

Consumer Co-ops: Orienting New Members

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Every cooperative, small or large, will bring in new members at one time or another. The cooperative needs to orient these new members to the goals and nature of the cooperative, and their rights and responsibilities as members. Equally important, the cooperative needs to solicit from the new members their interests, purposes, needs and special skills.

Orientation is a process of two-way communication.

Orientation should be seen as part of a continuous education process. The education process begins when a person first hears about the cooperative, and it continues for as long as the person is a member. A vital education process lays the basis for continued member loyalty and participation.

Many cooperatives, particularly larger cooperatives with a steady influx of new members, develop a formal orientation session as a tool for the process. If your cooperative does not use an orientation session, you still must provide orientation to new members.

There are many sides to the relationship between the member and the cooperative. The member patronizes the business, is a part-owner of the business, participates in governing the cooperative, and becomes part of a network of social relationships. In pre-order cooperatives and most retail stores, the member may also participate in the operations as a "volunteer" or working member.

Some of these are formal requirements, for instance paying a membership fee and becoming an owner of the cooperative. However, for the most part, the member decides how much to patronize the business, how much to participate in membership meetings, whether to run for the board, how much effort to put into working in the cooperative, and generally how "cooperative" he or she will be. A cooperative in which none of the members do anything more than what is required of them will soon fail. A cooperative in which only a few of the members are doing more than what is formally required will soon "burn out" the active members. Therefore, it is critical to orient new members to what the cooperative expects beyond the formal requirements for membership.

On the other hand, telling a new member what is expected will only make sense if the cooperative provides a good enough service to make the expenditure of time and effort worthwhile to the member. This guide sheet deals mainly with techniques for orientation. However, a good orientation requires more than techniques; it presupposes a good cooperative.

Knowing your purposes

New member orientation requires planning as much as any other aspect of your cooperative. Before the cooperative can even begin to select a technique, it must first ask

- What kind of influx of new members is expected?
- What is the message that it wants to get across to new members and learn from them?

Since the relationship of the member to the cooperative is many-sided, new member orientation will be multi-purpose. Following are some of the purposes that you may want to accomplish in orientation:

- To find out what new members think the cooperative is and what they expect of it.
- To find out what talents or skills a new member has and is willing to use to the cooperative's benefit. (In a cooperative with a volunteer coordinator, this may be done through an entry interview.)
- To communicate what is expected of a member. New members want to know this; it is an opportunity to build involvement from the beginning.
- To familiarize the new member with the cooperative's operations. New members will take an immediate and active interest in this aspect of orientation; the orientation must remember that other aspects are equally important in the long run. In the case of a pre-order, this will include a briefing on how the cooperative's particular systems for paying, ordering and working operate, and how the member will fit into the cooperative. In the case of a store, this will include a tour of the store and an explanation of how to use bulk dispensers, how the pricing system works. etc.
- To explain the requirement for initial membership fee or other member capital, how it has been agreed upon and what it is used for.
- To prepare the new member for gradually taking on increasing responsibility in the cooperative by explaining how the members participate in the cooperative's operations and governance.
- To give the new member the sense of belonging to a community.
- To communicate the purposes and goals of the cooperative. From the beginning, the new member should know these purposes and goals, both because it is the member's right and to maintain the coherence of the organization.
- o provide history and philosophy of cooperatives and a sense of the larger cooperative movement.

Each cooperative can choose priorities from this set of purposes, as well as add new ones. For instance, the members of a given cooperative may feel that orientation should include an explanation of how to use certain foods or education about the food distribution system. It is important, however, to realize that there may be trade-offs.

Selecting your technique

When your purposes are clear, you will be able to consider technique. If your cooperative does not have many new members, you may feel that formal orientation sessions are not practical for you. Here are a few ideas for a smaller cooperative without orientation sessions:

- Use the order sheet, handouts, well-displayed signs, etc. to make sure that the necessary information about how to order and pay for food is available.
- Create a policy sheet that goes to all new members.
- Establish a trial period for new members with orientation as an integral part of the trial period.
- Bring a new member to an ordering meeting, packing meeting, etc. with someone specifically assigned to answer any questions.
- Pair a new member to an experienced member for a few weeks.

If your cooperative has a steady influx of new members, you will probably want to establish formal orientation sessions. Some cooperatives have a "voluntary" orientation session and try to create incentives that will attract new members to the session. Others require that all new members go to an orientation session. Even if the orientation session is required, the cooperative should think of what incentives it can offer for attending. Otherwise, the cooperative may find that some members never attend the session and never come back to the cooperative. The best incentive is an attractive pre-order or store, combined with a short and lively presentation.

Whether your cooperative uses orientation session, alternative techniques or a combination of the two, you should be able to answer these questions:

- Who is responsible for new member orientation?
- When, how, and with what resources does it take place? and
- How will we know if it has been successful?

Elements of an effective orientation session

If you have decided that orientation sessions will fit your purposes, you next have to answer

- How often
- At what time to schedule them.

The answer to the first question will depend on what kind of influx of new members you expect. If it is a steady stream of new members, you will be best off establishing a regular schedule of sessions and adding extra sessions if there is a sudden unexpected demand for them. Schedule them at times and locations that are convenient for new members, and above all, be sure that the information about time and place is accurate and well-publicized. Announce a beginning time and ending time, and stick to them.

The orientation session should convey that the cooperative is an attractive and friendly place. Be concerned for a good atmosphere; consider how to make the session a social experience. This requires limiting the number of participants and choosing an orientator who is personable. It also requires a well-planned presentation that highlights the essential points but does not bog down or try to present too much material.

You can supplement the presentation with handouts that repeat the central points and add any important information that is too detailed for presentation in the session. These might include:

- A list of board members and staff;
- A wallet-sized card with the cooperative's hours, address and phone number; Sheets explaining shopping or ordering procedures;
- A policy sheet; and
- A copy of the bylaws.

Some cooperatives use a series of presenters (a staff member, a board member, etc.) in one meeting or rely extensively on audio-visual presentation. However, most orientation sessions depend heavily on one orientator. In this case, it is particularly important to choose the orientators carefully and to provide them with training.

Finally, you should expect to continually improve your orientation sessions. To help with this and to give feedback to the orientators, hand out a short evaluation form at the end of the session. You can ask for spoken comments and suggestions as well, but an anonymous evaluation form with a few well-chosen questions works best for getting a broad range of responses from all the participants.

The original authors of this publication were John Noller and C. Brice Ratchford.

Related MU Extension publications

- EC941, Consumer Co-ops: Introduction to Consumer Food Cooperatives <http://extension.missouri.edu/p/EC941>
- EC942, Consumer Co-ops: Steps in Organizing a New Pre-Order Food Cooperative <http://extension.missouri.edu/p/EC942>
- EC943, Consumer Co-ops: Managing a Pre-Order Food Cooperative <http://extension.missouri.edu/p/EC943>
- EC944, Consumer Co-ops: Essential Elements of Managing a Food Cooperative <http://extension.missouri.edu/p/EC944>

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■ Issued in furtherance of the Cooperative Extension Work Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture. Director, Cooperative Extension, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO 65211
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