

Store Opening

Marketing & Messaging Guide



This resource was developed by Firebrand Cooperative for Food Co-op Initiative in support of their mission to equip startup food co-ops with the tools, resources and knowledge they need to succeed. The Firebrands who worked on this guide are Darnell Adams, Kaye Kirsch, and Melanie Shellito.

A special thank you to JQ Hannah for inspiring each of us to market our own co-ops with excellence.

Store Opening Marketing Implementation Guide

This plan is focused on the final three months leading up to the opening of your store. Based on the experiences of dozens of startup food co-ops upon opening, we know that the following are critical to your co-op's success in building a customer base and financial solvency:

- getting the word out to a broad swath of the surrounding community that a new grocery store is coming, well before opening
- bringing people in the door at opening (and for the days immediately after) with enticing, time-limited promotions and a targeted campaign to get out the word that your doors are open
- ensuring every customer has a great experience on that first trip so they will return and tell others

The plan below will cover your marketing planning from now until opening, as well as touch briefly on how business-as-usual marketing will work in your store once you are past open.

Get Ready: Planning for your Store Opening

There are a few things you want to have ready, in order to start planning:

1) Confirm your Budget

For your marketing planning prior to — and at — store opening, you will draw from two pools of funding:

- **Your pro forma should have a 'Startup Promotion' line item.** This is an amount of money that your co-op planning team has set aside for exactly this purpose. These funds should all be used to publicize your store's forthcoming opening as widely and repeatedly as you can, and to make a big media splash in those first weeks post-opening. To execute your opening marketing planning, find out how much is left in the pro forma "startup promotion" budget first, and confirm this is all available for your opening marketing planning use. Optimally, this budget is at least \$20K, and more is better.
- **Year 1 Marketing Budget:** Check with your GM to see what your Y1 marketing budget is, as some of the marketing you will be planning now will also fall into ongoing Year 1 marketing costs. Marketing/promotions purchases you make for pre-opening and opening often come in bundles or packages that make financial sense to extend past opening. Confirm how much of this budget can be used as part of your opening marketing planning. Some examples of where this might come into play:
 - The first weekly sales flyer you develop for opening week might be part of a larger media package you buy with your local newspaper, that will cover weeks or months of sales flyer insert advertising. Perhaps you can negotiate a special ad package as a new client that includes having your flyers in the local newspaper

multiple times during the first few months, with a tag on the front page of the paper on opening day.

- You could contract to have your co-op pop up on the internet searches in your community for multiple months when people search anything to do with “grocery”, and there are benefits to extending that contract into the first three months of operations or beyond, as well as cost savings by signing up for both pre- and post-opening services.

2) Line up your vendors and partners

Your store opening campaign will ideally have multiple media channels working together in sync to make a big splash at store opening. Research shows again and again that layering the “vehicles” you use creates a much bigger impression in the minds of your audience. You might have radio, print ads in newspapers and on buses, digital billboards, direct mail, and online ads all popping up at the same time, in coordination with your ongoing social media strategy. Layering multiple marketing vehicles does take some detailed planning, so pull together the key information on vendors for these marketing vehicles, and organize it now.

Set up your files for your preferred media vendors, making sure you have:

- their contact info
- current rate sheets and special package offers
- specific info about preferred formats, sizes, resolution, etc. they need the ads in
- lead times for booking advertising

Don't be afraid to ask about special ad packages or offers for a new business or new client. Ensure that you are familiar with the reach of each advertising option, and expect the vendor to provide data on where their reach extends to and the demographics of its audience. Some advertisers may even offer to design the graphics and ads for you (oftentimes at no cost), but we don't recommend this option. It is far better to have your marketing team prepare all artwork themselves — this will ensure brand consistency and cohesiveness with your entire ad campaign, which will provide a much bigger impact.

