

Summary & Impressions

Outreach Activity of OCC Annual Mtg 4-28-19

Background:

It is understood that some residents of the local community hold The Creamery in a negative light, with commonly cited criticisms such as price, product mix, and politics. Over the years, management has attempted to address this issue with efforts to keep prices down on "basics" and an emphasis on friendly customer service.

In the wake of events related to the proposed Dollar General, however, it has become clear - particularly to some MO who live in Cummington - that these negative views of The Creamery have worsened. What is less clear: a) how to raise awareness of this issue among MO, and b) what, if anything, we can do.

Outreach Activity - "Community Voices":

The purpose of the Outreach activity at the 2019 Annual Meeting was to raise awareness among MO about the extent of negative community perception of the store, by bringing in voices of local residents not typically represented at The Creamery's Annual Meeting. Based on anonymous interviews with 10 local residents, a "script" of quotes was created and read aloud by 6 volunteer readers. Attendants then met in small groups for approx 20 minutes, with a facilitator / note-taker in each group. For a copy of the script and/or group notes, or for questions about the process of selecting and interviewing local residents, please contact Peg Cowen at board@oldcreamery.coop. **THANKS to all interviewees, readers, note-takers, facilitators and everyone at the meeting!** Your role and input was invaluable!

Member Owners Response to the "script"

Following is a general summary of reactions, themes, and suggestions from MO, based on the notes from each small group, and presented in no particular order.

Reactions to the script

- surprised at the unfriendliness
- not surprised
- depressing
- painful!!
- mad
- sad, heartbroken
- disheartened
- this is serious business
- uncertainty where the "political" feel comes from. The 'natural' brands?
- some difficulty imagining feeling uncomfortable coming into the Creamery

Frequent comments /threads/ topics, etc

- Cannot be all things to all people, and attempting to do so is ill-advised.
 - Decide what you are and stick to it.
 - ***** This theme came up in many groups and was strongly emphasized.*****
- Interest in 'local' -
 - a few groups noted that the importance of offering local products was mentioned frequently in the script
- Community tension-
 - issues around the store pre-date the transition to a co-op
 - may also reflect tension resulting from shifting local population
 - long-timers vs. new-comers; old insider vs new outsider; --- that is how it is in the hilltowns, and the discrimination goes both ways.
 - politics of the world are polarized now, with cultural divisiveness
- Transition to Co-op -
 - it is part of co-op mission to offer wholesome foods
 - co-op is a progressive thing that some people won't buy into
 - the co-op model also draws people from outside of town
 - has there been enough education/marketing about what it means to be a co-op?
 - change from Alice & Amy's time is simply cosmetic - the co-op theory has not changed significantly
 - co-op is way things are going, i.e.: Williamsburg Market.
- Product Mix -
 - significant discussion about the importance, feasibility and advisability of increasing "mainstream" products.
 - some personally OK with such a shift, others not.
 - goods don't reflect year-round community
 - there has been a change in what is available
 - mixed comments about finding or not finding what you need
 - still fairly 'gourmet'
 - agreement to not lose local emphasis when possible
 - people go elsewhere for produce (no specific reason given)
 - discussion of catering to tourists vs. the local community
- Environment / "Feel" of the store -
 - "First impression: This is a yuppie store. Second impression: It's expensive."
 - "One of the first things you see when you walk in the store is a collection of political buttons. It immediately brands the store as a counter-cultural, lefty place."

- this is not NoHo or Greenfield (fewer available customers, different community to reflect)
 - "I feel welcomed - but careful what I say"
 - "would MAGA hats be uncomfortable for us?"
 - it's a community, but it's also a business
 - "If this was a for-profit business, the community touchy-feely thing would not matter."
- Finances -
 - store was not financially sustainable for Alice & Amy
 - Facts: Member sales decreasing; 60% of revenues are from non-members, summer people, and tourists.
 - one person noted that MO# not always taken by cashier, raising question of whether the data are accurate about member sales.
 - locals - we need to listen, want more mainstream brands.
 - tourists (and summer) - bulk of sales, but seasonal, maybe 1-timers.
 - the "declining balance". First time many MO had heard about this. Much discussion in one group, and agreement it's a good idea.
 - frustration in apparent lack of understanding that small store size drives prices higher.
 - Marketing
 - the importance of marketing was mentioned in several groups
 - change the vibe through marketing. If you want to change the vibe, have to market that.
 - Staff - Customer interactions /
 - staff are friendly (mentioned several times)
 - further improvements can be made in reducing wait time in line at the register.
 - MO shared this story: "I came in at the same time as 2 sales guys passing through ---- suits, polished shoes --- they were looking to get lunch. It took so long to get a sandwich that they left. That was a \$40 sale that walked out the door."

