

# Telling Stories

*Old craft leads to increased local sales and social media visibility*

BY CHARLI MILLS

Long ago, back in the days of community barn raising, an Upper Midwest barn was new in a day. Neighbors traveled by horse, wagon, and maybe a model-A or two to help a young German homesteader and his wife raise the framework of a barn that still stands in Savage, Minn. Upstairs is a loft with a heavy pine floor now dingy with dust and age, and if you know where to look, you can see the carved name of the young boy who marked the barn's beginning. That boy grew up, married, milked cows, but never had children. In his old age, it seemed he would also be the one to mark the barn's demise as developers subdivided the surrounding area.

Yet someone took notice of this old barn, so well-built by the hands of a community, and he stopped by one day to ask about renting it out. This someone was Tom Koskovich. He and his wife not only preserved the barn, they also became dear friends to the aging couple who owned it, and eventually the Koskoviches bought the barn and its farm. Eventually, they took to raising organic crops and sold their pumpkins to the co-op in Burnsville, Minn.—Valley Natural Foods. Along with pumpkins, Koskovich delivered stories. Koskovich is one of those lanky, weathered farmers who likes to pause from work with a good tale, as if the ancient art of farming is somehow inherently tied to the old craft of telling stories.

If that is true, then grocery cooperatives are as full of stories as they are of farmed food. Many co-ops claim to be the storytellers of the food they carry. These stories are important to members and shoppers who yearn to connect with their food choices. This is a story about how one co-op tapped into its natural resource of stories to increase local sales and gain greater social media visibility.

## A focus on meat

First of all, let me introduce myself as the official, badge-bearing storyteller of Valley Natural Foods. My name is Charli (short for Annette, but that's



The barn and Bubba...the steer that started it all.

another story), and I've been the marketing communications manager since 2001. I'm the one who listens to every word Koskovich has to say about his pumpkins, his barn and his green parrot that the goshawk ate. It comes in handy when I am giving presentations to the local moms' clubs or run across

another story-telling enthusiast. Lucky for me, storytelling became relevant to my job.

Two things happened in 2006: Valley Natural Foods had a visit from locavore movement founder Jessica Prentice, and we hired a summer writing intern. Prentice was touring with her new release, *Full Moon Feast*—a beautiful book on seasonality, food wisdom and stories. Her visit coincided with an expansion to our newsletter, *This Is Living Naturally*. Our intent was to have more editorial space to feature a two-page, 1,500-word local profile, which is why we hired the intern. She was to write six profiles during the summertime.

Prentice validated the importance of telling food stories because food is all about relationships. As a locavore, that's her philosophical foundation. She also pointed out an obvious point we had overlooked—in a Northern climate, animal husbandry is vital because it is produces the only year-round food products we have available in our co-op.

Taking inspiration from Prentice, our co-op scrutinized the meat department. After all, it made sense to focus on a readily available local product, and we were uniquely positioned to process beef on-site. Paul Nutting, meat manager, was a second-generation butcher with decades of experience. He advised the co-op on installing meat rails and to institute hanging beef (the term used to describe the process of cutting beef from the whole carcass). This would differentiate the co-op's meat from all the prepackaged, prefrozen product that the big chains thaw and display as "fresh." However, the co-op needed to find a local source of beef.

During this time, Koskovich stopped by Valley Natural Foods and, upon talking to Nutting about the hanging beef idea, casually mentioned that he had a corral by the old barn on his place. He offered to raise the beef according to Nutting's specifications. Our co-op invested in 13 head of steer and initiated our hanging beef program on the Koskovich farm. Numerous staff visited the herd, and someone

came up with a nickname for one of the steers, “Bubba.” It stuck, and the program was named Bubba’s Natural Beef. As with the launch of any new program or product, we knew that we had to get the story out to the members and shoppers.

Growing Bubba’s Natural Beef on the Koskovich farm was one of the first local profiles we covered in *This Is Living Naturally*. With a distribution base of 35,000, the newsletter is a pivotal piece of communication, and we were counting on the impact telling stories about local farmers would have on sales. However, we would need to develop some sort of tracking system, and before we could do that, we needed to define local. Our timing converged with the interests of other co-ops in the area. Developing an authentic local premise became another innovation that took cooperation.

## Defining local

In 2007, the 11 natural food co-ops in the greater Twin Cities of Minnesota began a collaborative effort to standardize a definition for “local” in an effort to track the impact co-ops have on local sales. Each store had a different definition. Some stores measured miles and others hours; some adhered strictly to “made in Minnesota.” Furthermore, the co-ops had to decide what role production and distribution had. Eventually, the stores agreed that any farmer or producer known by hand-shake within a day’s drive to and from the co-op markets would be considered local. Thus the group adopted the definition of local as a region: Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa and South and North Dakota. A regional definition made sense, since the Northern climate shapes the growing season.

Once we defined the term, each co-op was tasked with identifying and collecting local sales data. In 2008, the first measurement showed that on an average, the Twin Cities co-ops derived 20



percent of sales from defined local foods. Valley Natural Foods measured low at 12 percent. We were disappointed, but not deterred.