Think beyond your traditional co-op organizing advertising channels, too. Social media is inexpensive and easy, particularly if you have strong networks and influencers among your member/owners. You'll definitely continue to use social media as a powerful tool in your marketing toolkit, but now's the time to do research into media channels that will get your name out there into the community as a whole. Moving forward, you'll need to reach a broader audience than your typical core, and become top-of-mind as people go about their daily lives. To do that, you'll need to explore marketing channels you may not have used before. Consider options such as:

- digital or traditional billboards
- direct mail (consider Every Door Direct Mailing (EDDM) for better rates and coverage)

- radio
- traditional newspaper advertising
- transit systems (interior or exterior on buses, or at bus stops)
- online ads via your local media partners (newspaper, TV, radio)
- online or print ads in publications from community or neighborhood groups (nextdoor, neighborhood associations, churches, etc.)

3) Identify your Audience(s)

People primarily choose their grocery store for convenience, which means that the people who live or work close to your co-op will likely be your most frequent customers. This group will be broader and different than the people your co-op reached during your organizing days, where you likely moved through circles of affinity groups. Do research on the demographic makeup of these neighborhoods (age, gender, etc) and what ways they tend to consume media. Have a plan to reach all your nearest neighbors with direct mail, on-site marketing, and neighborhood outreach.

4) Talking Like a Grocery Store — One of Your Core Messages

Co-ops choose many different names, and many don't have "grocery" in them. Even a co-op name that has something like "market" in it could mean many things. A "market" could be any type of store, so you will have to put in extra effort to communicate that your co-op is a **grocery** store. To do this, focus on pairing your co-op marketing with immediately-recognizable grocery store imagery in all your visuals — this will reinforce that your co-op is where they should start shopping for food. Imagery such as shopping carts, bags of groceries, people with hand baskets in the produce section should be used often.

As you lead up to opening (and beyond) your messaging will shift to "talking like a grocery store", meaning using the familiar tools of communication that customers have been conditioned to expect from a grocery store: sales, new products, menus, special items, featured farmers and producers, hours of operation, etc. Since you're a co-op, you will tie these familiar grocery things into the values that set co-ops apart and make them unique, but you cannot skimp in any way on "talking like a grocery store." It's the only way your co-op can claim 'market share' as a strong grocery store option in the minds of your member-owners and customers in your trade area.

You will have multiple core messages you are speaking to at any given time, but the grocery store-specific messaging is a constant that you *always* need to be speaking to as you plan your marketing messages over any time period. It will be the most critical of your core messages during the three months pre-opening, through the opening phase.

5) Have your team pulled together with everyone knowing their role

Planning for your pre-opening and store opening marketing must begin immediately, long before the full staff team is on site, and while many duties are shifting. To move the marketing planning

forward effectively and quickly, it is important to clarify immediately who will lead the effort right now, who else will play a role, and how much authority/responsibility each person will have.

Questions to get answers to before starting your marketing planning:

- Who will have ultimate authority — Is the GM, the interim GM, or the project manager the source of authority for this plan? Who will delegate responsibilities for marketing and approve the plan? We *strongly* recommend that the authority over the plan be one person, and specifically operational staff (GM, interim GM, or project manager). Final decisions must rest with a person — not a committee — in order to move forward effectively.
- Who will manage this plan — The person determined to have ultimate authority over the plan must then decide if they will be responsible for *building* this plan, or if they will assign that responsibility to someone else. If so, who? And what aspects must be approved by that person with authority vs what the manager of the plan can do without coming back for approval? Obviously, if the person with authority will also serve as the manager of the pre-open/open marketing plan at this time, this is a non-issue.
- Who will play a role in building the plan — Will the manager of the plan do all the leg work with vendors? Will they have additional assistance? Will they have a team giving them input/feedback as needed, as they build the plan?
- Expertise — It's important to get this right and you only have one shot at getting it right from the beginning, so be sure to have an expert you can call on (such as the Firebrand team) to serve as an expert review team as you build your plan, providing input and guidance.

