



An Introduction To Producer Marketing Cooperatives

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March, 2021

What is a Marketing Cooperative?

Cooperatives¹ are enterprises that are democratically owned and controlled by those who benefit from them. Cooperative members can be individuals or—as in the case of many marketing cooperatives — they can be small businesses or farms who join together to more effectively market and sell the product produced by their members. Marketing cooperatives allow farmers and other small scale producers to band together and hire professional marketing staff whose job it is to secure contracts and promote sales on behalf of all of the members.

Marketing cooperatives are common in agriculture where they represent household names like Land-o-Lakes, Sunkist, Organic Valley and Ocean Spray, all of which are brand names of enterprises owned and controlled by their farmer-members. Marketing cooperatives are also commonly used by artists, artisans and other small-scale producers with an interest in promoting their work to a common group of customers.

For small scale farmers, harvesters or artisans, **one of the biggest barriers to business growth is labor and time management**. Simply put: time spent selling is time NOT spent in production. Particularly for growers and others involved in a seasonal business cycle, there are seasons of the year when there are simply not enough hours in the day to do all the work necessary on the farm, yet also spend effort pursuing new accounts and customers. There may be times of the year when it is crucial to meet with customers and secure sales and contracts. Yet those times of day or month or year may not always line up conveniently with the production cycle. This leaves the farmers with less time in the field to do what they enjoy and do best². Not every producer sees marketing as a chore. But for most, it can sometimes be challenging to balance the diverse set of tasks and skills that business ownership demands; marketing cooperatives can help.

Marketing cooperatives generally charge an overhead fee like a “commission” for their services on product sold through the cooperative, which might be as low as 10-15% or as high as 30-35% depending on the range of services offered. For members, this lower net sales revenue is made up for in the additional volume of product they can move through the cooperative, with no additional marketing effort on their part.

In sum, a marketing cooperative is a structure that can help an individual producer to achieve higher sales volume and create more efficient operations, helping the underlying farm or business operation to become more financially stable and successful.

¹ Cooperatives are a special kind of corporation with their own incorporation laws. Every state has some kind of cooperative statute, and some have more than one. The information in this guide applies generally both to legally incorporated cooperatives, and to other kinds of enterprises such as LLCs that operate on a cooperative basis. It is best to consult with a cooperative attorney with expertise in your state law before formally launching a cooperative.

² In this manual, we will talk mainly about farmer-owned cooperatives, but many of the same principles apply equally to marketing cooperatives owned by artists, artisans or other entrepreneurs.

① What Does a Marketing Cooperative Actually Do?

Coops engage in many activities to help members increase revenue. They do this in several ways, by helping members to:

Foster opportunities for increased sales

Cooperatives engage in many activities to help members increase revenue. They do this by facilitating:

- **Better prices:**

By working together, producers in a common market can prevent each one from undercutting the other, and instead establish a common market price that fairly reflects the labor and effort of each producer.

- **New customers:**

Working with the volume of many small farmers and a professional sales staff, a marketing cooperative can approach new and different customers who would not be interested in dealing with a small grower individually.

- **New markets:**

A marketing cooperative might access new markets that an individual farmer would not be able to. For example, a small peony farm might not harvest enough of a certain grade of bud to effectively sell them; a marketing cooperative made up of many farmers would be much more likely to find a market for the whole range of items produced by member farms.

- **New products:**

By working together, individual members can actually create new products for market, such as bouquets of flowers featuring items from several farms.

- **Customer retention:**

Some marketing cooperatives feature members growing in different microclimates, harvesting at different times and/or focusing on different specialties. Such a cooperative can present a more attractive face to the customer as a group, provide a longer sales window, more consistent delivery and a more diverse set of offerings, even if each individual member's season or availability is more limited.

- **Market influence:**

There are also many examples of instances where the very existence of a cooperative alternative in a marketplace significantly affected the actions of competitors to the benefit of consumers. It is no exaggeration to say that strong cooperatives can change underlying market conditions and behavior, benefiting both small producers and their customers.

Share overhead and infrastructure:

Another core benefit of marketing cooperatives is shared sales infrastructure. This may include:

- **Staff:**

Hiring an experienced and professional sales and marketing staff allows co-op members to attend to their own businesses, while leaving promotions in good hands. Not everyone needs to attend an industry gathering or promotional conference or get up at 4:00 a.m. to talk to a customer four time zones away if instead one person is doing it on everyone's behalf.

