

Co-op Marketing:

Using Core Messaging to Transform your Marketing Impact

Has your marketing lost its edge? Not seeing the impact you want from your marketing campaigns or events? Social media engagement down and/or not growing as quickly as it once was? Sales flat and/or owner growth plateauing?

These signs all indicate it might be time to revisit the core messaging in your marketing plan. Making sure that every single communication from your co-op aligns with the core messages can reinvigorate marketing that's gotten a bit stale.

What is core messaging and how does it fit into your overall marketing?
The graphic at right shows how brand, identity and core messaging relate.

'Core messages' are the most important information you want your stakeholders to know about your co-op right now. It's how we tell the story about who our co-op is and what we aspire to be. Core messaging connects us with our stakeholders or target audiences through a variety of messaging vehicles (which should all fit within your brand's identity).

What about your Ends? Those are important and they will likely be woven into some of your core messaging, but they are not the day-to-day, strategic messages that you communicate to your stakeholders in order to operate and grow your business.

Every co-op has multiple stakeholders, ranging from owners and customers, the community we're in, our staff, the board, and our vendors. Being intentional about who is talking to each stakeholder and how the core messages are conveyed to them is accomplished through all the different vehicles our co-op uses for marketing (see list on the next page).



*Tangible elements (what you can see, hear, touch) make up your brand's **identity** and communicate the intangible attributes of your **brand**. Good core messaging engages and creates passionate fans.*

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|--|---|---|---|---|--|
| <p>Stakeholder: Owners</p> <p>Who's talking: Marketing Manager</p> | <p>Stakeholder: Customers</p> <p>Who's talking: Marketing Manager</p> | <p>Stakeholder: Community</p> <p>Who's talking: Marketing Manager</p> | <p>Stakeholder: Staff</p> <p>Who's talking: HR / GM</p> | <p>Stakeholder: Board</p> <p>Who's talking: General Manager</p> | <p>Stakeholder: Vendors</p> <p>Who's talking: Dept. Managers</p> |
|--|---|---|---|---|--|



So what are the key core messages for *your* co-op right now? If you don't currently have core messages as part of your marketing plan, now's a great time to develop them. If you already have them, it might be time to revisit to make sure they are addressing the primary communication and strategic needs of your co-op at the moment.

If you are starting from scratch, or even revisiting your current core messages, a great way to tackle this is to just start brainstorming about all the things you wish your customers knew and understood better about your co-op.

- What are the questions you keep answering all the time in the store or on social media?
- What new products, services, departments are on the horizon for your co-op?
- What social/economic/environmental impact is your co-op making that you wish more people knew about?
- What perceptions exist in your community about your co-op that you would like to shift?

If you start by making a list, you will see that certain topics fit together naturally and your core messages begin to emerge.

For example, if you are constantly responding to FB queries about what soup is on the hot bar today or hours of operations, those things fit together under 'grocery store operations'. Most co-ops will have a 'grocery store' component that might look something like these core messages from a well-established co-op:

| | |
|--|---|
| Welcoming Grocery Store | Ends/Mission (used as differentiators) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Departments ■ Products ■ Convenience ■ OPEN to ALL ■ Hours ■ Jobs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Vibrant, Inclusive Community ■ Educational Resource ■ Cooperative Movement ■ Robust Local Food System |
| Value to Customer | Ownership |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Sales ■ Deals ■ Quality ■ Local ■ Organic ■ Health | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Locally owned ■ YOU own it ■ Transparency ■ Democracy ■ Elections ■ Board Representation |

Co-op Marketing Vehicles

What is driving your core messages to your stakeholders?

Start-ups + Open Co-ops

- Newsletter
- Social Media
- Texting
- Flyers
- Pamphlets
- Samplings
- Events
- Giveaways
- Sponsoring Events
- Website
- Tabling (where, who)
- Press coverage/releases
- Branded product/swag
- Partnerships w/local businesses and orgs

Open Co-ops

- Store Signage
- Store Events
- External Events / Classes
- Store Classes
- Shelf Talkers
- What we put on sale
- Coupons
- Ads (radio, print, etc)
- Staff Appearance
- Store Locations
- Customer Service interactions
- Expertise appearances
- Store feel and appearance
- Donations
- Staff treatment/benefits
- Staff trainings



Below is a core messaging example from a co-op open just a few months. Marketing prior to, and at opening, was minimal and the store was perceived initially as having very high prices. Many in the community did not know what a food co-op was or that everyone could shop there. Local food was the primary differentiator for this co-op in a market with other organic competition from a corporate natural foods store, plus Costco, Walmart, and others.