Marketing Channels

In our media-saturated world, there are many options for how to market your grocery store, and the channels you use will ultimately depend on your budget, staff capacity and audience. The channels below are the ones we recommend for a store opening campaign, when you want to shout from the rooftops that you are a new grocery store, now open to anyone and everyone. When you open, you want as many people to hear about your co-op as possible, as quickly as possible. Now is the time to go big and plan a multimedia blitz.

We will briefly summarize the various channels, share some key points and tips for using each channel, then pull your plan together in the next section with a timeline breakdown per channel for bringing your whole opening campaign together. As you build and prepare campaigns, be thoughtful about how you can track the effectiveness of various media to help guide your ongoing media purchasing in the future. Coupons that people redeem in store are a great way to track any print media, and depending on your POS system, you may also be able to do digital coupons through your text messaging platform or other online media.

On site: Remember, grocery shopping is about convenience so your store itself provides a great opportunity to reach your future shoppers while construction is happening. Your goal should be alerting all the people who routinely drive, walk or see the store that a grocery store is opening there soon — and it's right on their regular route. Switch up the signage on the construction fence, or add more elements to it as you get closer to opening to keep people's interest. At opening, make a huge visual splash with banners, teardrop flags, balloons, pennants, streamers or anything else you can imagine to make sure everyone knows that you are now open for business.

Social Media: After years of co-op organizing, you've probably built a strong social media following, but now is the time to expand your reach and shift your messaging to grocery store information, as well as co-op info. Be creative with building new audiences and targeting ads to constantly build your social media following. Keep in mind, everything about your store will be new, so be sure to update your "about" information on Facebook with store hours, department info, and all the typical store information people expect to find on a grocery store's social media account.

Radio: Plan for a live broadcast from the store with a popular local radio celebrity during your store's grand opening events to get the word out. Typically a radio station will have a package of advertising that includes several hours of live broadcast, a series of radio ads, and possibly even online advertising. Be sure you understand how much of the programming and content you can help to direct by providing talking points and guests, and align the radio ads to your store opening timeline.

Billboard or Digital Billboard(s): These are a great way to reach regular commuters and get simple messages out about your store. Digital billboards provide easy, convenient options for building name-brand recognition, switching up messaging (like a countdown to store opening) and can help people find the store too (i.e. "one block north"). Be strategic in thinking about where the billboards are in relation to the store. In order to optimize your billboard spend, do your homework on the daily traffic counts, and how long/how frequently your ads rotate.

Newspaper: Most newspapers have a grocery store insert day and you should try to get your flyer in there at least the first few weeks you're open. It might be cost-prohibitive to do it on an ongoing basis, but consider it for the first few weeks when you are open, or around special sales events. Most newspapers will allow you to select the areas of town where you want your flyers delivered, and you may be able to buy a special tag or sticker that goes on the front page of the paper promoting your opening as well. Sometimes the newspaper may sell you a package that includes online ads in addition to your print advertising, which can help extend your reach. Pay attention to the lead times on the inserts.

Direct Mail: There are many print vendors who can help you prepare a direct mail campaign as part of their services. Check with them to determine a target radius (start with 1-2 miles from the store, or broader if your budget allows). You can opt to send to residences and/or businesses, and will probably want to send a series of 2-3 postcard mailings over the first months that invite people to visit the grocery store when you open. Include the opening date on the first mailing. Always list your store hours and the location, and include a time-limited, special offer coupon just for your neighbors to entice them to visit.

Transit Signage: Signage in or on buses and at bus stops along routes that run by the store are a great way to let people know the new grocery store is now open. Be strategic about the timing and placement of the ads to get the most bang for your buck around your store opening.

Online: In addition to your social media advertising on Facebook or Instagram, consider a Google ad campaign for your grocery store when people search for relevant keywords. (Be sure to set up your google business listing too, as soon as you can, since it can sometimes take Google a few weeks for verification.) As you talk with vendors about other media buys, they may offer ad packages that include online advertising on their channels as well. For instance, when you buy an ad insert package for your local newspaper, they may include 20,000 free online impressions on their website, too. These can be a good way to extend your local reach and they are usually cost-effective. If you can integrate an online coupon, you can test how effective various partners are for bringing people to your business, as well as how effective your coupon was.