- **Facilities:**

For some products, a climate-controlled warehouse may make all the difference in product quality but may be too expensive for most farmers to invest in on their own. A cooperative allows small scale producers to access quality facilities at an accessible cost.

- **Equipment:**

Processing or harvesting equipment or delivery vehicles are another big ticket item that not every small business can afford to own individually, or even needs to. A cooperative can offer the use of these items at a fraction of the cost of owning them.

- **Online sales system:**

Depending on the kind of product, a shared online sales system is also an element that is frequently much more effective when done collaboratively. Investing in software can be pricey, and professional oversight and maintenance is key to getting an optimal experience, both for consumers and for sellers.

Create a common brand and/or market presence:

Not every cooperative will decide to develop a common market brand on behalf of members, but all will engage in some level of share promotional activities, which might include:

- **Brand or market presence:**

It is vital that producers who market together have a common standard and system for ensuring product quality—marketing together will be nothing but frustrating if this is not achieved. That said, many marketing cooperatives take a shared commitment to quality one step further, and create a brand that they all can share in. This does not mean that an individual member cannot also retain their own business brand and identity; only that with certain customers or classes of customer, it is agreed that the cooperative will be the entity marketing on behalf of all members, as opposed to each member individually. A common brand can be a powerful force in the marketplace, as the household names cited at the beginning of this manual attest; you may not know an individual cranberry producer, but most consumers know of Ocean Spray.

- **Social media and other outreach:**

While some people love social media, others find it exhausting to keep up on all of the platforms expected of a modern entrepreneur, especially one in a creative enterprise or emerging industry. Social media can be an important tool for customer engagement, and one that can be managed by marketing co-op staff. Blogs, photos, and other content can be regularly generated and posted, without every member business having to do the work themselves.

Ensure representation in the broader marketplace and/or political context:

Most businesses find it beneficial to join one or more organizations that advocate on behalf of members in a broader economic or political setting. As democratic organizations made up of aligned producers in a common field, cooperatives are a natural vehicle for doing this. Together they can:

- **Promote policy change or work with an industry trade association:**

Policy advocacy work may be an afterthought for some producers, but for others it is central to the health of their business. For those involved in new or emerging industries, or those actively trying to promote an alternate method of production such as organic or fair trade, keeping up with developments in the industry and public policy and having a common voice that can speak on their behalf is vital.

- **Combat market control:**

Anytime a single powerful purchaser represents a large part of a market or effectively controls some vital aspect such as transportation, storage or certification, small players often have difficulties. Cooperatives have a long history of working to create a more even playing field for independent producers. For Example:

1. Many farm cooperatives in the U.S. such as co-op creameries or grain silos were started for this reason;
2. Marketing cooperatives have played a key role in the fair trade coffee industry, making sure that the quality grading of coffee beans is done in a fair and transparent manner;
3. Members of an organic dairy cooperative played a significant role in setting standards for that industry;

Aid in risk reduction:

Another important value of a cooperative is the reduction of risk for individual producers—that is, helping some bad things not to happen. Some examples include:

- **Group purchasing of insurance, training and education:**

Cooperatives can help members to access insurance at much more affordable rates than they could alone. Marketing co-ops also frequently invest in common education or training for members on risk reduction topics such as safety protocols, human resources management, and other important topics.

- **Customer diversification:**

Having a broader base of products and customer markets does not just work to increase the bottom line for members. It also is an important activity for reducing risk, by helping members avoid being too dependent on a small bank of customers.

② What Are Some Other Activities That Marketing Cooperatives Might Take On?

It should not be surprising that marketing and sales are the core objectives of most marketing cooperatives. While working together on this important set of tasks however, for many members it quickly becomes apparent that there are lots of other common activities that would benefit from being shared. Other frequent barriers to growth for small scale producers for example, include lack of access to capital to fund equipment, land, or processing facilities and a lack of business training and financial management acumen. These, and other common issues can also be addressed by a cooperative of similarly-minded peers. Some additional activities that marketing cooperatives frequently take on include:

Joint purchasing:

A frequent additional role of marketing cooperatives (in fact, often called “marketing and supply cooperatives”) is supply—that is, joint purchasing of items in bulk to save money for members. Seed, fuel and other inputs are common items to purchase jointly, as well as insurance.

