

Co-op Identity 2.0: Do the websites of Canadian co-operatives reflect the co-operative difference?

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Today, a corporate or organisational website is a primary communications tool, a means of projecting an organisation's vision, mission and values to a broad public audience as well as to its own particular stakeholders. This should be particularly true for co-operatives, which are values-based businesses guided by internationally recognised principles. As the Canadian co-operative movement strives to generate greater public awareness of the co-operative difference, the web should be a useful tool for doing so.

But do the websites of Canadian co-operatives reflect the co-operative difference? Do they generate public awareness of the co-operative business model and instill co-operative identity within their membership? Do they reflect the vision, mission and values the organisations that created them purport to embrace? Or do they exist simply to further the co-operative's line of business?

This paper presents the results of a content analysis of the websites of Canada's 52 largest co-operatives, based on a Co-operative Identity Web Index (CIWI) created for the purpose of this research. As a comparator, the paper also looks at a CIWI analysis of the websites of 20 new and emerging co-operatives, as well as those of Canada's 20 largest credit unions, using a slightly modified index.

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Introduction

The extent to which Canadian co-operative enterprises promote their co-operative identity is a subject which is frequently discussed within the co-operative movement. Advocates for the co-operative model frequently articulate the importance of promoting the differences between co-operatives and other types of businesses.

In its Blueprint for a Co-operative Decade, the International Co-operative Alliance cites the promotion of co-operative identity as one of the five most important keys to making co-operatives the world's fastest-growing business model by the year 2020:

In a world suffering from a deficit of democratic representation and from short-termism, co-operatives demonstrate how business can be done not only differently, but better — not only for their own benefit, but for the world's. However, to spread this valuable message, there must be clarity as to how co-operatives are to be defined and distinguished. This is important for the co-operative sector itself, in creating a powerful sense of shared identity; but it is also important that an identifiable co-operative message or "brand" is projected, which differentiates this form of business (ICA, 2012: 20).

The notion that clearly identifying a business as a co-operative creates a potential marketing advantage is also supported by the results of several surveys on public perception of co-operatives, including a public opinion survey conducted by the Canadian Co-operative Association in 2012 in conjunction with the United Nations International Year of Co-operatives (Abacus Data, 2012).

The survey, conducted by the polling firm Abacus Data, found that Canadians had a very positive impression of co-operative enterprises and given the choice between a member-owned community business and a national chain store, the vast majority (83 %) would choose the co-operative. The survey also found that Canadians perceive co-operatives as supporting

community values and local economies, that they treat their employees better than other businesses, that they are more likely to sell locally-produced products and that they are more likely to have environmentally sustainable practices.

Similarly, a 2008 survey commissioned by the Nova Scotia Co-operative Council showed that 87 per cent of Nova Scotia residents had a “completely favourable” or “mostly favourable” perception of co-operatives (Nova Scotia Co-operative Council, 2008). And for nine consecutive years, Canadian consumers have ranked credit unions first among all financial institutions in terms of customer service (IPSOS, 2013).

Given the positive public perception of co-operative enterprises, one would anticipate that co-operatives would actively promote their co-operative identity when marketing their products and services through all their communications platforms, including their corporate websites.

But in spite of a near-consensus within the co-operative movement that co-operative identity is important, the extent to which co-operatives actually communicate that identity has not been extensively researched. Much of the research on identity has focused on structures, governance and adherence to co-operative principles (eg Coté, 2001; Coté and Gratton; 2002, Lafleur, 2003; Deschênes, 2010) or the relationship of co-operative identity to community and social cohesion (Fairbairn, 2006) rather than on the projection of that identity to a broader public.

Leslie Brown at Mount Saint Vincent University is one of the Canadian researchers who has specifically linked co-operative identity and communications strategy:

... to survive and thrive in the future, co-operatives will have to develop communications strategies, including marketing strategies, that explore and stress their advantages as co-operatives (Brown, 2006: 2).

