, partly by means of an award-winning television commercial.

In breakout sessions, Tom Monahan from PCC Natural Markets discussed “Effective Advertising in a Shifting Media Universe,” while New Leaf Market’s Cristin Burns presented “Party On! Marketing for Food Events.” Notes from these and other sessions include images and suggestions for measuring success. Available to NCGA members, the presentations are located in the Marketing Matters folder within the Conference Materials Fileshare at ncga.coop.

Cross-sector idea sharing

Annie Hoy from Ashland Food Co-op presented “Going Rogue: IYC Cross-Sector Collaborations.” Inspired by the International Year of Cooperatives, Hoy and others from the Oregon Rogue Valley have begun to connect around common themes and events. Hoy’s presentation will be reprised at the annual conference for the Northwest Cooperative Development Center (in October 2012) and at the Indiana Cooperative Summit (in November 2012).

Conference keynote speaker Tim McAlpine of Currency Marketing gave two presentations filled with advice about using social media in transformative ways. Creator of the “Young

and Free” campaign, McAlpine was inspired to engage college students in competition for one-year positions as “spokesters” for regional North American credit unions. Spokesters blog several times a week, create short videos, contribute to a “Young and Free Show,” and use Twitter, Facebook and occasional live appearances to convey the differences between credit unions and conventional banks. McAlpine also inspired a Marketing Matters Young and Free Jam, an almost instant collaboration available at YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=bzTaUNzh9MU&feature=youtu.be.

Bringing it home

A tools and resources update from the NCGA Marketing Team considered what’s new at the strongertogether.coop website, including easier ways to share and repurpose content. Recipes will begin to feature some branded ingredients, and a voluntary New Item Program (launching in January 2013) has been designed to improve product adoption. Door-buster deals with trade support will increase market competitiveness. A new quarterly promo playbook and Spanish language versions of the consumer brochures are among many other projects also in the works.

Kelly Smith announced an International Year of the Cooperative World Food Day Cause Promotion scheduled for Saturday, Oct. 13, 2012, challenging NCGA co-ops and cooperative vendors to raise at least \$100,000 for hunger relief. There will be a cross-sector My Co-op Rocks! Contest beginning in September 2012, and marketers were invited to contribute to a Recommended Marketing Practices Living Document.

The final session of the conference was a “Bottom Line Change” workshop with Zing-Train’s Maggie Bayless. “It’s important to do something concrete within 48 hours after any kind of training,” Bayless advised. She provided guidance for zeroing in on specific achievable ideas that might have the most impact back home.

Bigger than ever, Marketing Matters 2012 provided tools for coping with change, connections with other brand management specialists, and inspiration around co-op themes. Oh, and then there were the Pisco sours, the Thai iced tea, the Beast brunches, and the abundant good energy available in Portlandia. As New Leaf Market’s Burns put it, once back home: “This year’s Marketing Matters was the best to date. I left every presentation with new ideas and better ways to refine our existing practices. In the day-to-day grind, I sometimes lose sight of the bigger picture. Marketing Matters rejuvenates my co-op spirit and inspires me to become a better and more effective co-op marketer.” ■