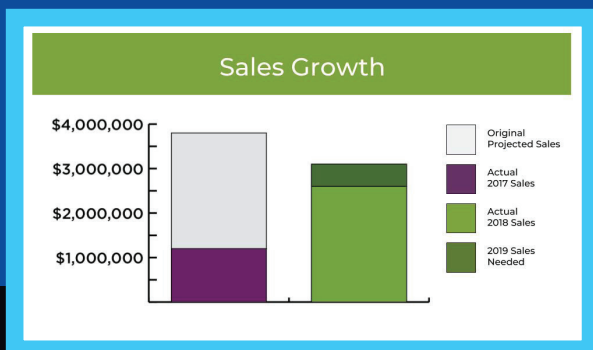


# Planning an Impactful Annual Meeting



### LOCAL FOOD

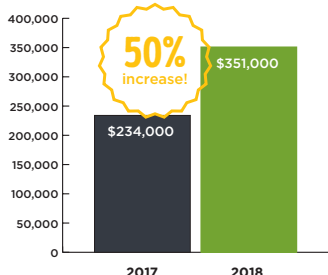
End #3: Farmers and producers benefit from a thriving local agricultural economy.

LOCAL

**85** Local producers

**1257** Local SKUs currently in our system

Total purchased from local producers





31%

**31%** % of total store sales from local products

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\$719,227

in sales of local products

# Planning an Impactful Annual Meeting

**Annual Meetings are an important opportunity to bring your owners together to build community, share important co-op information and education, manage community and owner expectations, vote for new board members and increase owner engagement. In most states, it's also a legal obligation to owners... but it can be so much more!**

Your co-op principles shine in your Annual Meetings, with democratic owner control being exercised in voting for the board; owner economic participation is practiced through transparent financial and operational reporting; autonomy and independence celebrated with each co-op coming together for an annual meeting that reflects their owners and their community. It's also a great opportunity to educate people about the cooperative movement, and build your owners' co-op financial literacy, while celebrating the impact your co-op makes in your community.

Annual Meetings are often a legal requirement with specific obligations in your bylaws that you must comply with. The state you are registered in may also have annual reporting requirements, which may include annual financial reporting to the owners. Annual meetings are typically the final day for voting for the board of directors, so confirm the information from your bylaws about advance notice requirements, quorums, and specifics on how the vote needs to happen.

## For ALL Co-ops:

**Celebrate** — Remember to celebrate milestones and achievements, and identify what is next. If you have a projector, show photos of volunteers in action, people celebrating, social media posts announcing milestones reached, etc. Give a nod to any win or anniversary over the past year. They're all important to building that sense of success, and they make the upcoming goals seem that much more attainable.

**Build Growth** — Don't miss this opportunity to drive your ownership growth. While most Annual Meetings are specifically for owners of the co-op, this can provide a great reason to challenge current owners to bring a non-owner friend who will sign up. Those new owners are then able to participate in the festivities, and immediately experience that sense of community you're building.

**Q&A** — always include time for questions from owners and/or other attendees. This portion of your meeting is very important, but needs to be handled thoughtfully (sometimes a few voices take over the entire conversation). Depending on the number of attendees and the stage of development you're in, this could be done with the whole room at once. Make sure acoustics allow people to hear the question as well as your answer (microphones are best). Or, you can have board members tabling individual stations about a topic they are comfortable discussing, and owners can circulate and chat. Be sure to have a way to capture the questions and answers so you can include them in an email to all owners post-meeting. Another idea would be for people to write down their questions in advance and the board can answer them at the end of the meeting.

## Just for Start-up Co-ops:

Proactively manage expectations of your owners and the community by reminding people of the process and **timeline** towards your new store. This one is really important because the five to seven years it takes to open a co-op can seem endless to owners. Setting realistic expectations, and taking your ownership along on the journey can minimize frustration (especially when there are occasional setbacks). Oftentimes, when people see a visual representation of the many steps required to build the most stable, financially responsible store it makes them feel more secure about the entire endeavor.

**Exposure** — This is also a great local media opportunity. Your rules may stipulate ‘owners only’ at your meeting, but setting some time aside pre-meeting to talk with media can net you some excellent coverage for this local initiative. An Annual Meeting also indicates the legitimacy of your operations (fence-sitters like to see that!) If you’re doing an interview on-site, media will be able to see the energy of arriving owners, and can possibly get some impromptu comments from these engaged owners. Get your press release out early and have a designated spokesperson ready with your talking points.

**Appreciation** — Publically thank volunteers and board members (including any who have stepped off the board since the last annual meeting) and use this forum to help recruit new volunteers or future board members. Bringing attention to the hardworking people who are making it possible is key. Not only do they feel appreciated, it can convince others to pitch in once they see what opportunities are available and how many active hands there already are, and that their contribution will be valued and appreciated.