Business infrastructure:

In addition to sharing staff for marketing tasks, some cooperatives also make use of common “back room” infrastructure for member businesses. This might include shared bookkeeping, human resources or other professional services that can be used by each member for the support of their individual business.

Processing, packing, or other value-added activities:

A familiar function of cooperatives in agriculture is the sharing of processing and packing infrastructure, converting members raw products into a more saleable format. The development of other “value-added” merchandise is also popular, with members product as the core input. Salsas, juices, pickles and other food products are some examples from vegetable cooperatives. Large farm co-ops are involved in the manufacture of ethanol and other capital-intensive and complex production activities.

Alignment or purchase of complementary businesses in vertical alignment:

Large cooperative enterprises have also used their collective resources to invest in other key businesses, such as transportation firms, or to acquire other companies to ensure access to vital inputs or supplies.

Training and education:

Many cooperative members also feel that they might benefit from more training in finance, business management, or operational issues to improve the operations of their own home farm. Marketing cooperatives can organize, host and sponsor such activities, making them more easily affordable and accessible to cooperative members.

③ What Are Some Other Alternatives? How is a Marketing Cooperative Different?

Of course, there are other ways that producers might take on some or all of the activities that a marketing cooperative could. Here are some options:

Platform cooperatives:

Platform cooperatives are cooperatives of members who simply share a common computing platform, such as a website and app. Unlike marketing cooperatives, they typically do not brand together or pursue common customers. They simply share a space and presence on the internet. This kind of format might appeal to producers who sell a finished product direct to consumers.

Worker cooperatives:

For producers or artisans who wish to work even more closely together, a worker-owned cooperative might be the answer. This is a single business that is owned and controlled by its employees. While not common in agriculture in the U.S., this model has had some use in some farming co-ops in other countries and is seen in a wide variety of industries in the U.S. including construction, grocery and business services.

Multi-stakeholder cooperatives:

Producers who are aligned with other stakeholders in the community along common issues might consider a multi-stakeholder cooperative. This is a cooperatives with more than one member class, so producers might join with consumers, workers, and/or community members to set up a joint venture. In these cases, the co-op serves as a bridge for two or more different, but aligned groups of stakeholders. Many local food hubs use this model.

Competitor/Collaborators:

Particularly in emerging markets, it may happen that one local farmer has more capital and business expertise than most of the others in the industry. That producer might simply opt to share a portion of their infrastructure—space in a packing house or storage facility for example—with others. This is often an interim step in an emerging industry when there are not yet enough local growers to form their own cooperative.

Networks:

Another option for local producers in a similar industry who are not yet convinced to take the step of forming a cooperative, is simply to set up a network of allied growers to share information and resources. Such an arrangement may or may not eventually turn in to a cooperative. In the meantime, collaborating on limited informational activities and getting to know each other may benefit all.

④ What Are Some Other Alternatives? How is a Marketing Cooperative Different?

A marketing cooperative that is working at its best is a successful business that is made up of other successful member businesses, whose businesses are more successful because of their membership in the cooperative. In this way, every action of the marketing cooperative should be directed—in both the short and long term—toward enhancing the sales, operations, and profitability of each farm or enterprise making up its membership. As we have seen, members can benefit from marketing cooperatives in a variety of ways, including:

- Access to new of markets
- Greater volume of sales which, even if made at a lower price, can result in greater profitability because of efficiencies implicit in bulk sales
- Risk reduction, both in terms of direct activities like education and insurance, and indirectly through customer diversification
- More regular, reliable sales which can help a member to build a more stable underlying business.

That said, not every cooperative works well, and not every activity of a cooperative directly benefits every single member in every single instance. Well-run cooperatives get to be experts at balancing needs. Some common member questions and issues that may come up in an emerging marketing cooperative include the following:

Why might the co-op sell product for less than a member might get at the Farmers' Market (or wherever)?

