

Middlebury Natural Foods Co-op Celebrates the Year of the Co-op

People have long recognized the value of cooperation—working together for the greater good. Our ancestors hunted game, migrated, threshed grain, and raised barns together. Communities pooled their resources to create libraries, schools, and volunteer fire departments.

Cooperation as a business model has been around for hundreds of years too, and co-ops remain more vibrant than ever today. Co-ops are formed for a wide variety of reasons. They provide purchasing power for farm supplies; product marketing and processing for small producers; financial services; medical care; electricity; irrigation water; affordable funeral services; and food.

Co-ops begin with people teaming up to meet a specific community need. In the early 1970's, a few Middlebury, Vermont families formed a food buying or “pre-order” group to access otherwise unavailable whole, natural foods. Membership grew, and the group started a store front, incorporated as a business, elected a Board of Directors, and hired staff. Demand for healthy, natural foods increased, as did the co-op's membership, and the co-op expanded several times, culminating in the 2004 construction of a beautiful new building, our current home. Today, the co-op is 4500 members strong, employs 70 people, and provides \$13,000,000 worth of products to consumers—approximately 35% of that from local producers—making the co-op vital to local growers who sell their crops here, the consumers who want local, healthy food, and the economy of the greater community.

Business Based on Principles

In our world of giant, multi-national corporations with revenues that surpass the GDP's of all but the wealthiest nations, it's interesting to look at the difference the cooperative model offers. Though there are socially responsible exceptions, all too often, corporations have one driving priority, an exclusive focus: profit at any cost, whether the cost is environmental destruction, poor working conditions, inadequate worker wages, or the undermined integrity of our political systems. We hear stories everyday in which the needs of big corporations trump the needs of the greater public good.

It hasn't always been this way. During this country's first hundred years, corporations had to show they fulfilled a specific public need; their power and size were limited; they were prohibited from involvement in the political process; their charters were dissolved if violated; and they could not buy stock in another corporation. Many of these cooperate laws were instituted in direct response to excessive corporate power and influence on government. The Boston Tea Party—an act of civil disobedience that helped ignite the Revolutionary War—happened in response to the infamous Tea Act of 1733, which was a collusion between the powerful East India Company and Parliament designed to create profits and a tea monopoly at the expense of the people.

Much has changed, especially since the civil war when war profits and political chaos allowed corporations to expand their power. Near the end of his life, Abraham Lincoln warned, “corporations have been enthroned An era of corruption in high places will follow and the money power will endeavor to prolong its reign by working on the prejudices of the people . . . until wealth is aggregated in a few hands . . . and the republic is destroyed.”

Cooperatives, on the other hand, by their very nature are principle and people oriented; people form a co-op to work together for their mutual benefit. Co-ops have historically been decades ahead on social issues, such as minimum wage, full voting rights for women, sexual harassment policies, environmental sustainability, and safe, healthy working conditions.

At the Middlebury Natural Foods Co-op, everything we do is based on our “Ends Statement,” or the reasons the co-op exists:

MNFC member/owners, customers, and the community benefit from:

Healthy Foods

Vibrant Local Economy

Environmentally Sustainable and Energy-Efficient Practices

Cooperative, Democratic Ownership

Learning about these values

A Wider Wealth

Someone once said to me, “You won’t get rich working for a co-op.” That might be true, if you define wealth only in terms of personal income, as many corporations and people do. But I would argue, we sorely need a redefinition of wealth. As an employee of MNFC, shoppers often ask me, “Do *we* carry such and such product?” Instead of “Do *you*...” because we all own the co-op. Co-ops enrich, empower and improve the quality of life for the whole community. Co-ops bring everyone up together by democratizing power, providing for our mutual needs, and simply being vibrant centers of shared activity. So much of what we encounter these days comes in the form of a lifeless construct, something with form, but little substance. The atmosphere in a co-op is noticeably different from a profit-based business. A food co-op like MNFC, for example, is more like an open marketplace where you catch up with the people you know. It’s warm and inviting. It’s a living community. I don’t feel that way at a Wal-Mart or a Shaw’s or a Starbucks—do you?