That same year, we revisited *This Is Living Naturally*. Was print the best way to tell our local stories? We had a cumbersome weekly e-newsletter and a website, but neither told stories. They were mostly archives of information, freshened weekly by specials and demo schedules. We also had a growing library of high-resolution photographs.

In addition, social networking was picking up, and we were interested in the buzz. How to combine it all was our challenge. I had to sit and look at all the pieces and envision them as a whole. In addition to liking a good story, I also like good branding, and I understood that we needed some sort of visual connectivity. Inspiration actually arrived via a social network site called Gather.

It was a graphic rendering of a simple photograph of a pear that caught my eye. A designer on Gather had created the artwork for fun, to share with her network friends. It was compelling, an elegant story without words: just what our stories-with-words needed. It turned out the designer, Ann Rauvola, lives in Minneapolis. We agreed to meet at a corner neighborhood restaurant, hit it off and got to work on the next set of newsletters. We already had a strong distribution of 35,000 and quality printing with Cooperative Printing. Now we had strong design to go with our stories.

That design element became part of the solution to our challenge—it would provide good visual branding. However, we still had to figure out what to do with all that electronic-media potential. Another chance meeting occurred at a Chamber of Commerce event with Lin Coombs, owner of Eye for Image. Coombs is an Internet marketer, someone who knows the territory of podcasts, blogs and wikis. At the same time we hired Rauvola as a contractor, we hired Coombs.

Together, these contractors elevated Valley Natural Foods to the next level of storytelling. We used the redesigned *This Is Living Naturally* as the visual and story-telling platform. We expanded our local profile to three pages, keeping the word count the same. This allowed us to better use space and photos to keep readers interested in the long story. A local profile photo (or collage) became the cover of the newsletter. We decided to refresh our web banner with each new issue (we publish six times a year), so that the visual impact was a clear connection. As we stepped into the world of social media, we took this concept with us and began refreshing our icons and banners with each printing of *This Is Living Naturally*.

## Going social

In 2008, we started a blog on WordPress and completely revamped our e-newsletter using a Web-based service called Aweber. Coombs helped us rethink our e-newsletter since it was very long. But how would we include all the pertinent information, such as what a co-op is, weekly coupons and specials, and stories and photos if we wanted a shorter e-newsletter? The answer is, use pages and links.

We now write all our stories with photos as blog posts. Between our website and blog, we also have pages (not the same as posts since pages do not show up in your blog roll) with the important, but lengthy information about our hours, departments, membership, and more. We created an online database for recipes with a print-friendly version, and we have selectable coupons that allow a person to print only the ones they want without printing anything in Access. The e-newsletter is brief—it’s brimming with teasers and links to everything else we update weekly, but fits a computer screen without endless scrolling. Just like a good story, everything connects. ►

## Food Safety Supports More Collaboration

HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point) certification is all about food safety and upholding strict standards. Paul Nutting, meat manager at Valley Natural Foods, maintains a high level of quality control. He knows the producers by name and face and even visits the local farms where the co-op’s lines of pork and beef are grown. It creates a trustworthy line of traceability.

On behalf of the co-op, in 2008 Nutting completed the extensive HACCP certification process that allows state ag inspectors to continuously monitor the department’s internal processes and procedures for safe handling of products. It is a governed management system that regulates such matters as the temperature of our cutting room, how we package our meats, and how we store it.

This certification allows Nutting and Valley Natural Foods staff to resell our pork and beef to other co-ops. Just Foods in Northfield and River Market in Stillwater both buy the “Down in the Valley” brand. As a bonus to getting our product, we also provide to these co-ops at no cost all the stories we collect and document in promotional materials. They become our partners in the story-telling process.

◀ Social media is a low-cost way to tell stories, and any story worth telling is worth retelling. The caution would be not to get too involved. You can spend zero dollars on social media but all your hours. First, decide which outlets you want to use and second, find a way to connect them for efficient use of social media. For Valley Natural Foods, once our e-newsletter distributes, we use share icons to upload various stories to Facebook, our Facebook fan page, Twitter, and LinkedIn. We use Gather to continue the stories we started in our newsletter but didn't have room to include in print. We are even using video documentaries to tell the local profile stories online and in-store using flat-screen digital displays. It lets us approach a single story from multiple angles.

The big question is, did all this storytelling pay off for us? Well, Koskovich was delighted to see his story in print, as has every local producer since then. It has paid off well in building authentic relationships with our farm partners. Bubba's Natural Beef program expanded throughout the meat department, and Nutting reports that 90 percent of the meat he sells is local. In fact, the program is now transitioning into a premium label intended to go beyond meat and represent other exclusive, yet local items in our store, such as our produce department's fresh salsa. The new program is called "Down in the Valley."

Another payoff came in an unexpected way, that of awards. In June of 2009, our General Manager, Susan McGaughey, accepted the Howard Bowers Fund Award for Cooperative Excellence. This award recognizes our co-op as one that has made significant progress in meeting the needs of members through growth in net sales and earnings, initiation of new and innovative programs, and expansion of member services. Two weeks later my staff and I received two Excellence in Communications awards from the Cooperative Communicators Association: first place for member newsletter and second place for best use of photographs on a website.

However, the bottom-line payoff came when we compiled our 2009 local sales data. We grew from 12 percent to 28 percent. And it all started with the story of a barn. ■



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