Many small scale producers start out selling at local venues. This might mean the local farmers market or a CSA for produce, craft fairs for artisans or some selected local business customers for flowers or other specialty items. Selling direct to consumer often yields the highest price, but that price comes at a cost—standing around at the farmers market or craft fair all day instead of farming or making art. This market is also limited by the number of sales venues available, the seasonality of some of them, and limit on time that can be spent on sales versus production activities. For some producers, this might be fine. For others, it is difficult to make a family-supporting living this way. This is where the cooperative comes in. The co-op can help access additional markets which do not require this unpaid (and often unacknowledged) sales effort on behalf of the producer. Group sales generally do not replace individual's member sales, but augment them.

An example from the flower industry illustrates this point:

- A local flower grower might receive \$150-\$200 for making a friend's or acquaintance's bridal bouquet (and do a beautiful job!) but these jobs are hard to come by. Without the personal relationship, wedding planners will not know if the grower is a reliable source, and will therefore likely turn more often to commercial vendors instead.

- The same grower could sell her beautiful bouquets at the farmers market every Saturday during the growing season for \$15-\$25 each and make the same amount of money on a good day. But this market is limited by day and season (summer Saturdays when it doesn't rain) and also requires that the grower spend key hours during the growing season not on the farm.
- Alternately (or, more importantly, additionally) the grower might join a marketing cooperative for local growers. Grocery bunches sell for far less, and the grower may only get \$8-10 per bunch. But these bunches can be sold every day (rain or shine) for the entire season, can use much less expensive blooms than a wedding bouquet, and require no additional unpaid marketing time on the part of the grower. So, while each bunch is sold at a different price, they also have far different underlying marketing costs.



Each market can be profitable in their way, and for a small-scale producer, a combination of markets is more likely to ultimately yield a family-supporting annual income as opposed to pursuing a single market.

What if a member already has some established customers. Can they keep selling to them directly and not pay the overhead fee to the co-op?

This is a common dilemma, and a difficult one to answer. Many co-ops allow new members to keep their existing contracts when they join (this is especially true with new cooperatives, which have not yet proven their marketing expertise), but require that new customers work through the cooperative. Others decide that certain venues (such as farmers markets or craft fairs) still belong to the individual member business, and the cooperative restricts its sales activities to pursuing wholesale accounts to supplement.

Most emerging cooperatives and many mature ones as well actually prefer that members have a diversified network of sales outlets, so no one is too dependent on the co-op for their entire livelihood. Some established cooperatives, however, may require members to commit to providing a minimum dedicated supply of product as a condition of membership or they may have the member provide all of a specific product or variety to the cooperative.

There is no one answer to this question, it all depends on the cooperative and its members. Members need the cooperative to be successful. So, any discussion of market outlets will need to explicitly balance the needs of each member to make a stable return against the needs of the cooperative to have the best opportunity to deliver on its promises to all members. Ideally, these interests are not mutually exclusive, and with patience and good will, a fair resolution will be arrived at.

⑤ What is Required of Members to Make a Cooperative Work?

Cooperatives are beneficial in many ways. But they are certainly not miracle-workers, and they do not live on air. Cooperatives require resources and commitment from members in order to work. These include:

Equity financing:

Co-ops can raise capital in multiple ways including loans and some grants, but their core source of financing must be from the members. Member equity—the amount of financing required as the ownership share of each member—provides the base funds for the cooperative and is key to leveraging financing from other sources by demonstrating the interest and commitment of member/owners. Member equity can be raised in a variety of ways, including a lump-sum requirement for all members, a goal level of member equity that can be paid over time, or “per unit retains”, a system that is common in marketing cooperatives whereby a small portion of funds is held back on each unit of product marketed through the cooperative.

Product quality:

A marketing cooperative cannot build a reputation for quality if it does not have any. Members need to commit to delivering to the cooperative product of sufficient quality to meet the demands of its customers and contracts. Equally, co-ops must be willing to call out members who not meet this obligation, and instead try to pass off poor quality items. In a co-op, the livelihood of everyone depends on each member being willing to uphold the standards that have been set their peers on the co-op’s member-controlled board.

Reliable delivery:

Similarly, a co-op cannot build a reputation for reliability by selling things it does not have. Members depend on co-ops to negotiate contracts on their behalf, and co-ops in turn rely on members to deliver the product at the time and of the quality they agree to. Reality—especially in farming—can often interfere with the best of intentions. Poor yields or severe weather can make it difficult for members to meet their delivery obligations, and a good cooperative will have alternatives. But member reliability must be the rule.