Website: Revising your co-op website to provide the grocery store information that your shoppers will be looking for is important to plan for in the months leading up to opening. This is a great time to revisit what information your customers and owners/members need, and reorganize the site to prioritize the information that your shoppers will be looking for. At the same time, you'll also be telling the story about how your grocery store is unique because it's a co-op. Make it easy for shoppers to find store hours and location, information about departments in your store, and your sales flyers and promotions. Make sure these are always current, and accessible from the homepage with minimal clicks.

Earned Media: A new business opening is always news, and a community-owned business like a food co-op has some great human interest angles to it. Tap into the relationships you have built with the media during your co-op organizing years to strategically plan interviews about the new store, and make the media your partner in getting the word out about your store opening. Offer a trusted reporter an exclusive 'one month before opening' peek at the progress towards store opening for an exposé. Pitch an article or radio interview about what shoppers can expect in their new grocery store. See if the early morning local TV show wants to be on site for opening day. Have a press release, a designated spokesperson, and a media plan prepared before opening day to make it easy for the media to help tell your story.

Text Messaging: If you haven't done it already as part of co-op organizing, build a text message list to share key updates with your owners and others. After store opening, this will be a great way to get out exciting news like flash sales, special events and special coupons. If you don't have texting set up already, do it now and promote signups heavily via your social media and email newsletters. Texting is an inexpensive and immediate way to reach people and generate excitement — just be strategic and don't send too many.

Events: You should plan a series of fun events for the first days you are open. This may be particularly challenging in the time of COVID, as the purpose of events is to get a huge turnout, but we also need to plan for the safe participation of everyone who comes. Some of the things that we typically try to do at a grocery store opening, like sampling of food, may not be viable in 2021, so some creativity and new approaches will be needed.

To honor and appreciate your owners we always recommend a special early shopping time for just your owners, before the store officially opens to the public. These are the people who invested in your store when it was just an idea in your hearts and minds. Give them the first chance to see and experience

their store ahead of the general public. This is also a great training opportunity for your new front-of-house staff, to let them practice the check-out system on a very forgiving audience.

At store openings, most grocery stores give away bags of groceries to the first people who visit. We absolutely think this needs to happen, even in the time of Covid, and would recommend that it be done as a drive-through and/or socially distanced walk-through option on the morning you open. We recommend having branded reusable grocery bags made, and fill them with an enticing array of groceries. You want the bag to look full and make people feel they got a very special value of a full bag of free groceries. For example, for around \$25, you could include a loaf of bread, a head of lettuce, a box of pasta, a box of cereal, a bag of chips, etc. Think staple grocery items that can fill up a bag nicely, with something leafy and green poking out the top. Include info about the store and awesome coupons for them to use on their next visit. Have tents set up in the parking lot to hand out the bags, and a line of traffic cones to direct traffic. Give away bags to the first 100 or 150 people who show up (or more, if your budget allows). People *will* show up for a free bag of groceries, so make sure your local media outlets know this will be happening, and try to get camera crews to cover the line of cars and buzz in your parking lot at opening (and if you can't get camera crews, at *least* take plenty of photos of customers and happy volunteers handing out bags, to post on your social media). Have energetic volunteers wearing store shirts/aprons directing traffic, and an efficient hand-out system in place to move people through the line efficiently while still being fun and welcoming. These are the public's first impressions of your co-op; make sure they're good ones!

Other events for opening week could include a live radio broadcast from the store; visits from featured farmers or vendors; a cooking tutorial of a farmer making their favorite dish using seasonal product, or a 'local celebrity' chef cooking a meal with the farmer. Consider an event or ongoing activities for kids, such as a coloring contest or scavenger hunt in the store. Have giveaways of safely pre-packaged foods to replace the usual in-store sampling. Have drawings throughout the day(s) for great prizes and make a big deal of doing the drawings and naming the winners (and capture your customer's contact information for your email lists!) Snap a photo of the winner with their goodies for posting on social media. Feature any local professionals who have contributed to the store design and let them share about their work and inspirations. Make the whole week festive and fun for everyone who visits the store during those days.