Specific Suggestions / Recommendations

- "loosen up" the atmosphere.
- follow the existing policy of no political items, displays, etc. .
- continue emphasis on staff training for customer interactions
- celebrate the town!
- pizza night?
- consider increasing mainstream / non-organic items in product mix
- market the "vibe" that you intend
- hire local people whenever possible
- streamline bulk ordering program

- stop free-coffee-in-own-cup on Tuesday so can lower price generally
- listen to but do not be discouraged by the negative comments in the script, which came from a small number of people.

Potential Areas for Action

After reviewing and digesting MO comments, we see 5 potential areas for action which might help us broaden our appeal to a wider range of local residents, should we decide that we want to pursue that goal. To the extent possible, we included specific targets or steps, based on MO suggestions and our own follow up and thinking. Much of this falls within operations, while some requires work of board, Outreach Committee, and MO. We offer this as a working framework - food for our collective thought.

- **Product Mix**
 - Explore increasing "mainstream" items, with financial implications fully identified and tracked
 - Continue emphasis on local products to the fullest extent possible within financial considerations.
- **Store Atmosphere &**
- **Celebrate Cummington**
 - Consider the cafe space as an asset of the town (use of space for fundraisers, etc)
 - Consider more charitable efforts, i.e. start a "Milk Money Fund" for community
 - Upon entering, the space could "say" both Cummington and The Old Creamery Co-op.
 - Actively promote town events, organizations, committee mtgs, volunteer needs, etc, e.g. via the napkin holders and/or designated "Town News" bulleting board.
 - Implement existing policy regarding political items or displays, for example, remove the buttons.
 - Explore selling Cummington t-shirts, etc, with proceeds to go to, for example, Cummington Recreation Committee.
 - Better signage, pictures of hilltown farms & farmers = **recognizable people** from our community
- **Staff Training**
 - Continue emphasis on positive customer relations.
 - Continue emphasis on minimizing wait time at deli and cashier
- **Marketing & Messaging**
 - develop marketing to promote any of the above steps.
 - Community benefit - can we quantify our economic impact on the hilltowns? on Cummington?

- Co-op education in universal, non-politically-binary (left or right) language:

Cooperative Principles:

- Voluntary and Open Membership
- Democratic Member Control
- Member Economic Participation
- Autonomy and Independence
- Education, Training & Information
- Cooperation among Cooperatives
- Concern for Community

Cooperative Values:

- | | |
|-----------------------|--------------|
| ▪ Equity | ▪ Solidarity |
| ▪ Self-help | ▪ Equality |
| ▪ Self-responsibility | ▪ Democracy |

- Communicating the "value" of the Creamery: We all want to "feel good" shopping and supporting our local market. Not an act of charity - the value *created* is real; people-to-people, people in community, people in place

Questions for Reflection

"Your Hilltown Community Market".

We explicitly (and proudly, we suspect) proclaim this on our sign and letterhead. That is such a great slogan and goal. The following questions arise.

- 1) What does this slogan mean, and to what degree do we hold it as core to our mission? If this is among our core intents, how well are we translating it into board decisions and daily operations? In this area of the hilltowns, what does a "Community Market" - that is also a co-op - look like?
- 2) From a "bottom line" perspective, to what degree is the financial viability of the store linked with broadening our appeal and improving our connections with local residents?
- 3) Does our current mission statement adequately guide us, particularly given our (unique) situation as a rural small grocery & co-op, operating in what otherwise is a "food desert." What is our role / responsibility in terms of the regional issue of limited food access?
- 4) What does the Creamery stand for? Meaningful employment, values-based purchasing, mutual betterment, service to community.

Respectfully submitted,

Peg Cowen, Seva Tower, and Kalyan Uprichard

5-22-19