Loyalty:

Co-ops are democratically owned and controlled enterprises, where each member has a right to express their opinion (expressed in an appropriate venue and manner), and influence decision-making in the form of voting for the co-op’s leadership. In turn, co-ops have the right to expect members to be loyal and work toward common objectives. A member who undercuts the cooperative’s prices or attempts to steal a customer endangers the work of all of their fellow members, and would be subject to penalties up to and including expulsion from the co-op.

Energy, initiative, a good attitude and clear communication:

No one wants to hang around with a bunch of people who are not willing to do anything but complain. Working together is not always easy, for sure. But it is easier by far, if each member approaches the collaboration with a sense of energy and initiative, a good attitude, and a commitment to clear communication. If not, what is the point? Cooperatives are vehicles of self-help, but also self-responsibility. Every member has an impact on the nature and “tone” of the cooperative. If a co-op is having trouble dealing with a contentious issue, or is having a difficult discussion, the best thing to do is get outside help. Good communication is a learned skill, and most of us can afford to practice it more. Good will and a good attitude is priceless, and the mark of a valued cooperative member.

For more information on cooperative equity structures and options see: “Cooperative Equity and Ownership” published by the University of Wisconsin Center for Cooperatives

<https://resources.uwcc.wisc.edu/Finance/Cooperative%20Equity%20and%20Ownership.pdf>

6 Conclusion

As a farmer or other small businessperson, it is necessary to secure marketing services, whether you take on that work yourself or hire someone else to do it. You pay in time or you pay in money, or both. This is true regardless of whether you are part of a marketing cooperative or not. A producer can take on their own marketing tasks and just ignore figuring that time into the cost; they can sell through an existing distributor of some kind who will take the cost of marketing out of the price paid to the producer; or a producer can join with other like-minded peers and form their own marketing and distribution vehicle such as a cooperative. Your choice of these three basic options may depend on your volume, your unique marketing conditions and relationships, your access to free and dependable labor (generally in the form of family members), and whether you actually enjoy marketing activities or not.

It takes time and money to build market share, and this is especially true for emerging products which are not yet a mainstay of a customer's shopping basket. In particular, organic and fair trade products have often relied on cooperatives to help build efficiencies and market presence, as have local food ventures and increasingly, local flowers as well. Beneficial economies of scale are achievable for many core business activities from purchasing to processing, and cooperatives are a time-tested way to take on these activities in a manner that is focused on creating the best outcomes for producer/members.

Cooperatives are not the right answer for every one or for every situation. But in many cases, they are a sensible and valuable resource to help small scale producers navigate and compete effectively in a complex and sometimes unpredictable world.



Supplement: Marketing Planning Practices to Achieve Revenue Growth

Following is a planning resource contributed by the ICA Group to help cooperatives and individual producers strengthen their marketing strategy and communications.



Consistent quality, a reliable supply of product, and competitive pricing are common concerns of agricultural product buyers, whether retail establishments, manufacturers, or wholesale distributors that supply a range of other customer accounts. Each type of buyer is distinct, however, and cooperatives need to tailor their marketing methods and messaging for each customer group to effectively target and retain them. Relationship-building with buyers is also critical, including ongoing communication about the cooperative's product and growing schedule. In this, the cooperative's website and social media presence play a central role.

This section provides guidance about segmenting customer groups and communicating with them. Crafting **Ideal Client Profiles** is a foundational step that will help your cooperative develop target lists and determine how to best focus your time and efforts. Next, a **Marketing Messaging Framework** is presented, as a tool to help your members and staff achieve consistent messaging that builds and reinforces your brand. Finally, a checklist of **Website Essentials** is offered to help you optimize the impact and functionality of your online storefront.

Ideal Client Profile:

Crafting your Ideal Client Profile(s) is a key step toward achieving revenue growth and provides multiple benefits. Growers are familiar with the types of customers they sell to as individual producers. The key here is to think about the types of clients cooperative members can effectively supply together. These may be the same types of customers producers already serve (with the co-op providing more efficient communications and servicing); or it may mean new customers that for reasons of volume, variety, or relationships are currently out of reach for individual members, but may effectively be pursued as a group. Defining your Ideal Client Profile will create alignment across producer members and guide the creation of a target account list. In addition, it will enable you to create a cohesive marketing plan and allocate resources to optimize your sales and marketing efforts.