Email newsletter(s): If you don't already have a regular owner email newsletter mailing schedule, establish one in the months before store opening to provide your owners with timely and regular updates on the store. After opening it can be used to share owner-only specials and events, plus updates on how their store is doing. If you have a general email list that you have built over the years of co-op organizing, share information with that group of people too, including pre-store opening information and regular sales promotions, events, and store info on a regular basis.

Guerilla Marketing: By the time a co-op opens, most organizing groups have gotten really good at stretching their marketing budget by utilizing volunteers for community organizing efforts, and doing creative, fun and unexpected things to draw attention to their start-up effort. Your co-op organizers, committees and volunteers can be a source of rich ideas and helping hands to take your traditional media campaigns to the next level. Layer into your plan ways to utilize these organizers and volunteers. Examples:

- Marketing Canvassing — Consider sending a team out to put door hangers on homes in the nearby neighborhoods with messaging that invites people to visit the new store, information about when it will be open, and a really compelling coupon or promotion that they need to redeem within the first few weeks of store opening.
- Directing Traffic — During opening week, have people dressed up in fun co-op gear or food costumes or silly hats and fun masks waving people into the parking lot or handing out special coupons or samples at the bus stop nearby. You could also have folks out in front of the store the week before the grand opening holding up signs with the store's opening date, waving at cars during busy hours with an info table for those walking by.
- Treasure Hunt — Set a budget to purchase items from local businesses/partners and wrap up a co-op merch piece (tote bag, knit hat with your logo, etc) along with a “ticket” for the local item they have won. The co-op team hides the ‘treasures’ at local businesses that have agreed to be a part of the fun. Promote it heavily online with hints about what businesses to check, and as people find the hidden items, they post a photo of themselves with their co-op merch and ticket — tagging your co-op, the business it was found in, and the business the prize was from! Have them bring their ticket to the store to redeem. You could even drive participation in the Hunt by holding a drawing for an exciting grand prize — like a \$100 gift card — that everyone who found one of the “treasures” is entered to win!

Store Opening Campaign Plan

The chart at this [LINK](#) will show you how to plan out your store opening campaign and what activity you should be planning in each channel during each phase leading up to opening. There are lots of moving parts to coordinate, so this matrix can help you keep track and plan your whole campaign in advance, get any necessary approvals, and execute it all. *Tip: make a copy of this Google sheet so you can customize it for your own use.*

Key Messages

Your Key Messages will also tie in to your store opening campaign planning, so we've summarized those here for each phase, for convenient reference.

Marketing staff must strike a balance between “we’re a grocery store” and “we’re a mission-based business” in their communications. Too far in either direction is at best unproductive, at worst it’s confusing to the public which hurts market share. The same holds true for the audience you’re appealing to — are they your informed, engaged **core**, or the **general** public you’re trying to entice.

Timeframe	What you should be talking about
3 Months Out	<p>Construction/store updates</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Store progress pix (general/core) • Staff introductions, as they happen (core) <p>Your grocery store</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vendor promotions / introductions (general) • Product/department promotion as items decided (general) <p>Ownership</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outreach/ core values (general/core) • Founding owners, become an owner before the store (general)
2 Months Out	<p>Construction/store updates</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Store progress pix (general/core) • Staff introductions, as they happen (core) <p>Your grocery store</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vendor promotions / introductions (general) • Product/department promotion as items decided (general) <p>Ownership</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perks of ownership: planned in-store programs/savings (general) • Outreach/core values (general/core) • Founding owner, become an owner before the store (general)
1 Month Out	<p>Grand Opening</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Product promotions / vendor promos (general) • Soft opening dates (core/general) • Store progress pix (general/core) • Media night / preview (general) • GIANT grand opening plans: week long, promos, etc. (general) • Other events / workshops/classes (general) <p>Ownership</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perks of ownership / programs for saving (general) • Member-only pre-open events (core)

Post-Opening Marketing

It is critical that there is a coherent marketing team process with clarity about who has decision making power over what. There isn't just one process that works for all co-ops, because of differences in staff sizes, staff roles, etc but there are some consistent things to consider.