**Owner Voices** — Engage owners and the community by seeking input on the new store. Depending on what stage you’re in, set up ‘stations’ to gather owner input. These stations can be as simple as post-it notes they can use to jot thoughts, ideas, products and visions on, and stick onto individual sheets of paper with a particular topic written on it. These comments and visions can make for great social media fodder later, and it helps reinforce the idea that this store will be **THEIRS** and reflect this community’s wants and needs. Consider station topics like: What products would you most like to see the co-op carry? What words describe how you envision your co-op? What avenues could be used to educate more people about co-op ownership? What impacts to the community would you like to see occur through your co-op?



Consider having stations that illustrate what’s to come, or offer owners a place to post their ideas and suggestions.

## For Existing Co-ops:

**Meeting purpose** — This is your chance to give a yearly report to your owners on their co-op’s progress from the previous year, plans for the future and other information you want to share with your owners. This report might be delivered by the General Manager or members of the board, or both. But remember that **the annual meeting is the board’s responsibility** to the ownership to provide an update on the overall financial health of the co-op. Therefore, even if you opt to have your GM deliver the information, the board needs to oversee the presentation. Take time to build a narrative and script out the messaging each presenter will share to ensure everyone stays on topic and the necessary elements are covered.

**Illustrate impacts** — Use the annual meeting as an opportunity to remind your owners that their co-op is about more than food. Simple graphs and charts that showcase impacts in the community that meet your ends are very powerful. If the purchases

from local farmers has been steadily increasing over the past three years, show that growth! How much money was donated to local charities? Highlight that number in a big way! How many people took classes in the co-op classroom? Let's see stats with a fun photo or two!

**Reporting** — Yearly financial reports for your owners should be provided at the annual meeting. You will likely need to submit this information as part of your annual report to your state as well. Have copies of the full financial reports available for owners who want them, which include the profit & loss statement, balance sheet, and comparison against budget or prior years. Tie your financial results into a larger narrative you are sharing with owners about the impact your co-op is making in your community. Find a way to represent the data visually so your owners can more easily understand and interpret it. Plus, it starts building the basic co-op financial literacy of your owners — *after all, it's their store!* Understanding the very basics of how the business runs is important for every owner.

**Appreciation** — You can never thank your board, staff, owners and volunteers enough and the annual meeting is a great opportunity to do that publicly. Have there been some new initiatives that staff have really worked hard to implement? New staff members hired? Have volunteers been instrumental for specific events? Introducing and thanking your board members is also a great way to remind your owners of the role the board plays in your co-op.

## Running a Smooth Meeting — Things to Plan For:

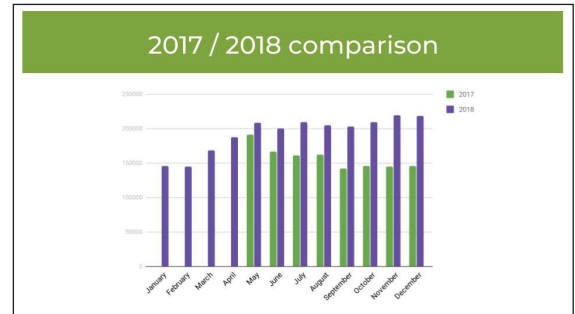
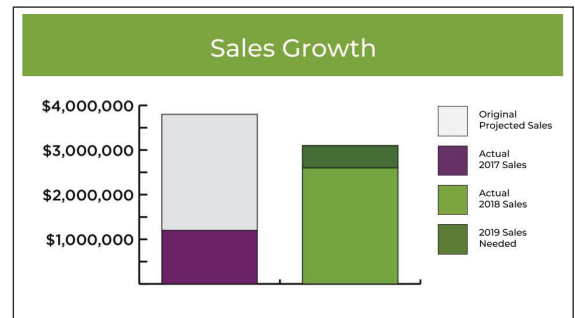
**Appropriate venue:** Public libraries, universities and churches typically have meeting spaces that work well for large groups. Many have audio-visual capabilities that are very important to a great meeting, plus they are usually budget-friendly and may allow you to bring in your own food.

**Check-in:** Many Annual Meetings are restricted to owners only, and if yours is (check your bylaws) you'll need a couple volunteers with a copy of the current owner list so they can confirm each attendee is an active owner. If your meetings are also open to the public, you will want to ensure that only active owners have access to ballots for voting.

**Name tags:** Name tags are nice to help put faces to the names many see on Facebook! Consider a different colored name tag for board members, volunteers or staff. Even better, give those folks brightly colored hats, t-shirts or aprons to make them easy to identify.

**The voting process:** Oftentimes co-ops allow for online or in-store voting, and the Annual Meeting is the last day to register a vote. If your check-in volunteers are already confirming ownership, you'll just need to have ballots available for those who vote at the meeting. Have the printed ballots and a ballot box readily available.

