

Leading Our Co-ops Beyond Customer Service to Cooperative Service

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As food co-ops forge ahead in the “the new normal,” they often find themselves in the precarious place of trying to both differentiate from and conform to competitors. From the consistent progression of conventional grocery stores towards natural products offerings, to the growing threat of internet retailers, food co-ops are experiencing an increasingly urgent pressure to raise the bar on business operations while still maintaining and better communicating their distinctiveness as community-owned institutions. With more of co-ops’ offerings emulated by other stores, customer service has emerged as a key opportunity for differentiation.

But what is it that can make co-ops’ customer service different? While food co-ops have continued to expand and increase their visibility across the country, they also continue to struggle with issues that preclude them from fully differentiating in the marketplace: a diluted understanding of cooperative identity; a failure to connect owners and shoppers to ends, impacts, and goals; high learning curves on ownership structures; and poor execution of community involvement and communication of alignment.

Beyond customer service

It falls on co-op leaders to teach and maintain not simply a “customer service culture,” but a Cooperative Service culture in their organizations. Cooperative Service is a holistic approach that goes beyond customer service training. It directly addresses the needs of co-ops to provide the tools and accountability that staff need to effectively engage with shoppers, owners, and potential owners comfortably and with confidence. It does this by creating an organic atmosphere of inclusion, warmth, and welcoming, through both great operational and associative services.

We know what great “traditional” customer service looks like, and many co-ops already practice it in varying degrees. But the



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relevant training needs to go beyond the basics of retail service techniques to address the elephant in the room: that co-op staff have the extra job of having to authentically and empathetically connect with their shoppers as co-op owners, community members, and as individuals. Co-ops ask more of their staff than traditional grocery stores, and managers need to give staff the tools they need to do the heavy lifting that’s asked of them: to move the co-op model forward. And it

starts with managers holding responsibility for a clearly communicated Cooperative Service culture.

How strong is Cooperative Service culture at your co-op? Are managers giving staff the tools they need to grow their co-ops sufficiently and to truly differentiate? Take stock of the service in your co-op, and start your leadership on the journey to action in the following five steps.

Step 1: The assessment

In order to have a clear end game for this process, start by assessing the current condition of Cooperative Service culture at your co-op. Create a small, cross-functional team that includes the general manager and voices from all different elements of service and levels of seniority within the co-op.

The team should ask big questions and answer them honestly: What are all the mechanics, systems, and processes that affect your service, and where do they tie in with the gaps and successes in management structure and style? What are the challenges that affect the achievement of your co-op’s goals? How well does your staff connect to the value of ownership?

Is your training and accountability consistent—or does one department excel while another has a “that’s not my job” mentality? Do you rely on the shining personalities of a few staff members to carry your service experience, or do you train the skills that all your staff need to feel comfortable approaching shoppers and handling complaints? Are there operational challenges to

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providing service, such as broken equipment, complicated return policies, and inefficient scheduling? Are these issues being addressed by your management team?

The team should be able to articulate the co-op's service goals and assess how well they are supported by current systems, training, and management. Use surveys, interviews, and customer feedback to gather data, and write down your findings to share and benchmark.

Step 2: Engage your team's vision

Once you are armed with this assessment, the team is ready to create a strong vision of your co-op's Cooperative Service culture. Consider developing as a group a Cooperative Service vision statement for the co-op. Encourage your team to think beyond the canned "thank you, come again" service cliché, and envision a culture that will accomplish all the objectives of the co-op: What does your co-op's service look like when it invites high quality participation of owners, shoppers, and the community in order to achieve its goals?

When you can clearly define this concept, you will be ready to bring it home in your co-op. The key to introducing culture change to any organization is transparency about the process. Let all of your staff know about the goal of transforming your service culture, make sure to discuss the possible benefits and changes, and continuously seek input and feedback along the way. Be sure to keep staff informed and invested through internal staff communication, such as newsletters and huddles, and create opportunities for staff to participate. Develop some common language about what Cooperative Service means for your co-op.

Step 3: Create the roadmap

Once the management team has identified the co-op's current Cooperative Service condition and articulated a Cooperative Service vision for the future, you're ready to create a plan for operational action. The goal of this roadmap is to create and improve upon tangible systems that can be managed and measured. Use your assessment to identify the structures and

activities that affect Cooperative Service, then develop SMART plans (SMART: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Timely) to shore them up.