Tom Webb, a co-operative consultant who became Managing Director of the Masters of Management, Co-operatives and Credit Unions programme at Saint Mary's University, reached a similar conclusion:

Marketing co-operative uniqueness can provoke critical thinking and be education in the best sense of that word. The [co-operative] marketing that the author has had the opportunity to examine has also paid off in terms of heightened member awareness of the reason for the co-operative's existence, and improved market position (Webb, 2000: 274).

The other assumption underlying this research is that a corporate website is a key marketing tool for co-operatives, as it is for other enterprises. It is a means of projecting an organisation's vision, mission and values to a broad public audience as well as to its own particular stakeholders. This should be particularly true for co-operatives, which are values-based businesses guided by internationally recognised principles. Notwithstanding the ongoing debate as to whether the relevance of corporate websites has diminished with the rise of Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms, the website remains an important component of any organisation's communications strategy and is a reflection of the extent to which the co-operative perceives an advantage in communicating the co-operative difference.

With these two assumptions in mind, a content analysis of the websites of Canada's 50 largest non-financial co-operatives, as identified by the Rural and Co-operatives Secretariat in 2010, together with those of Desjardins Group and The Co-operators, was undertaken to determine the extent to which Canadian co-operatives project their co-operative identity through their websites. Of those, 34 of the websites were exclusively in English, 10 exclusively in French and eight were bilingual sites.¹

Additional research was conducted on the websites of the 20 largest Canadian credit unions (Credit Union Central of Canada, 2013) using a slightly modified index and, as a basis for comparison, those of 20 smaller, new and/or emerging co-operatives.

Unlike printed publications, websites are refreshed and updated on an ongoing basis. It is therefore important to note that the websites of the 52 largest co-operatives were reviewed

in April and May 2013 and the credit union and emerging co-operative websites in August 2013. The data collected on those websites reflect their content at the specific time they were reviewed.

Methodology

While content analysis is often qualitative in nature, a quantitative tool was developed to form a basis for comparison among the various websites analysed. The tool is the Co-operative Identity Web Index (CIWI), a six-indicator index which quantifies content that specifically reflects co-operative identity:

1. Co-operative identification: Does the organisation specifically identify itself a co-operative, over and above its name and/or logo?
2. What is a co-operative? Does the website attempt to answer the question “What is a co-operative (or co-op)?”
3. Co-operative Principles: Does the website list the seven Co-operative Principles as identified in the International Co-operative Alliance’s Statement on the Co-operative Identity?
4. Additional information: Does the website provide additional information about the co-operative model, the co-operative movement and/or how co-operatives differ from other businesses, for example, an FAQ?
5. Co-operative links: Does the website include links to other co-operatives, sectoral organisations or provincial, national, or international co-operative apex organisations?
6. Dot.Coop: Does the website use the .coop domain extension in its URL?

Points were awarded for each of the six indicators: up to 10 points for indicators 1-4, up to 5 points for indicator 5 (based on the number of links) and 5 points for indicator 6. Attention was also paid to the location of the co-operative information on the website; for indicators 1-4, one point was deducted for each level of navigation. For example, if a website identified the organisation as a co-operative on its home page without requiring any clicks or mouseovers, it receives 10 points for indicator 1. If one click or mouseover was required, it received 9 points, etc.

Partial points were occasionally awarded for reasons of content: for example, if a website referred to the co-operative principles but did not list them, it received partial points in that category.

The scores for each website were then added to create a total CIWI score for the co-operative, with 50 as the maximum score and 0 as the minimum score.

Results of the Research: Canada’s 52 Top Co-operatives

Indicator 1: Does the website identify the organisation as a co-operative, over or above its name and/or logo?

This was the indicator that generated the highest scores among the 52 largest co-operatives: 49 of the 52 websites identified the organisation as a co-operative. Of those, 21 identified as a co-operative on the home page and 25 identified as a co-operative on the second level of navigation.

Only three organisations did not identify themselves as co-operatives at the time the analysis was conducted, although since the analysis was completed, one of the three has posted a graphic with the words “Co-op membership benefits” on its home page.

