

BOARD STUDY

La Montañita Food Co-op

Board of Directors Meeting – February 16, 2016

Civic vs. Corporate Branding – What is La Montañita’s Purpose?

Facilitated by: Jeff Hertz

Topic: When we talk about purpose, it is easy to jump to the Ends, but it is important to re-consider our purpose regularly. It is also interesting to think about our branding in relation to corporate and civic brands in our local area. What do you think our current branding is like and how do we open it up to be a civic brand?

Readings:

- “Making Sense of Civic Brands” - <http://www.designwithdirection.com/making-sense-of-civic-brands/>
- “The Power of Purpose” - <http://www.placeholderllc.com/the-power-of-purpose/>

Discussion, organized by theme:

How La Montañita Is Perceived

- Civic branding is a compilation of perceptions. How is LM perceived in the community? The co-op is too expensive. The co-op only has the Mercedes version of food. So we are addressing those perceptions – how do we change those negative perceptions? How do we communicate our Ends policies? Those are the counterbalance to many of the other perceptions out there.
- We used to have a very strong civic brand because member-owners were very involved, attracted because of the alternatives provided. Over the years, that brand has tarnished, washed out. We are now seen as exclusive, way too expensive, upper-middle-class, and white. The civic brand has gotten muddied. Over the last couple years, I feel like what we’ve been talking about is trying to rekindle what the co-op used to mean, or could mean to the community,
- Right now, our brand is “I shop here sometimes and shop sometimes at other stores.” The competition has muddied our brand.

What Co-op Management Is Doing

- GM: We believe we have a serious branding issue. We have a different sign at almost every store, for starters.
 - We assessed internally and found that our team members are not shopping in our stores.
 - We have to rebuild the brand. There’s some tactics we can do, but we have to have a strategic plan. Expect more on this soon.
 - In our view, the “civic” element of our brand is the differentiator. Our corporate brand and prices matter too, but our civic brand is what makes us unique among the competition.

- Co-ops today across the country are focused on tightening financials. Member engagement departments and social advocacy programs are being cut. That is not the approach we want to take at La Montañita.
- It's about place. What we do in Santa Fe cannot be the same as what we do in Albuquerque. They are two different cities. Still, the catch phrase we use in both cities to describe who we are can be the same. And it should be a message about our civic identity. This is under development.

Communicating our Brand

- Brand and branding are different. Brand is what makes us unique. Then branding is taking that message out to the community through a variety of channels. Brand umbrella is the same regardless of site. But the marketing differs by place.
- Membership department has had the function of promoting the civic brand.
- Ends reporting happens every year, but that report may not be the tool for communicating.
- The member survey has potential for the practical value of gauging the effect of our civic branding, and how well we are communicating it.
- I like the newsletter. I get a lot of information from that over the years. I'm attending the Organic Farming Conference this weekend. La Montañita has always had a booth there. That presence is important. The Earth Day celebration in Nob Hill is also important. It is to me like a national holiday.
 - But a lot of people think the city puts on the Earth Day celebration, not the co-op. That's part of the whole branding issue.
- We need to be distributing information at point of purchase, not just at conference tables.
- In a co-op in a different city, there were maps in the store that showed where items came from.
- As a landscape architect, I learned that you want to create a place. Make it easy for people to remember a place and identify with it.
- Shoppers should get a sense of what they are doing and why and why it matters.
- We will have t-shirts, hats, chico bags, and pens with the logo on them.
- The Fortieth anniversary presents a great opportunity to reach out to new shoppers and new member-owners.

Alignment with Other Trends and Happenings

- How can we think about La Montanita's alignment with local public health concerns, public transportation issues, the new Albuquerque Rapid Transit (ART)?
- What are some new trends and movements we can latch onto?
- Local is part of our message. That is a trend. Who are those vendors and why are we working with them? We need to get that word out. A decal at restaurants.

La Montaña's Purpose (Possibilities for civic brand messaging)

- The purpose of any co-op is to meet the needs of the members. The co-op is not just a grocery store. You can't have a co-op without members. You can have a store, but it's not a co-op. That is the story we have to communicate. It's not just "La Montañita" that has an impact on the community; it is all of our staff, and all of our members.

- Price Issues:
 - How are we retaining our member-owners? It's not just getting lower-income and families of color into the door. It's retaining them. We do know that our owners tend to buy a lot at the co-op (large basket size).
 - I recently moved to Albuquerque, coming from an organization that had a program similar to the Double Bucks program. We saw significant results in basket size and retention.
 - "Exceptional food to fit your budget" is a message we are working toward.
- We need a place for people to get together. That was something that was common in co-ops in past decades. Some of the themes from the co-op café reflect that yearning for neighborhood, for shared spaces.
 - Dining area at the store in Moscow, ID, was a place that people hung out.
- Millennials, Native Americans, and Hispanics are not shopping at the co-op. Catering to these populations and celebrating the diversity of New Mexico has to be part of the branding. (Need to collect data on our customers/members in order to know whether the composition of our membership changes with changes in brand.)
- Education should not only be about food but about economics. What does it mean to spend money at the co-op vs. national corporation-owned? Presidential candidates on both sides are claiming that the financial system is rigged. This is an opportune time for a message about our alternative economic structure.