



LEADER

A publication designed to promote visionary and forward-thinking discussions between and among food co-op leaders

Great Governance: Annual Meetings

Annual meetings—we gotta have 'em! That much is a given. But they can be much more than perfunctory corporate requirements. Annual meetings, one of those high-visibility board activities, present a great opportunity to display your co-op's ownership structure and commitment to democratic control. What can the board do to make the annual meeting a fun, dynamic, and effective expression of your co-op's democratic structure? How can annual meetings help members better understand the co-op—both as a business and as a cooperative? What exactly defines a *great* co-op annual meeting?

In this issue, we share some of our ideas about annual meetings to help guide a conversation among board members. This conversation should take place at least six months before your next annual meeting, so directors can build agreement about the event. In this issue's study guide, we offer guidelines for developing a meeting planning checklist or calendar, to help you plan the kind of annual meeting you want.

As always, we hope you find this issue to be a useful tool for your board and your co-op. We always appreciate hearing your feedback, suggestions, and thoughts—on this issue and on future topics you'd like to see us cover.



A Study Guide for Co-op Leaders

Great Governance: Annual Meetings

.....
In This Issue

Beyond the Basics: Why Have an Annual Meeting?—*Marcia Shaw*
[Page 3](#)

Options for Annual Meetings
—*Paige Lettington* [Page 5](#)

How We Do It at Quincy Co-op
—*Lucinda Berdon* [Page 7](#)

.....
Study Guide

An Annual Meeting Preparation Checklist—*Martha Whitman*
[Page SG1](#)



More about the **LEADer**

The *LEADer* is a quarterly study guide designed to foster visionary and forward-thinking discussions between and among co-op leaders. The *LEADer* is a publication of National Cooperative Grocers Association (NCGA) and strives to incorporate experiences and voices from all co-ops affiliated with NCGA. Each issue is produced by the Board Effectiveness Support Team (BEST), a voluntary committee made up of board leaders and general managers from co-ops around the country. We welcome those who would like to join us in this project.

The *LEADer* is available to all interested co-op leaders. This issue and all back issues are available online at <http://www.cooperativegrocer.coop/leader/index>. Those wishing to subscribe to the *LEADer* and have issues sent directly by e-mail as soon as they're available should contact Karen Zimbelman at kz@ncga.coop.

We welcome your reactions, suggestions, and contributions, as well as questions for us to answer in future issues. Send comments or questions to askthebest@ncga.coop. For more information about NCGA, the *LEADer*, or the BEST, contact:

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Beyond the Basics Why Have an Annual Meeting?

by Marcia Shaw

Beyond the legal requirement, why have an annual meeting? If you don't have a good answer to this question, perhaps your board needs to spend some time creatively thinking about your goals for this opportunity. If your board typically crafts a fun event around the annual meeting, perhaps you have a "little bit of sugar makes the medicine go down" attitude. That's better than just gritting your teeth to get through the boring parts, but what about a whole rethinking of what we're trying to accomplish?

Start with the assumption that an annual meeting is an opportunity to generate member involvement. You may know what you want to say to your members, but what would you like to hear from them? Focus on questions that might make a good conversation with a group of involved members. Try to get a large number

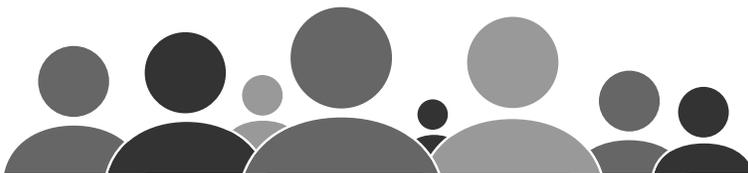
of members involved. If 10 directors circled up with 10 members each, that would get 100 members involved.

How do we make that conversation useful to the board? First, be prepared with a number of provocative questions. Seed the conversation with some data

or information that might be new to many. What's changed in your marketing area in the last 10 years? How has the natural foods industry changed? What new links

has your cooperative made with others in the community and how has that informed your board? Ask members to

consider the question: How is my co-op membership different from a Costco membership?



Beyond the Basics

Why Have an Annual Meeting?

Thinking about what you want to discuss with members will help you determine how to structure the annual meeting. Assuming that one goal is to inform or inspire your members, consider how an engaged co-op member behaves differently from just a grocery shopper. What part of belonging to a cooperative matters most to your members? What encourages them to read board minutes or fill out surveys?

The annual meeting is an opportunity to tell the co-op story again in a new way—to refocus on what’s important about cooperatives in 2014. To tell the story to a new audience, you might put on a show or a skit or create a graphic book, employing infotainment in the best sense of the word. Those who are new to cooperatives will take your story in any form, and old-timers will appreciate your attempt to translate the story for new members.

If your annual meeting has gotten stale or if your annual report is pretty boring for the average member, consider getting some new people involved in planning. Just as annual meetings don’t have to look the same from year to year, annual reports can have a new look and feel without sacrificing the information you want to get across.