In some cases, the identification was in the form of a menu tab or link containing the word “co-operative”, examples include “Our co-op”, “Vie coopérative” (Co-operative life) and “Identité coopérative” (Co-operative identity). In other cases, it was an actual statement describing the organisation as a co-operative.

Examples:

- Mid Island Co-op (www.midisland.coop), Nanaimo, British Columbia
Mid Island Co-op was created by mid Vancouver Island citizens in 1959 as a socially responsible way to provide themselves with goods and services. This website is created for Co-op members and community members who want to know what membership in a co-operative entails. (Text on home page.)
- Co-op Atlantic (www.coopatantic.ca), Moncton, New Brunswick
Co-op Atlantic is the second-largest regional co-operative wholesaler in Canada and the largest co-operative in Atlantic Canada. (Text on home page.)
- IGPC Ethanol Inc (www.igpc.ca), Aylmer, Ontario
IGPC Ethanol Inc is wholly owned by Integrated Grain Processors Co-operative Inc, one of the largest agricultural co-operatives in Ontario. The co-operative was founded in 2002 by a group of farmers and agri business people looking to add value to Ontario’s agricultural production. (Text on home page.)

Indicator 2: Does the website attempt to answer the question “What is a co-operative (or co-op)?”

Thirty-six of the 52 websites made some attempt to describe what a co-operative is, although in some case, the description was limited to such phrases as “member-owned”, “controlled by members”, or “profits shared among members”. This was a category in which partial points were frequently awarded (as well as deductions for navigation level), based on the amount of information provided.

Only one co-operative, Pioneer Co-op (www.pioneercoop.ca) described the essential features of a co-operative on its home page, with the statement:

Membership has its benefits. Pioneer Co-op is locally owned and controlled by its members. Profit is returned to the members based on their patronage.

Fifteen other websites provided some explanation of the co-operative business model on the second navigation level and 11 more on the third level.

Many of these websites devoted specific pages to explaining the co-operative model. A good example is the Federated Co-operatives Ltd website (www.coopconnection.ca), which includes a third-level (two clicks) page entitled “How Co-ops Work”. The page includes such statements as:

“Co-ops are democratically controlled using a system of ‘one member, one vote’.”

“Anyone can join a co-op.”

“Co-ops return their earnings to their members.”

Some websites received partial points in this category for referring to elements of the co-operative model but not explaining the model per se. For example, UFA Co-operative Ltd (www.ufa.com) offered a second-level web page headed “Governance”, which refers to “owners who elect delegates” but does not make the connection to the co-operative model itself.

Ten of the 52 websites, including several which identified the organisation as a co-operative, made no effort to explain what a co-operative is.

Indicator 3: Does the website list the seven Co-operative Principles?

Twenty-two of the 52 websites included a full list of the principles. The principles did not appear on the home pages of any of the websites, but were on second-level navigation on 11 of the sites. A few of the sites made reference to the principles but did not list them, or mentioned one or more of the principles, but not all seven. Twenty-five of the sites contained no reference to the principles.

On most of the sites that listed the principles, they could be found in the section of the website that describes the organisation, often headed “About (name of co-operative)” or “About Us”.

On other sites, the principles were somewhat harder to find. For example, Citadelle (<http://www.citadelle-camp.coop/maple-syrup/index.aspx>) a major Quebec maple syrup producers’ co-operative, has an excellent co-operative section of its website that includes a list of the principles. But in order to access it, you have to first click the “Members” tab on the home page, which non-member visitors to the site are unlikely to do.

Similarly, La Coop fédérée (www.lacoop.coop), Canada’s largest agricultural co-operative, provides extensive information about co-operatives on its site, including a page devoted to the principles. But all that information is included under a home page tab entitled Une entreprise – un réseau (A business — a network) and it is not obvious without one or more clicks what that section is about.

Indicator 4: Does the website provide additional information about the co-operative model, the co-operative movement and/or how co-operatives differ from other businesses?