Core message: “We’re a full-service grocery store, open to all”

- Unique features and benefits in our store – kombucha on tap, best bulk department in town, community room.
- Centrally located, open 7 days a week, easy parking
- Everyone welcome – you don’t have to be an owner to shop
- Special sales and competitive prices
 - Co-op Essentials – Pantry staples at low price, minimal margin
 - Special savings just for owners
 - Competitive pricing
- Delicious Food
 - Let people know what to expect in the store
 - Regular in-store sampling
 - Pairings, suggestions, recipes offered to guests
 - Feature natural, organic and local food

Core Message: “We’re supporting local farms and our local economy”

- Locally-grown – priority on local farmers and producers in all our purchasing decisions
- Know your farmers – our local celebrities. We connect you to the source.
- Local matters – when you shop local every dollar makes a difference
- Owned by you, your friends, your neighbors – 100% of the profits stay in this community and are reinvested in this community

Core message: “We are invested in our community”

- More than just a grocery store, it’s a community
- Round up at the register program – investing back in local community organizations and people through Double SNAP
- A place where you belong – classes, events, café seating – come spend time with us!
- Kids are welcome – bring the next generation of eaters for a unique and friendly in-store experience; kids activity table, parents room (private moms room for nursing), kiddie carts, coloring books, free fruit for kids
- We care about your health – in store education, healthy food choices throughout the store

Core message: “Community owned (We Own It!)”

- A store owned by you, your friends, your neighbors
- By owning a share of the co-op you are voting for a better community
- Owner benefits
- Democracy – board meetings, run for the board, annual election
- Co-op principles & values

Everyone on your team should know your core messages and be intentional and explicit about sharing them in all the day-to-day operations. This will build cohesiveness and consistency, which in turn helps your customers automatically associate those core values with your co-op.



So what does great core messaging look like?

So what's going on in this example on the right? Can you identify the two core messages happening with this post?

1. Grocery Store: We're giving people the info they need to know to plan a weekend meal at the co-op. We have a brunch bar with great food. Here's just one delicious item that will be there, with specific info you need (hours). Always have a mouthwateringly beautiful photo and post *early* so that people have time to plan (Facebook can be very slow to show posts, and early also gives people time to share your post to their circles). For something like a Sunday Brunch, consider posting the day before or even earlier so you are part of people's weekend plans.

2. Local: this post promotes items from a local farmer, hitting the 'local food' core message. Always tag and promote your local vendors every single chance you get; it lends credibility to your claim of 'local' and it increases your posts' reach.

In the below quarter-page ad for an event program, another newly opened co-op uses some similar core messages:

1. Grocery Store: Once again, it's important to hit the necessities like location and hours of operation, but also website since this is a printed ad versus something online that can simply link. Cue the featured image of fresh food, and a list of items appealing to busy families and budget-conscious shoppers. The store was recently voted as having the 'best produce' in town, so that icon lends credibility to the quality of food shoppers will find inside.

2. Open to all: Almost the same size as the logo is the reminder that everyone is welcome. It's a commonly misunderstood aspect of co-ops, so constantly promoting the fact that non-owners can shop is important.

3. Healthy + Local: Take any opportunity to align the co-op's offerings with healthier/fresher choices and Local items, even if those messages aren't a primary focus of the piece.



Determining your core messages for the next quarter takes a bit of time up front — especially if you're also strategizing with a GM and department managers — but will result in stronger and more memorable brand awareness for your co-op (or organizing endeavor). Your stakeholders will notice, and you'll be better positioned to convert followers into loyal fans.

Firebrand Cooperative works with co-ops and other socially responsible businesses across the country. Leaders seek us out to build strategic processes, enabling organizing teams and boards to work more effectively... and ultimately achieve their goals of making the world a better place.

Change is inevitable. *Managing* change will get you where you want to go. We are your partners in: Strategic planning; facilitation; brand/identity; assessment and feasibility.