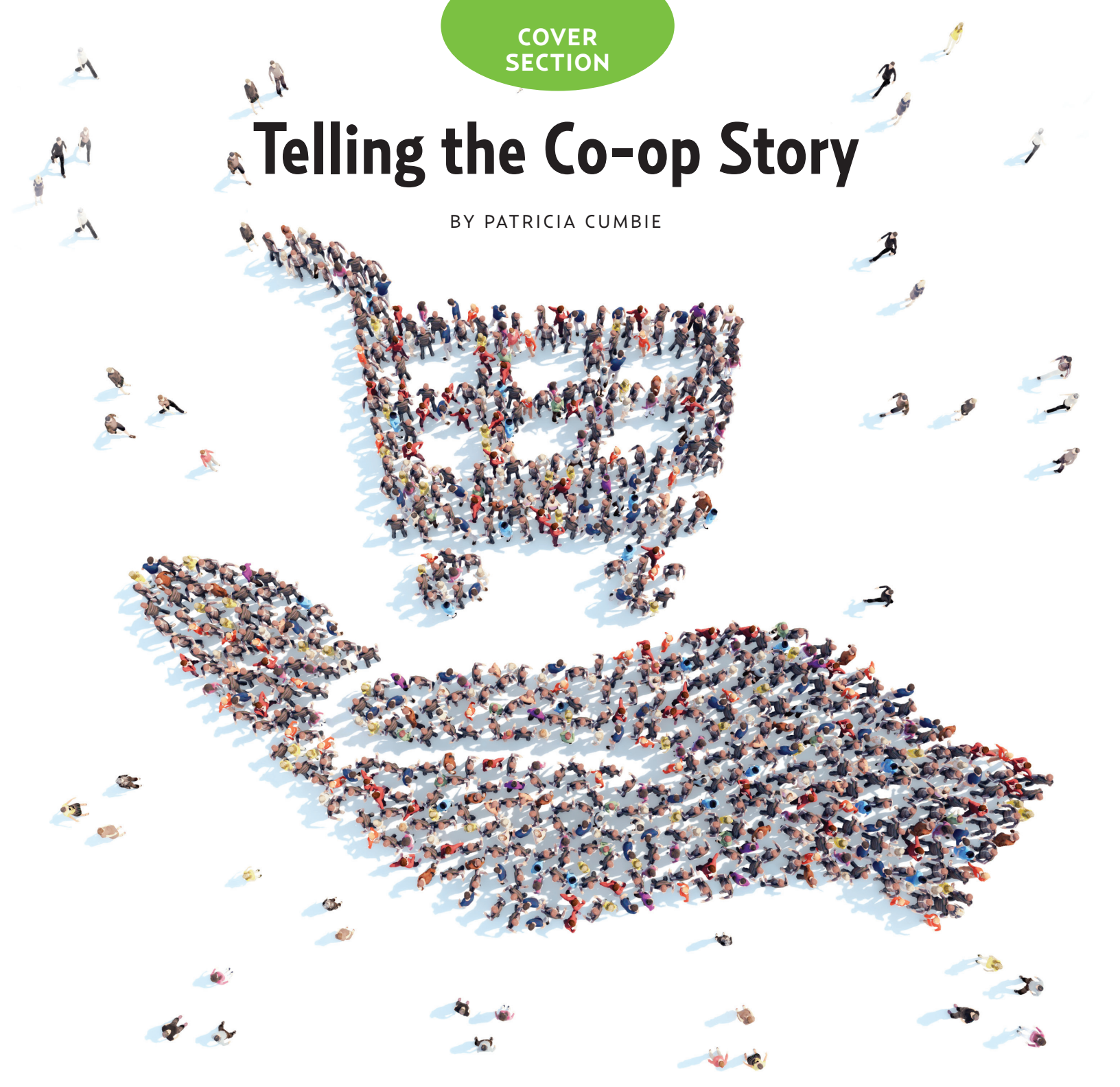


Telling the Co-op Story

BY PATRICIA CUMBIE



Stories are as old as humankind. If we didn't have stories, we wouldn't have progress or evolution. It's how people communicate, organize, and instruct. Nor could most of us imagine a childhood without bedtime stories. Our most cherished memories are linked with a vivid story. As humans, we crave connection and meaning, and that's why stories can feel as essential as breathing.

Even though storytelling seems as natural as living, good stories, the kind that spur people to action or move their hearts, are the result of

skill, planning, and commitment. Storytelling in business also has a purpose. If a business wants to expand its brand's reach, it has to do so through relationship-building, organizational leadership, and strategic thinking. Being good at defining who you are, and why what you do matters to current and prospective customers, enhances all three of those company objectives. For values-based businesses such as cooperatives, the capacity and facility to demonstrate ethics is paramount. Otherwise, there could be no way to distinguish the cooperative difference.

Likewise, a strong competitive advantage for cooperatives is their ownership structure. No other business has an ownership connection and such potential for a powerful relationship with its customers. There are literally a million great stories to tell based on the difference co-ops have made in the lives of others, the way communities have been strengthened and local economies bolstered. Cooperatives have an incredible opportunity, and a responsibility, to share this treasure-trove. In a world where there is rampant exploitation of people and resources, our world needs co-op impact stories ▶

◀ more than ever.