If you’re running out of ideas, use your network. Check with other co-ops and see what they’ve found most successful. Free your mind of constraints and get new input to refresh the most staid parts of your annual meeting. Inspire members to look forward

to learning what’s new in the business aspects of the co-op.

Once you’ve gotten a new annual meeting plan in mind, be sure that your meeting invitations reflect the changes. Tell people what to expect and why you think they’ll enjoy the change. Tell your members what you want from them, why their roles are important, and how this meeting will help them feel more connected and valued. We all benefit from more minds and hearts engaged with our cooperative ventures.





Options for Annual Meetings

by Paige Lettington

While it's important to conduct certain co-op business functions at your annual meeting, the meeting is also a great opportunity to build community among your membership. Many members are interested in the financials and in learning about board candidates. But even more members are interested in getting to know each other; learning about food, cooperative, or environmental issues; and weighing in on issues related to their store.

Once you've decided what you want to accomplish at your annual meeting, there are options all along the spectrum, whether you are low on resources and energy or are looking to throw a blowout party. Here are some ideas to get your creative juices flowing.

Make It Delicious

Your members are involved because they love good food. Their interests may include local, organic (or beyond), or home-cooked food. Here are some options for food-centered annual meetings:

- A potluck provides the opportunity for members to share their culinary skills with others using ingredients purchased from the co-op.
- A meal provided by your store gives members a chance to try foods from your deli, which may increase deli traffic or inspire members to re-create dishes they enjoy at the meeting.
- A meal catered by local chefs adds an upscale feeling, reinforces the connection to the local food community, and inspires home chefs to use your co-op's ingredients.

Or you could center the meal around a theme: a local-foods meal, with all ingredients from within a 100-mile radius; a seasonal meal; or a world café meal, with foods from different cultures.

Options for Annual Meetings



Make It Educational

Many member-owners are interested in learning about food, co-op, and environmental issues. Along these lines, you could:

- Bring in a well-known speaker, either from the local community or from the national level. Choose a topic that's important to your co-op or your community.
- Have a panel of experts on a food-related topic make presentations and take questions from members.
- Set up a member discussion forum about a topic related to food, your community, or a current issue facing your co-op.
- Show a relevant documentary film and hold a structured discussion afterward.

Add Some Entertainment

Providing entertainment doesn't necessarily mean hiring a band. There are a whole range of additional options:

- Hire a DJ, enlist a small group or an individual to play background music, or hold an open mike for members and staff.
- Put on a talent show featuring members and staff.
- Stage a variety of games, especially if your meeting is being held outdoors.

No matter what options you choose for your annual meeting, you are bringing your members together to share fun, food, and information while conveying important details about the business they collectively own. This is just one piece of the co-op difference!

TRY THIS

HOW CAN YOUR ANNUAL MEETING FIT WITHIN THE GRANDER SCHEME OF MEMBER ENGAGEMENT?

In addition to a stand-alone meeting, why not meld the variety of member/board activities that take place over a year or more with the board's strategic visioning? For instance, consider tying newsletter articles, member forums, member focus groups, member dinners with the board, and other activities into one long-term project of exploring member values and thoughts for the future.



How We Do It at Quincy Co-op

How many businesses do you know of that offer an annual meeting to their shoppers? That's already a co-op difference!

by Lucinda Berdon

At Quincy Natural Foods Co-op (in Quincy and Portola, California), we use our annual meeting as a unique opportunity to discuss our larger goals, vision and values, current financial situation, fun facts about our store, and important updates. And since we're all about community, we discuss how the co-op contributes to our community's quality of life through collaborations with other local organizations, supporting the local food system, and involvement with local schools. We talk about how our co-op community pulls together while doing business. We celebrate milestones and accomplishments. The meeting is also an opportunity to describe NCGA's programs and efforts.

What inspires our member-owners to participate in the annual meeting? We provide an action-packed evening that draws a full house. We start with a social hour including local wine, beer, and appetizers. Live local musicians provide entertainment while directors and staff circulate and mingle with members. Next we serve a nice dinner, during which staff members perform a 10-minute skit that illustrates something about our co-op culture, co-op finances, or a major milestone. In the past, we've presented rewritten Johnny Cash songs, game show parodies, and comedy routines. After dinner, our formal presentations start. We often begin with a guest speaker (usually someone from our local area). Next are the board and GM annual reports, followed by an opportunity for questions and discussion. We're big fans of PowerPoint presentations, slide shows, and other visuals. We generally end with a raffle and an event evaluation. The whole event lasts about three and a half hours.

How We Do It at Quincy Co-op

Everyone contributes to making it happen. The board approves the date, generally the first Saturday of June. The board's membership committee determines the vision, theme, and overall plan for the event, with the assistance of the GM, our member services coordinator (MSC), and other staff.

The MSC deals with logistics for the event, starting with PR and marketing (including announcements on social media sites, POS screens, and community radio stations), printed materials, and invitations mailed to members. The MSC also handles all fees, licenses, and rentals and recruits members to help with the event. Member

volunteers decorate and set up the venue, serve the meal, bus tables, pour water, serve coffee and tea, and clean up afterward. The only thing our operational staff handles is bar service—and it's a great night for tips.

