

Educating and Energizing Startups

“Up and Coming, Up and Running 2012” offers collaborative model

BY ELLEN MICHEL



PHOTOS COURTESY OF BLOOMINGFOODS

The third annual “Up and Coming, Up and Running” food co-op startup conference took place in Bloomington, Ind., on March 8–10, 2012. This year’s gathering attracted 81 participants, representing 22 co-op startup projects and an additional number of established co-ops and facilitators. Conference evaluations were resoundingly positive, emphasizing the chance to share experiences, learn from qualified practitioners, and focus on specific dimensions of the startup process.

What began in 2010 as mostly a smaller regional conference this year attracted participants from 12 states: Alaska, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, New Mexico, New York, Ohio, South Carolina, Virginia, and Wisconsin. Workshops in two categories (“Laying the Foundation” and “After the Paint Dries”) offered sessions in four tracks and a total of 21 presentations.

From its inception in 2010, “Up and Coming, Up and Running” has provided support to

Members from 22 startup co-ops from a dozen states gathered in Bloomington, Ind.

Attendees were introduced to the larger world of cooperatives, including the International Year of Cooperatives.

groups trying to get new food co-ops started, from the initial community-organizing phase through the earliest years of operation. The conference offers resources for steering committees still in “the first nine yards” of development as well as assistance for co-ops on the verge of opening or in the critical early years of operating. Sessions emphasize the four cornerstones needed to build a successful co-op enterprise: vision, talent, capital, and systems.

What’s my line?

“Up and Coming, Up and Running” gives participants a chance to learn from some of the



best consultants available, in very focused workshops designed to help them with more integrated cooperative planning,” said Debbie Trocha, executive director of the Indiana Cooperative Development Center (ICDC). ICDC is the primary administrator of the conference, with logistical and on-site support from host co-op Bloomingfoods.

One much-appreciated dimension of the conference is the chance to schedule one-on-one exploratory consultations with workshop presenters.

“Having expertise available and giving attendees the opportunity to meet with established people from the industry is a great gift,” said Mel Braverman, who offered “Intro to Co-op Finance” and “Key Indicators” workshops. “This conference offers an intimate setting, so people don’t feel lost in the crowd.”

“Bill Gessner has worked on more food co-op startups than anyone else in the country. Mark Mulcahy and Chris Ryding have a combined 50+ years of fresh food experience,” Braverman observed. “PJ Hoffman has incredible technical expertise and is grounded in the challenges of these types of projects. How often can someone talk to all these folks in the same day?”

At an optional preconference Managing Fresh Foods workday, participants had the chance to learn from Mulcahy of CDS Consulting Co-op and Alan Simmerman of Bloomingfoods. Classroom sessions on perimeter departments were enriched by tours of Bloomingfoods’ three stores and the co-op’s new Commissary Kitchen.

Ryding of National Cooperative Grocers Association (NCGA) provided more fresh-food support with a Friday workshop on incorporating deli operations into new co-ops. “With the fresh departments becoming an increasingly important part of differentiating co-ops from competitors,” said Ryding, “discussing what it takes to have a successful food service program and setting appropriate expectations is an important conversation.”

“What began as a way for Bloomingfoods to support regional co-op development has evolved into a model that could work for any geographical region.”

—Bill Gessner

Gessner’s two sessions on the “Four Cornerstones in Three Stages” was a foundational session for most first-time attendees. Art Sherwood, also from CDS Consulting Co-op, offered back-to-back sessions on “Building a Great GM-Board Relationship” and “Cooperative Strategic Leadership.” Sherwood’s popular sessions focused on building a positive performance culture from the earliest stages of co-op development.

Learning from others

Another valued aspect of the conference was the opportunity to socialize and share stories with other startup groups, building a network of peers and mentors. An open session with Stuart Reid of Food Co-op Initiative (FCI) and Ben Sandel of CDS Consulting Co-op helped identify common themes and questions.

A case study was added to the agenda this year. Three people from Friendly City Food Co-op in Harrisonburg, Va.—General Manager Steve Cooke, past Board President Ben Sandel, and former Marketing Manager Suzi Carter—talked about their five-year path from organizing to opening to affiliation with NCGA.

“The presence of Friendly City Food Co-op was invaluable. They provided an example of how keeping to the recommended path—the CDS development model, Four Cornerstones in Three Stages, can pay off with a successfully operating, cooperatively owned storefront,” said Brad Alstrom. Former general manager of Lost River Community Co-op in Paoli, Ind., Alstrom now has a regional development role at Bloomingfoods.

Marketing and membership workshops offered by Suzi Carter and Ellen Michel considered the challenges of developing and managing a new co-op identity and the features of a brand: a store name, logo, design features, and the relationships needed to grow membership and anchor local affiliations.

PJ Hoffman of UNFI Store Development Services offered sessions on ►

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◀ “Getting to a Great Store Design” and “Store Equipment Options and Green Considerations.” Mac McLaughlin, merchandising manager for Bloomingfoods, moderated a vendor panel with United Natural Foods, Inc. (UNFI), Indy Fruit and other industry reps.

The conference also offered sessions on the complex process of raising money for startup projects, including a panel discussion on “Capitalizing a Startup Food Co-op,” and workshops on “Developing a Strong Member Loan Program,” and “House Party Recruitment Campaigns.” Jake Schlachter also videotaped a number of sessions, to be archived among other resources at the FCI site.

“The Up & Coming conference should be required training for all retail food co-op organizers,” Reid observed. “There is no other place where a new co-op can get as much guidance, advice, and support. Participants leave with new tools and the inspiration and motivation to use them.”

Sponsors this year included Bloomington Cooperative Services, CoBank, Cabot Creamery, Equal Exchange, Food Co-op Initiative, the Howard Bowers Fund of the Cooperative Development Foundation, ICDC, NCGA, Northcountry Cooperative Development Foundation, and UNFI. The Ralph K. Morris Foundation provided some scholarships to participants. Bloomingfoods prepared the conference buffet lunches. A Friday evening restaurant reception was underwritten by Indianapolis Fruit, ICDC, and Bloomingfoods.

“In addition to all the great learning opportunities for participants and presenters, Bloomingfoods and ICDC have found a very effective way to support the efforts of startup food co-ops,” said Gessner. “What began as a way for Bloomingfoods to support regional co-op development has evolved into a model that could work for any geographical region.” ■

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