

Becoming a Cooperative Story Teller

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Cooperative month is a time when we are all reminded that we need to tell our cooperative story. There are many great facts about cooperatives such as total membership or economic impact. However to really communicate our complex value package we need to tell a story. Most of us are not professional storytellers but we recognize a good story when we see one. When stories, even good stories like our cooperative story, fail to connect it is often because they lacked focus or did not resonate with the audience. A good way to improve the focus of your cooperative story is to consider the following questions:

- Who is listening to this story?
- How do you want the listener to feel?
- What do you want the listener to do?
- What is the one thing we want the listener to remember?

In addition to focus, a good story needs a good plot, setting and cast of characters. Some cooperative stories take us back to when the cooperative was formed while others help us visualize how it will be there for the next generation. Consider the best setting for your message. Our cast of characters can be small or large but it has to put a face on our message. Member ownership is a concept. Having a member describe how the cooperative listens to them turns that concept into a story. Your cooperative story also needs a plot which progresses from the beginning hook to the ending which gives the morale of the story.

The most overlooked aspect of storytelling is listening. By listening to how members (and even nonmembers) describe your cooperative you can see what benefits to reinforce in your story and what benefits you have failed to communicate. If members think of your cooperative as a dependable service provider, make sure that image is part of your cooperative story. If they fail to mention sharing in the profits, or participating in governance, round out your story by reminding them of those benefits.

There are thousands of great stories of how cooperatives have benefited farmers, strengthened rural communities and stabilized markets. Your cooperative has its own success story and cooperative month is a great time to share it!

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