At the next board meeting following the annual meeting, we take the opportunity to debrief. We review event evaluations; how things went before, during, and after the meeting; what worked; and what could use improvement. And then we actually start planning for the next annual meeting.

While the board is responsible for the vision behind the annual meeting, the logistical components are delegated to

staff. This makes sense because staff members already have relationships with vendors, suppliers, and member-owners. The board's job at the meeting is to meet and greet, deliver an informational presentation, connect with members, answer questions, address concerns, and share the co-op's vision and goals. Directors can articulate their positions on specific issues and use the opportunity to demonstrate how democracy works in the world of co-ops.



Resources for Further Research



CDS Consulting Co-op, *Annual Meetings and Annual Reports*, 2010. Part of CDS Consulting's Cooperative Board Leadership program

CDS Consulting Co-op, *Engaging Owners at the Annual Meeting*, *CBLD Connections*, June 2011. Ideas from PCC Natural Markets and Seward Community Co-op about how to use annual meetings to inspire member engagement

Michel, Ellen, *Annual Meetings: Getting It Right to Energize and Delight*, *Cooperative Grocer Magazine*, May–June 2004. Includes “10 Tips from the Pros for a Successful Annual Meeting”

USDA Agricultural Cooperative Service, *Organizing and Conducting Cooperative Annual Meetings*, 1992.

While written for agricultural cooperatives and somewhat dated, this report still provides useful information.

— Lucinda Berdon

ANNUAL MEETINGS

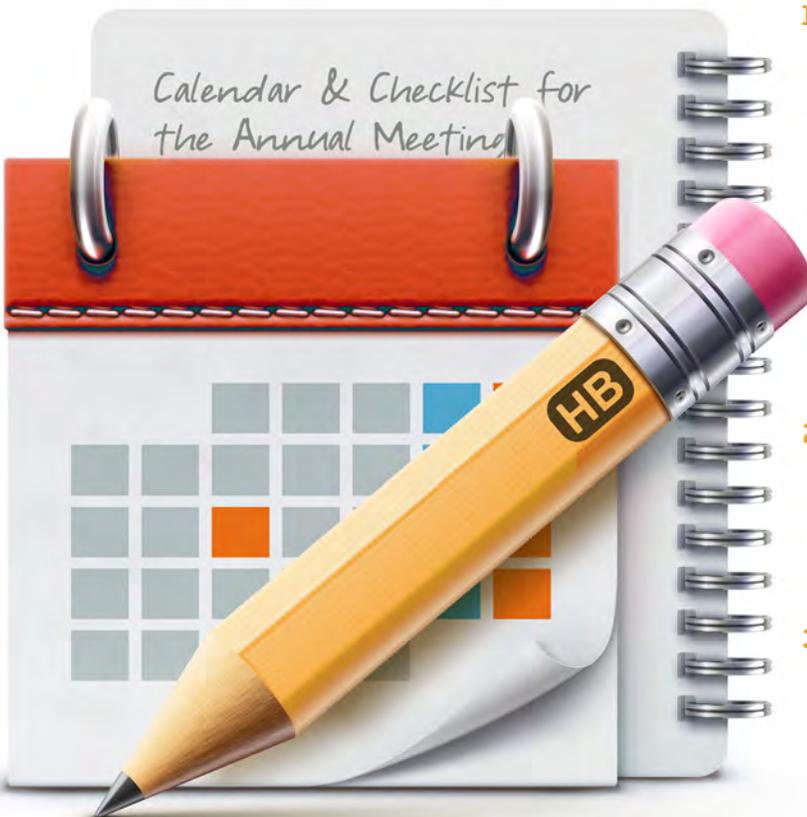
A LEADER STUDY GUIDE

A PREPARATION CHECKLIST

by Martha Whitman

Calendars are invaluable tools to help sustain a co-op's institutional memory and to help directors avoid making anything harder than it needs to be. To prevent having to reinvent the annual meeting wheel, integrate an annual meeting planning calendar into your master board calendar.

Questions to ask in creating your planning calendar:



1. When should the board give direction to a staff member or board committee to begin planning the meeting? How much time do you need to explore and develop ideas? Count backward from the meeting date to know when to start. Err on the side of many months rather than a few.
2. Who will be involved in designing and planning the annual meeting? Divide up the duties between staff, directors, and member volunteers.
3. When should the plan be communicated to the full board? Does your board have to give final approval?

ANNUAL MEETINGS

A LEADer STUDY GUIDE

4. When does the venue need to be determined and booked? Knowing the answer to this question might drive the timing of other tasks.
5. What is the timeline for announcements? Make a communications plan, giving people plenty of notice about the meeting and then reminders. Determine what gets communicated via newsletter articles, web postings, and e-mail blasts. When is copy due for the annual report (especially the president's report)?
6. What is the role of the annual meeting in relationship to board elections? The nominations and elections committee should have its own planning calendar. Work with this committee to coordinate efforts.
7. What else? What in particular do you want to include or avoid to be ready for your annual meeting?