It doesn't take much to convince people in business of the efficacy of a good story. However, some of the problems that challenge co-ops can also be directly tracked to their inability to convey who they are in the marketplace. **Especially in today's competitive environment, every cooperative needs a strong communications plan and strategy.** To ignore this essential part of business development is potentially to invite organizational discord, loss of market share, and diminished impact.

Stories build relationships

The very air seems filled with stories, and in our modern world it is. There are myriad media platforms available for sharing knowledge or experience with the world at large. Technology allows for a steady stream of instantaneously available narrative. But is it crafted? Emotionally compelling? Purposeful? Most people have learned to tune out chunks of communication if it isn't, dismissing it as background noise. That's the challenge for anyone working to try to gain someone's undivided attention in contemporary society—be it a friend or a savvy marketing director.

In everything people do in a cooperative, be it governing, supervising, or helping customers, everyone has a role to play either in managing the story being told, understanding the story's audience, or telling it. This takes place (or not) in each meeting room, in training situations, between managers and staff, every day in customer service interactions, and through the co-op's marketing and communication channels. The story being told to all stakeholders is how the co-op culture is conveyed and sustained.

It's important also to be aware that a story may fall on a continuum of "meh" to "awesome." Merely regurgitating the organization's purpose doesn't necessarily make it resonant to an audience. Or, if the co-op is not proactively telling its story with foresight and purpose, it is still telling a story, and to its audience that could be titled something like "Lack of Awareness" or "We Don't Care." Engendered in successful communication is the desire to connect and convey meaning.

When stories fail to connect, there are usually a number of reasons for it: lack of enthusiasm for the story, a need for greater focus by the storyteller, and absence of a personal connection for the audience. A good way to develop and tell more impactful stories is to evaluate communications internally and externally (marketing materials, speeches, training, leadership development, etc.) by addressing the following questions:

- What is the purpose of this communication?

- Who is it speaking to?
- What should this communication do?
- How do you want people to feel?
- What do you want people to do?

Connecting with an audience requires emotional intelligence and, frankly, good customer service skills. Emotional intelligence is the ability to be empathic, disciplined, and socially aware—in a nutshell, being able to put yourself in others' shoes, to be able to see the other side of an argument. Want to connect with a busy mom in your customer base? Think about her typical day. Make your business relationship with her stronger by demonstrating to her you understand her needs and how to be of service to her.

Storytelling is where passion for the co-op really comes through. Use the elements of literature: character, conflict, action, context, and emotion. Design your stories around what you want people to remember about the co-op.

Successful storytelling through communications planning

One of the most overlooked aspects of business planning is strategizing for and executing the best ways for the co-op's story to be told. It is erroneous to expect that positive and impactful communication will happen organically, or that people will be so inspired by the co-op's mission that word-of-mouth excitement and exponential sales will follow. The co-op needs preparation and infrastructure to successfully implement its storytelling.

Your cooperative's marketing and owner services outreach plan, or marketing communications plan, is the guide to leading

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the co-op down the path of storytelling success with purpose and understanding. It doesn't matter what size your co-op is, a marketing plan is indispensable to being successful and viable. The co-op's communications efforts should be geared toward a precise goal—if not, the organization may be spinning its wheels, losing time, or procrastinating on launching effective systems.

Because it is strategically important as a critical component of the co-op's overall business planning, getting expert facilitation and support for creating a marketing and member services outreach plan is essential. It's also important to evaluate the programs you

already have in place, as well as determine areas for development while undertaking a brand management or marketing plan.

Stories create pathways to participation

Storytelling is an important tool for driving innovation and change in cooperatives. When people feel an emotional connection or belonging, they are motivated to do things on behalf of a vision. The cooperative model demonstrates a strong vision for ethics in business; more and more people want to be a part of that or something "real," and that is the story that attracts them to the cooperative.

When we talk about belonging, people define it as feeling welcomed and accepted. It is certainly that, but that is an outcome. Belonging doesn't mean offering our co-op owners or our communities unconditional love—it means cultivating a connection. The act of belonging is about fostering relationships. When people feel connected, especially through stories, they do powerful things together.

How can we expand participation based on the relationship-building we already do and want to do in the future? Creating feedback loops in our communications, wherein the audience also becomes the storyteller, is crucial to co-op storytelling. Often the ratio of "telling" to "listening" is imbalanced. Organizations often do way more of the telling and not enough of listening. Co-ops answer the call to greater participation not by cajoling people to be "involved," but by first issuing an invitation, especially to listen, creating organizational infrastructure that allows for two-way communication.

The designated story practitioners in most organizations are often considered to be those people in leadership positions. That's one area where the co-op model differs. Democracy makes it possible for people with other roles in the organization to contribute their part to the story. Creating entrance points within the co-op to embrace consumers on the continuum of their understanding of cooperation and desire to participate allows shoppers and owners to move with ease along the spectrum of involvement and loyalty.

In a cooperative business, educating everyone about the co-op story, especially staff, is critical to promoting ownership among new customers and enhancing belonging for current owners. Invigorate co-op culture throughout your co-op (staff orientations, membership meetings, community education) by continually emphasizing the co-op principles and values. By providing individuals and groups the tools for technical competence, professionalism, and integrity, people can be empowered to take action on behalf of the owners they serve, the customers they influence, and the stories they share. ■