Marketing at food co-ops is Brand + Promotions + Outreach:

- **Brand** — Generally speaking, your business' *brand* is what your audience thinks of your business. Keeping that brand exciting, memorable, and relevant to people's needs is how you build strong public awareness. Leveraging that public awareness is how you build name recognition, loyalty, and grow your audience over time. At a chain grocery store, a great deal of talent and money is poured into building and maintaining the corporation's brand, creating not only name recognition among their target customers, but also a clear sense of what that brand offers and represents. Co-ops must also build and maintain their brand to be successful, but our fight for name recognition is harder because we are not part of a chain and have much smaller budgets to do this work. But it can be done, with dedication to a consistent look/feel and messaging between all your marketing efforts.
- **In-Store Promotions** — This refers to any deals or product features done in-store to sell particular items. This could include general sales flyers, owner-specific sales, flash sales, product sampling events, department-wide discounts, etc. These are a critical part of grocery store marketing efforts, *but cannot be the extent* of a grocery store's marketing efforts. In-store promotions are often the one tool former managers of chain grocery stores mistake for the entirety of marketing.
- **Outreach** — This is any effort that prioritizes education and community connections above the actual selling of products. This could include giving store tours to local groups, public presentations about the co-op, educational classes/events off-site or in-store, and tabling at events outside of the store where the goal is informing, not selling product. Outreach is an important piece of a co-op's overall marketing efforts, but must not eclipse brand work or in-store promotions in the time and resources it takes from the marketing team.

When you plan marketing, you must build a plan that includes all of the above areas of marketing with an understanding of **who** will be authorized to make the decisions in each area, **who** will do the work of each area, and **how** each area of marketing will be represented in the co-op's total marketing budget. There should also be an understanding of what success will look like — is it a certain number of new shoppers in the store? a goal of X number of cases sold? a specific number of new owners for the month? Review the metrics of success as a team before and after any major marketing initiatives, and discuss any mitigating factors (ie. rain during an outdoor event) and what could be improved on for next time.

The team and their roles

Successfully marketing a new grocery store takes everyone working together to plan, coordinate and execute a marketing plan. These are the key players who will have input and who will support the store's marketing plan on an ongoing basis after opening.

- **The GM** is responsible for overseeing the marketing plan and its successful execution. They might be responsible for creating the marketing plan and framework at the very beginning (pre-store, before marketing staff is hired) and may weigh in on key budget decisions or promotional plans.
- **The Marketing Manager (or Coordinator)** is responsible for day-to-day execution and coordination of all the marketing activities. At a new store, they may work closely with the GM to create the first marketing plan and the systems the store will use going forward.
- **Department Managers** are responsible for coordinating with Marketing to provide timely information needed to successfully market their department as part of the overall store marketing plan. This might take the form of planning department sales or special promotions to align with in-store events, and proactively working with the Marketing person on seasonal promotions or special events. For a new store, Department Managers might not be hired yet when you need to plan out the earliest store-opening promotions, so check with the GM on how to plan and coordinate timing for those special offerings and deals. It's likely your distributors will have case pack options and other special offers available for a new store which can be used for high-visibility grand opening promotions.
- **Every store employee** is part of successfully executing a complete marketing plan, so having an effective system of communication to keep all employees informed about new promotions, sales, or special events is important. In particular, your front end staff need to be kept aware of any coupons or special offers their customers might bring in to the store. Any time a special promotion goes out to the public, be sure to provide an info sheet to the front end team about the promotion, how to ring it up, and any special handling that may be needed.