For example, do ownerships materials (printed, electronic, and in-store) need a refresh? Do the return policies need to be simplified? Is it time for a multi-store co-op to use a real-time internal communication tool like Slack? Assign timelines and stakeholders, and allow for accountable empowerment to help keep the process moving forward. Don't forget to create markers for success so you know you're making progress on your plan.

Also be sure to clearly define who has ownership of the Cooperative Service training program going forward. Is it marketing, human resources, front end—or another department?

Step 4: Rethink your training

Co-op managers often brainstorm varying tactics and marketing initiatives to connect all the diverse pieces of the organization to its owners, shoppers, and the community, but they may fail to consider the weight of the execution of these tasks on staff. It's critical that management provide staff with the tools they need to accomplish collective objectives. The empowerment of staff through comprehensive Cooperative Service training is the most fundamental tool to communicating "the co-op story" to those participating in co-op life.

Implement a Cooperative Service training system for current employees and new hires that makes both customer and owner experiences front and center within the organizational culture.





Consider curricula that dive deep into the history of your co-op and personal co-op stories (“Why do you work at/belong to your co-op?”), in addition to presentations about the cooperative model and the seven principles. Sharing co-op lore or “Why I Love My Co-op” stories trains staff to better articulate their enthusiasm for their work and passion for the mission.

Being fluent and meaningful about their connection to the co-op can increase owners’ and shoppers’ levels of understanding of how their own roles are integral to a healthy co-op—socially and economically. In other words, when people can connect their own story to the co-op’s story, their loyalty increases—which, ideally, can lead to increased sales, word-of-mouth advertising, and a deeper level of commitment to the co-op’s mission.

Training is not a simple task, but rather a process that takes time and investment. Think about moving away from the “one day and done” training, and instead develop an ongoing approach that will continually hold staff accountable for meeting Cooperative Service standards over the course of their employment, such as a passport style program or Co-op University trainings.

Whatever training system you choose should be consistent across the board for all co-op staff members and address all of the goals of the co-op. Make sure training materials are scripted, have activities that engage, and test or benchmark participants on their learning in some way.

It goes without saying that co-op leaders should consider themselves models of awesome Cooperative Service at all times. While many managers may not be customer-facing, it’s important to remember that great internal Cooperative Service is vital to staff morale, and this ultimately manifests itself on the store floor. Great service is expected and delivered throughout the co-op.

Step 5: Foster accountability for success

Consider thinking of Cooperative Service not just as a philosophy, but as a system—and systems need to be maintained. When we begin to see service as a concrete structure rather than a list of guidelines, it becomes something that can be measured, managed, and be held accountable for. Identify the processes and procedures that will impact the success of the road map. Establish metrics that will help the management team assess how effectively the systems they have in place are helping to accomplish the co-op’s goals.

Utilizing quantitative benchmarks to evaluate those systems helps to cultivate a unified approach to the management of your Cooperative Service experience—and it takes the guesswork out of evaluating efforts and engages staff in a clear role of accountability. A few examples of metrics to consider including are: new owner joins, daily out-of-stocks, items displayed without prices, register wait times, comment card response time, basket size, and event participation.

Conclusion

Management can’t expect staff to watch a customer service DVD and automatically understand how to have authentic relationships with owners, or to go through a half-day orientation on “what it means to be part of a co-op” and expect the lesson to stick interminably. Yet co-ops continually turn to conventional trainings that, first and foremost, fail to teach the core differences of our model, and second, lack the strategic framing of upper-level management thinking.

Food co-ops are not just grocery stores; they are community owned institutions that sell groceries in order to create impact. For staff to share this message with owners, shoppers, and the community, co-op leadership needs to hold itself accountable to owning a powerful, positive culture of Cooperative Service. Now more than ever, there is a need to shift our mindset from teaching the same customer service as other retailers, and instead incorporate the power of the uniqueness of our cooperative model into our own idea of service.

Create a Culture of COOPERATIVE SERVICE

Great internal Cooperative Service is vital to staff morale and ultimately manifests itself on the store floor.

STEP 1: Assess your current culture – ask big questions and answer them honestly

STEP 2: Engage the vision of your team – imagine what it would mean to accomplish all of the objectives of the co-op

STEP 3: Create a roadmap – design a plan for organizational action

STEP 4: Rethink your training – recognize that it is a process requiring time and investment

STEP 5: Foster accountability – think of Cooperative Service as a system to be maintained