**Pay portal:** If you have an ownership payment plan and only up-to-date owners can vote, be ready to accept payments from owners.



These sample Annual Meeting slides from a co-op undergoing turnaround balances transparency with simplicity. Various charts show financials in a way that's understandable.



**Promotion:** Give as much advance notice to your owners as possible; minimum/maximum notice times are usually stipulated in your bylaws. In order to drive attendance, put up signage in the store weeks in advance, send out a ‘save the date’ announcement in your email newsletter, and post consistently on social media. Create a Facebook Event for the Annual Meeting, and ask owners to share the event on their own pages to spread the word.

**Fun:** Consider special swag or giveaways that are only at the annual meeting or have a drawing to give away fun prizes.

## Ideas to Make Your Annual Meeting Impactful:

- Meals bring people together. Plan time in your annual meeting for people to gather and build community around local food. Consider a meal or a social time featuring local food/drink.
- Have fun conversation-starting questions on the tables.
- Make it a potluck and encourage people to bring dishes using local ingredients. Provide index cards by each dish with a list of local ingredients from local farmers, or for special diet notifications (vegan, vegetarian, or gluten free.)
- Live your values by collecting food waste for a compost pile. One of your local farmers would probably love to take that bin home at the end of the night for their on-farm compost pile.
- Local farmers and producers should be your celebrity guests. Invite them to have tables with their products or farm information, and give them a special name tag, hat or apron so people can identify them.
- Education — Have an “ask a board member booth”
- Music sets the tone. A small acoustic ensemble (perhaps one of your owners is part of one?) can be a great fit for the social hour and mealtime of an annual meeting.
- If you have a volunteer with the skills, a slideshow of photos/video snippets of the past year can be playing in the background as people are entering or mingling. People love seeing their co-op in action and spotting themselves, friends, volunteers, board and staff.



Farmers and producers can be featured guests. They can talk about impacts the store has (or will have) on their lives, answer questions, and give out samples.

## Voting process:

- How much advance notice of the meeting and board candidates do you need to give your owners? Your co-op bylaws often stipulate this, so check them early to give yourselves enough time to prepare.
- Will you accept mailed-in or online ballots?
- What is your process for distributing and verifying ballots (you’ll need to be able to confirm the voter is an owner and that they’ve only voted once).
- What is your quorum and how will you ensure it is met?
- What is your process for validating ballots?

## Who will be tallying the vote?

In some co-ops the Secretary is responsible for this with the help of a volunteer (as long as the Secretary isn't on the ballot for re-election). Another method that provides more transparency is to have a committee consisting of two board members (who are not on the ballot), two staff, and two owners. Ballots are divided up into six envelopes. Each person tallies the ballots in one envelope, writes the totals on the outside, and initials it. Then everyone passes their envelope to the person on their left, and that person re-counts the ballots and signs off if their count matches, or they note any discrepancies. Envelopes with discrepancies get passed to a third person for recounting. When all envelopes have confirmed counts, the envelopes tallies are added together for a final total.

### Sample Schedule — Startup

- 1:15 Check-in, mingling, food, input tables, final voting. Music and/or slideshow playing in background.
- :05 Welcome — board member is best; someone who can bring some nice energy
- :10 Introduction of new board candidates — a current board member
- :10 Recognize volunteers, outgoing board members, current board candidates
- :20 Provide progress update on the co-op startup effort: Milestones reached, what's next, timeline. Issue any challenges for your next goals.
- :15 Q&A session
- :05 Closing. Invitation to participate at the input tables.

Optional: depending on venue, a food justice-related film screening or food-relevant presentation can be fun for those who wish to stay.

### Sample Schedule — Open Store

- 1:15 Check-in, mingling, food, input tables, final voting. Music and/or slideshow playing in background.
- :05 Welcome — board member is best; someone who can bring some nice energy
- :10 Introduction of new board candidates — a current board member
- :10 Recognizing volunteers, outgoing board members, current board candidates
- :25 Update on the co-op to include presentation of financials, community impacts/Ends, store goals — General Manager and/or board member
- :15 Q&A session
- :05 Closing. Invitation to participate at the input tables

Optional: depending on venue, a food justice-related film screening or food-relevant presentation can be fun for those who wish to stay.

Firebrand is a worker-owned cooperative, because we believe everyone deserves a voice and a seat at the table. It also defines how we work: true cooperation brings about the most effective collaboration and the strongest results. Our focus is helping nonprofits, cooperatives and other socially-responsible organizations by building practical tools and training processes so their organizing teams and boards can work more effectively and ultimately achieve their goals of making the world a better place. If we can help with your project, let us know: [info@firebrand.coop](mailto:info@firebrand.coop)