

## **The Other Dimension of Member Communication**

*Phil Kenkel*

*Bill Fitzwater Cooperative Chair*

Member communication is a popular topic, if not a popular activity, among cooperative leaders. When most managers and board members talk about member communications they are referring to communication from the cooperative to the members. The other dimension of member communication is the conversations among cooperative members. Social media has added another dimension to these conversations generating conversations in both the physical and virtual coffee house.

Most members get the majority of their information, or at least truth check information, from other members. This can be an issue when the cooperative is facing complex issues or is making changes that can't be explained in a sound bite. The accuracy of member to member information is greatly improved when the cooperative has a robust formal communication plan. When a cooperative provides information in the newsletter and webpage and reinforces it with consistent messages from the board and management, member conversations are more likely to be grounded around the facts.

Cooperatives operate most effectively when leaders not only respond to member conversations but also actively encourage it. Member control is an important cooperative principle. We want cooperative members to be engaged in board member elections, carefully evaluating both incumbent and fresh candidates. Most cooperative strategies involve a balancing act. The board must balance short term returns from cash patronage with long run benefits from reinvesting profits in the cooperative. Successful cooperatives need members to be involved in that discussion indicating their preferences for alternative strategies.

Productive member to member conversation is enhanced when the cooperative not only communicates information but also communicates challenges and alternatives to their member owners. What is your members' vision for the future of your cooperative? Would members accept lower cash patronage if it funded infrastructure investment? Is the cooperative's value package knowledge and service or efficiency and price? Why not pose those questions to your members and try to get a conversation going.

Every cooperative has good producers, young and old, large and small that reside in the trade territory but are not members. Those producers rarely contact the board or manager to ask about the benefits of membership. They are all in conversations with producers who are members. Their decision on membership and their view of the cooperative is influence by farmer conversations. Cooperative leaders can't control those conversations but they can enhance them. A member who is informed about their cooperative, and who has been encouraged to give input is a much better ambassador.

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