



Columinate

Catalysts for Common Good

Columinate Field Guide: Virtual Annual Meetings

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In the wake of the pandemic, the customary way of doing many things has been upended. For co-ops, the list of adaptations extends to how we engage with members, including our approach to the time-honored (and legally required) tradition of the annual meeting. If you are making a first-ever shift to the virtual realm for your annual meeting this year, here are some key suggestions to keep in mind as you begin to plan:

- 1. Check the law and the bylaws.** Co-op bylaws and state statutes generally weren't drafted with a pandemic in mind, and you will want to evaluate how a virtual meeting lines up with the legal and technical requirements that govern your co-op. If you have any doubts, check with your lawyer, who can advise you on how to reconcile conflicting provisions with the need to limit in-person gatherings during this time.
- 2. Identify the desired outcomes of the meeting.** Once you can articulate some parameters, you will have a better sense of how to approach the design and planning. Start with a series of questions to help you discern your goals for the meeting, such as:
 - Do you simply want to meet the basic legal requirements of state law and bylaws?
 - Do you want to provide the sense of community gathering or even a bit of a party?
 - Is there a compelling topic or theme that you'd like to build the meeting around?
 - Do you want to engage your membership in discussion? (If so, you will need strong facilitation and a good platform for effective two-way conversation.)
 - Does it seem important to try to replicate some typical aspects of our meeting for a sense of normalcy, or is it okay to approach things entirely anew?
 - Do you want visibility and a role for each director?
 - What is within your staff's or board's capacity? What can you accomplish within your budget?
- 3. Adapt standard meeting components to a virtual format.** You may or may not want or need to include all of these components. But for those you do include, you can be creative in a way that enhances participants' experience.
 - **“State of the Co-op” and Financial Reports:** While you can certainly give a live report and share a slide deck during the meeting, you could also pre-record these reports, allowing for a tighter delivery and enhanced visuals. You could even share

the recording in advance, so that members can come ready with questions or view it even if they do not attend.

- **Director elections and other voting.** Your approach to the board election and other ballot items will vary depending on whether the voting period ends before, during, or after the meeting. Whatever the structure, think through the elements and craft a plan. For example, do you want to introduce candidates? Will they have a chance to speak? Will you want to explain a proposed bylaw revision? If so, how will you do these things?
 - **Member Comment and Q&A Periods.** A member comment period is entirely possible in a virtual format, but you need be mindful about the flow and understand the options and limits of your chosen platform in order to maximize engagement and minimize frustration. Whether you use a chat box, a Q&A function, or some system to put people in a queue for speaking aloud, be sure to give clear instructions to members so that they know what to expect. And a skilled facilitator who is comfortable with the technology is a must!
 - **Socializing.** You can create space for informal conversation and small group discussion in video platforms like Zoom through the use of breakout rooms. As with a member comment period, having a good plan and clear instructions for participants will improve everybody's experience!
 - **Breaking bread:** Annual meetings often include a meal but, there aren't many options for serving dinner together online. If connecting around food feels like an important element, you could offer a snack pack or meal box for pick-up at the co-op by those who register for the meeting. Other ideas include incorporating a live or filmed cooking demonstration as part of the meeting. You could even simply suggest that members have a beverage and snack on hand when they log in and raise a toast together during the session.
 - **Giving thanks:** Whether in person or online, the annual meeting is a time to give thanks and recognition to staff, the GM, departing directors, and others in the co-op community. Consider ways to include members, such as inviting comments in the chat or even co-creating a virtual thank-you card via GoogleDocs or other online tool.
4. **Have dedicated tech support.** Whether you recruit a volunteer or pay for the help, find someone who is experienced with your chosen platform to work "behind the curtain" and ensure a smooth meeting. Don't assign this crucial role to someone who has other duties during the meeting, as you want your tech support to have plenty of bandwidth in case you run into trouble with your *actual* bandwidth!
 5. **Plan a dress rehearsal.** Practice may not always make perfect, but you will minimize the chance of awkward transitions and technical flubs, and generally increase everyone's comfort level, by scheduling a walk-through with principal players in advance of the actual meeting. If your session includes an invited speaker, be sure to include that person so that you can have a sound and technology check. You may also want to offer a separate "dress rehearsal" for members, a brief session ahead of the meeting for people to practice logging in and troubleshooting any connection issues.

6. **Make attending easy, attractive, and fun!** You can increase the odds of good attendance with a few simple steps.

- Market the meeting well, via multiple channels.
- Provide clear instructions about how to sign up and support for members who need help navigating the process.
- Include a phone-in option for those who do not have internet access.
- Consider limiting the meeting to no more than 90 minutes; more than that may test people's stamina for virtual meetings.
- Offer incentives for attending, such as drawings for baskets or gift cards. You can even draw winning names live at meeting using an online “prize wheel” or similar tool.

Instead of thinking of a virtual meeting as a pale imitation of the “real thing,” consider how the format might create new opportunities to meet your obligations, conduct important business, engage your members, and even have a bit of fun. And, whatever you do, be sure to grab a screenshot or two of the event as historic documentation and for future marketing/outreach.

Additional Resources:

- *Field Guide: Annual meetings & Annual Reports*, by Michael Healy & Todd Wallace, <https://columinate.coop/annual-meetings-and-annual-reports/>
- *Field guide: Tips for Effective Virtual Meetings*, by Michael Healy, <https://columinate.coop/tips-for-effective-virtual-meetings/>
- *FCI Webinar: “Owner Meeting Legalities”* with Dave Swanson and Megan Helme of Dorsey & Whitney LLC (offered as part of the Food co-op Initiatives CoVideo series, May 8, 2020): <https://bit.ly/3gNymID>