Who are your ideal customers?

Your Ideal Client Profile describes your most valuable customers and helps to identify prospective customers that are most likely to buy from you.

Some basic considerations include:

- **B2B Segments (small business, retailers, wholesalers, chains, manufacturers of other products, web-based platforms)**
- **Corresponding Products**
- **Price or Value**
- **Long-term or Short-term Buyer**
- **Transactional or Partnership**

Different customer segments buy distinctly different products. The purpose here is to identify your ideal customers within each segment and help you develop the best market mix.

Process:

Evaluate the characteristics of your cooperative's current or past "best" customers in each market segment. Begin by listing your "best" customers and naming their key characteristics. Consider who sees value in what you offer, is willing to pay for it, is likely to generate repeat business, or promotes your business to others. What are their similarities? Then repeat this process for your "poorest" customers. For customers in new market segments you intend to approach as a cooperative, do the same exercise, but think about what characteristics you find attractive about this new market, and what characteristics might make you change your mind.

This might be an exercise you take on first with a smaller group of co-op members, perhaps members of the marketing committee. Be sure to include some of your most experienced growers in this group, as well as a diversity of producers. The committee could then bring their ideas for further discussion by the whole board, or even the whole membership if the co-op is small.

Examples of key characteristics:

Firmographics:

Location
Size
Order Processing/Shipping Needs
\$ Volume
Contribution Margin
Structure/Ownership
Years in Business

Psychographics:

Values
Attitudes
Reputation
Mission
Business Philosophy
History of Business
How They Treat Others

Compare both your best and poorest customers' key characteristics to help you develop criteria that define the types of accounts that are the best fit with the cooperative and provide the highest value. Using these criteria will help you maintain focus and discipline in managing your target list and achieve a higher win rate.

Next Steps:

- **Use your Ideal Client Profile to develop target client lists.**
- **Identify the Primary Buyer within your Ideal Customer prospects to determine your entry point.**
- **Review current opportunities and rate them.**
- **Revisit opportunities with different entry points.**

Marketing Messaging Framework:

Once the cooperative has determined its Ideal Client Profile(s), the Messaging Framework is an effective model for thinking through and developing relevant messages to each audience. This is a collaborative process. Cooperative members and staff should universally understand the cooperative's messaging and be involved in revisiting it as things change.

This framework is a cascading model, beginning at the top with the Brand Promise. Each area tends to lead to the next.

Brand Promise

A brand promise, or tag line, is a short phrase that states what customers can expect from both your product and your cooperative in terms of the benefits and experience, tangible and intangible. It captures your value proposition and represents the uniqueness of your brand. It builds expectations in customers' minds through the deliverables it promises and increases the desire for the product and experience of working with you.

Positioning Statement

A positioning statement is a short description of how your brand, product, or approach satisfies a customer need better than the competition. Positioning statements are also called value propositions, unique selling propositions (USPs), or statements of differentiation. Your positioning statement answers the question, "How are you different and extraordinary? Why should people buy from you?" It should guide all internal decisions to remain true to the brand concept. Cooperatives have a real advantage here, in that many customers respond positively to the story of an enterprise that is democratically owned and controlled by its producer-members.

Target Audience

A target audience is a group of people defined by certain demographics and behavior. Your Ideal Client Profiles inform your target audiences. These are the people and organizations most likely to be interested in your product and/or your story.

Mission Statement

A mission statement explains, in simple and concise terms, a company's purpose for being. It serves to help members and employees stay focused on the tasks at hand and inspires them to find innovative ways of moving toward achieving the organization's goals. For a cooperative, a clear, strong, and meaningful mission statement also helps to keep co-op members aligned and reinforces the reasons for working together as a group as opposed to going it alone as an individual producer.

Tone of Voice

Tone of voice describes how your brand communicates with your audience and influences how people perceive your messaging. Your company's tone of voice represents your brand personality and values. This includes the words you choose and how you sequence them in all the content you deliver – website, social media posts, emails, and any other formats.

