



Annual Meetings and Annual Report Field Guide

By Todd Wallace and Michael Healy

The annual meeting and annual report provide our co-ops with a built in mechanism for telling the important story of how we make a difference in our member-owners' lives. Think of them as a structured opportunity for the co-op to be accountable to its member-owners in both governance and operational realms. By creating a compelling annual report and organizing an effective annual meeting (they work together) we can help our members understand not just how the co-op is doing now, but also how the current conditions and activities connect to the past and future.

Principles of Effective Annual Meetings:

The annual meeting ensures that owners know the status of the business they own. Member-owners see why it matters that they own and shop at the co-op (matters for them, matters to other members, matters to the world). It also creates strategic transparency – as the co-op evolves, member-owners understand and appreciate that evolution.

- Understand your purpose. We show accountability to the member-owners by demonstrating how their co-op is meeting their needs. In addition, we can foster a broader understanding of the board's strategic work and hear directly from members their opinions and questions about that work.
- Be intentional. Plan the agenda and your logistics (as in any public forum). What do you want to communicate to and hear from the attendees? Ask yourself, "what will be the role of the board in this meeting?" Consider, for example, where directors will be sitting (highly visible up front, or mingling in the crowd), and what you will be saying. Who will be speaking?
- Have skilled facilitation. Make sure that whoever is running the meeting has the skills necessary to perform the task. Some options include the board president or another director, the General Manager or Member Services Manager, even a professional facilitator.
- Remember the diversity of membership. The annual meeting is not just for the people who can show up, but is also for the people who *can't*. Follow up with an article in the newsletter, a store display, or a news item on your website that will showcase the event.

- Consider the many elements that can help frame or focus your meeting. For example, some co-ops include some or all of the following:
 - A celebratory atmosphere with music, food, and fun activities
 - A dynamic speaker or presentation designed to educate on a relevant topic
 - A structured way for the board to hear from member-owners on a specific topic or question or issue the board is working on (member-linkage)
- Check your bylaws. Be sure to follow any requirements expressed in your bylaws or state law.

Principles of Compelling Annual Reports:

Annual reports are guided by many of the same principles as annual meetings. As a complement to the annual meeting, the report helps explain the story of all the work that we're doing on behalf of our member-owners. It builds their understanding of what they own. With that in mind:

- Having *high-level* financial information presented in an engaging way can be very useful. Show long term trend information about key data such as sales, net income, and total member equity over time. Take key bits of information and present them as a picture (instead of just tables of numbers). This information should tell the dramatic story of the co-op's financial condition over the years.
- If your board uses Policy Governance®, use your Ends monitoring report as a basis for the non-financial aspects of accountability. Take information from that report (rewritten as necessary for clarity and focus) to show the members what the co-op has been accomplishing on their behalf. A powerful report will focus more attention on the outcomes of the co-op's programs rather than simply on the activities themselves.
- If your board has been studying relevant topics and trends related to your co-op's community, share with the member-owners what you've been learning about and how you plan to engage them in this conversation.

Questions for discussion:

1. What kind of story should we tell about how the co-op is doing now, and how the present relates to the past and future?
2. What data/information could tell that story in the annual meeting and/or annual report? How could we present the information in a clear, accessible and engaging way?
3. How are we going to tell the story of the difference we make in our member-owners' lives?

4. What is the right balance between business, education, engagement and celebration in our annual meeting?

Resources:

- Annual Meetings
 - CGIN listserv archives (www.cgin.coop)
 - “annual meeting entertainment,” April 15, 2002
 - “annual meetings” February 5, 2004
 - “annual meeting attendance & beer tickets,” September 16, 2005
 - “Annual Meeting Short Movie,” September 16, 2008
 - “Michael Shuman speaks at the Hanover Co-op” and “Gar Alperovitz speaks at Weaver’s Way Co-op.” Videos, CBLD Library.
<http://cdsconsulting.coop/cblibrary>
 - Michel, Ellen. “Annual Meetings: Getting it right to energize and delight.” *Cooperative Grocer*, May - June 2004
(<http://www.cooperativegrocer.coop/>)
 - “Organizing and Conducting Cooperatives’ Annual Meetings,” USDA Rural Development. www.rurdev.usda.gov/rbs/pub/cir21.pdf

- Annual Reports
 - CGIN listserv archives
 - “Annual Reports,” January 20, 2005
 - CGIN Basic Resource Library, collection of Annual Reports

- Related Topics
 - “Boards and Member Linkage” and “Including Members in the Ends Dialogue.” Online workshops, CBLD Library.
 - Fairbairn, Brett. “Three Strategic Concepts for the Guidance of Co-operatives.” Available at <http://www.usaskstudies.coop/pdf-files/StratConcepts.pdf>
 - Healy, Michael. “A Recipe for Good Board Meetings.” *Cooperative Grocer*, Jan-Feb, 2010.
 - Meyer, Allison. “Keeping Score: Social audit defines values, environmental impact.” *Cooperative Grocer*, March - April 2010
 - Stier, Linda. “Cooperative Accountability.” *Cooperative Grocer*, Jan-Feb, 2004.