Elevator Pitch

An elevator pitch is a brief, persuasive speech that you use to spark interest in what your organization does. You can also use them to create interest in a project, idea, or product – or in the cooperative itself.

Brand Pillars

Brand pillars are important strengths or aspects of a brand that support or add dimension to the brand's core idea. They are the points that describe your brand's essence. For cooperatives, the co-op itself may be a brand pillar ("small scale producers working together"). Your commitment to quality, both as individual growers supplying the co-op, and as owner-members of the cooperative itself will also be a reinforcing pillar of your brand.

Benefit Headlines

A benefit headline explains how your information will benefit the reader. Benefit headlines help prospects "identify themselves" by telling the audience what's in it for them. Think beyond price and consider other aspects of the customer experience and the ways in which the cooperative can deliver a superior experience.

Supporting Examples

Supporting examples demonstrate how your product plays to your cooperative strengths and should be based on what makes your brand uniquely valuable to your customers. It's a specific benefit that makes your business stand out compared to other businesses in your market or industry. Again, for a cooperative, the co-op itself and the fact that it is owned and controlled by farmers, may (in addition to product quality and other factors) be an important part of the unique story you tell.

Process:

Working through the framework takes time, and you want to have lots of voices. It's a collaborative effort that bubbles up from your culture. It's fine to have people with different opinions. It's not a matter of trying to pick the best one. Your goal is to take the different perspectives and find the common theme and unique thread.

A good facilitator can really help in this process. It's not a half-hour meeting. It's a multi-week, multi-step process. The board of the co-op will certainly play a central role. Depending on the size of the cooperative, you may want to involve staff members, and perhaps a sub-set of other members, including some of your most productive, creative, and experienced growers.

Brand Promise

The place to start is with your brand promise. What promise are you making to your market? What expectation are you setting up for your clients and prospects? How would you state that in just a few words? What can your clients expect from you? What's the perception you want clients to have of your brand? You're saying if you work with us, this is the outcome, the value. This can't be developed lightly. Make a promise you know you can keep. This is what customers remember.

Examples:

- Geico: "15 minutes can save you 15% or more on car insurance."
- BMW: "The ultimate driving machine"
- Walmart: "Save money, live better"

Positioning Statement

Next is Positioning Statement. Once you have a clear promise to the market, how are you positioning your organization against your competitors? How are you different from them? What are your strengths and weaknesses? Answer the question, "We're the company that's best at _____." This is how you want to be known.

Keep in mind you don't need to reinvent the wheel. Your good customers will tell you what makes you different and best. The information is out there to help you see how you're perceived. Keep in mind also, that the cooperative is part of the story here. What things do you do better because your organization is owned and controlled by farmers themselves?

Examples:

- MailChimp: All-in-one marketing platform for small business.
- Slack: Collaboration hub that brings the right people, information and tools together.

Target Audience(s)

Briefly, this is a function of your Ideal Client Profiles. These are the people most likely to be interested in your product. What are their unique interests? Often, businesses use what they know about their target audience to create user personas that guide their decisions on marketing campaigns. For customers to feel connected to a product or brand, they need to relate to the content and tone of your message. Knowing which audience you're targeting with each campaign will ensure that you speak their language.

Mission Statement

The way to think about a mission statement is like a football huddle - everybody's on board with the play. Your mission is what gets you up every day. It's what you all agree you want to go out and accomplish. It's aspirational, it's lofty. It declares to the world, here's why we do what we do. Cooperative stakeholders - members, employees, distributors, suppliers, and the community at large - use this statement to align their goals with those of the cooperative, and to remember why we are all doing this in the first place.

Tone of Voice

Your company's tone of voice represents your brand personality and values. When you think about your organization, what is your personality, culture? What tone of voice represents the personality of your organization?

Examples:

- Friendly
- Warm
- Professional
- Authoritative
- Confident
- Humorous
- Empowering
- Informative
- Serious
- Conversational

There's no right or wrong combination. It's the result of your culture, and you want to ensure it carries through your website, print collateral, and emails. What language represents that? Successfully defined and implemented tone of voice enables your audience to recognize your brand using text alone, even without attaching your logo or company name to the content piece you produce.

Elevator Pitch

Your elevator pitch sparks interest and enables all producer members and staff to introduce yourselves and confidently and consistently respond when people ask, "what is it that you do?" A good elevator pitch should last no longer than a short elevator ride of 20 to 30 seconds. It should be interesting, memorable, and succinct. It also needs to explain what makes your cooperative or product (or both!) unique. Depending on the circumstances, some elevator pitches may be longer than the proverbial elevator ride and can go into greater detail about the team involved and the products being presented.

Brand Pillars

Brand pillars are compelling truths of the brand that go beyond mere attributes or adjectives, they describe your brand's essence. These can be any points that your customers feel are important – convenience, reliability, on-time delivery, innovation, etc. – and you are not limited to just one thing, but typically no more than three. Your brand pillars should exist in every touchpoint, either visually, verbally, or ideally, both.

Benefit Headlines

A benefit headline tells the audience right up front what's in it for them. A *tried and true* technique for crafting benefit headlines is to determine which benefit your product provides that is most important to your audience, and use that benefit as the crux of your headline. Remember that the benefit doesn't always have to come from the product itself. Many consumers, for example, react positively to the message that a cooperative, unlike a big corporation, is owned and controlled by family farmers and other people like them. Organic Valley dairy cooperative for example, emphasizes the link between organic production, land and animal stewardship, and food quality with such phrases as "goodness from the ground up" and "from outside with love."

Supporting Examples

Supporting examples demonstrate how your product plays to your strengths and should be based on what makes your brand uniquely valuable to your customers. Being "unique" is rarely a strong example in itself. You have to differentiate around some aspect your target audience cares about for your messaging to be effective. Supporting examples demonstrate the one thing that makes your business better than the competition. It's a specific benefit that makes your business stand out when compared to other businesses in your market or industry. For a cooperative, it may be the fact that every member farmer stands behind the product that he or she grows. Supporting examples may also directly contrast with competitors in order to point out the area(s) where your product or service stands out.

Website Essentials Checklist

Brand Enhancement

Build and reinforce your brand by using design standards that create a cohesive, polished feel and experience throughout the website. The entire site should be visually consistent and clean. Marketing cooperative websites also commonly feature professionally designed and formatted pages where member farms can show off their unique attributes, serving as a marketing vehicle for both the co-op and its members. This can be a huge advantage for members, as the cost and time of developing and maintaining such a website for each individual farm may be prohibitive.

User Experience

Structure website menus to make it easy and pleasant for users to navigate through the site. Identify what you want the customer journey to be and use clear "calls to action" to guide users on that journey.

- Track conversions of viewers to prospects to measure site's effectiveness.
- Use contact forms to collect user info for follow-up (vs. direct to email).
- Any off-site links should open in a new tab, so your site remains open.
- Google Analytics is easy to install and provides good information for continuous improvement. If Google Analytics shows that users spend a short time on your site or bounce away quickly, follow up to assess this.

Content

Content is king and should represent your brand via tone and use of key word-rich copy, i.e., key words that will show up in online searches. Blogs are a prime opportunity to strengthen your key word profile.

- Key words in headings carry more weight with search engines.
- Don't overstuff copy with key words.
- At least one to two blog posts per month is recommended; a blog acts like a gateway that gets people into your site.
- Feature members and customers in your blogs. People like connecting with people, and it has to be real. Regularly feature different member farms or enterprises to keep things fresh.

Responsiveness and Mobile Friendliness

Take time to test your website on all browsers and devices (desktop, phones, tablets) when changing or adding content, to make sure everyone has an optimal experience. Mobile usage is about 60%.

Accessibility

Federal WCAG2.1 standards (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines) measure accessibility to visually impaired users, including color contrast and compatibility with screen readers that provide an audible version of your site.

Search Engine Optimization (SEO)

Audit your site at least quarterly and at best, monthly. You can outsource this function to a developer.

Four measures of SEO are:

1. Technical: Page loading speed, security (e.g., encryption of form fills), mobile-friendliness. Technical SEO score should be 80%+.
2. Content: Navigation and site flow for search engines, use of key words
3. On-page: page titles, meta descriptions, internal links, etc.
4. Off-page: links back to your site (e.g., social media, YouTube videos), accuracy of "local search," i.e., business/organization info that appears on right hand of Google search page



**This manual was produced with generous support of the
United States Department of Agriculture – Rural Development**