In this category, points were given to those websites that provided visitors with more extensive information about co-operatives than just the principles or “what is a co-op”. With that in mind, 32 of the 52 websites received at least some points for this category, with 13 sites receiving 9 out of a possible 10 points.

One of the best examples was the website of The Co-operators (www.cooperators.ca), an insurance co-operative whose members are co-operative sector organisations. The site includes a number of pages providing information about co-operatives, with titles such as “Why co-ops are better”, “Committed to co-ops” and “The co-operative difference: it’s in our name”. The site also describes The Co-operators co-operative development program, which provides grants to co-operatives and the National Co-op Challenge, a competition for small, new and emerging co-operatives.

Similarly, Desjardins Group, Canada’s largest co-operative financial institution, included a wide range of co-operative-related pages on its main site (www.desjardins.com/en for the English-language site). The pages are accessed through a home page link called “Desjardins Education and Co-operation Zone: CoopMe”, which links to a section of the site entitled “The Desjardins Difference”.

Heritage Co-op, a consumer co-operative in Manitoba (www.heritagecoop.ca), had a home page menu tab entitled “Learn About Co-op”. Pages which came under that tab included not only “What is a Co-op”, but also “How does Co-op work?” “Who runs the Co-op?” and “Co-op: A Good Investment”.

Indicator 5: Does the website include links to other co-operatives, sectoral organisations or provincial, national, or international apex organisations?

This indicator was included because a key component of co-operative identity is the notion that co-operatives are part of a broad global network, reflecting the sixth principle, Co-operation Among Co-operatives. Points were allocated on the basis of the number of links, regardless of navigation level.

Nine of the 52 websites included links to five or more co-operatives, co-operative associations, or educational institutions with co-operative studies programmes. Not surprisingly, these included several second-tier co-operatives which linked to its member organisations. Another 19 sites included links to fewer than five other co-operatives or co-operative organisations. Twenty-two websites included no links to other co-operatives or co-operative organisations.

For example, the most links were found on The Co-operators website (www.cooperators.ca), in a section of the site headed "Committed to Co-ops". The links included co-operative studies programmes at five Canadian universities, the Canadian Co-operative Association, the Conseil canadien de la coopération et de la mutualité, the Canadian Association of Mutual Insurance Companies, the International Co-operative and Mutual Insurance Federation and the International Co-operative Alliance.

In addition to a widget which allows visitors to link to member retail co-operatives, the Federated Co-operatives Ltd. site (www.coopconnection.ca) included a page headed "Associations" (under About Us), containing links to the Canadian Co-operative Association, the International Co-operative Alliance, the four provincial co-operative associations in Western Canada and two organisation in which FCL is a member, Interprovincial Cooperative Limited and Cooperative Research Farms.

The website of Arctic Co-operatives Limited (www.arcticco-op.com) included a page headed National and International Links, which included nine links: Canadian Co-operative Association, Centre for the Study of Co-operatives (University of Saskatchewan), Coady Institute (St Francis Xavier University), Co-op Atlantic, The Co-operators, Credit Union Central of Canada, National Co-operative Business Association (US), World Council of Credit Unions and the International Co-operative Alliance.

Indicator 6: Does the website use the .coop domain extension in its URL?

The .coop domain was launched in January 2002 as an internationally-recognised internet domain for co-operatives. It allows co-operative enterprises to immediately differentiate themselves from other types of businesses when they communicate electronically. Since its introduction, proponents of the .coop domain (including the International Co-operative Alliance and NCBA CLUSA in the US, which serves as the .coop registrar for North America) have actively promoted the domain as visible indicator of co-operative identity.

The .coop domain is used extensively by apex organisations representing co-operatives around the world (ica.coop, coopsCanada.coop, uk.coop, ncba.coop, nz.coop and jccu.coop, are just a few examples) and one would have thought that it would have been quickly adopted by primary co-operatives. But that has not happened in Canada, as this research indicates.

Only six of the 52 websites analysed used the .coop extension. The remaining 46 websites were evenly divided between .com and .ca. It was also surprising that a number of co-operatives well-known in Canada for promoting their co-operative identity — including Desjardins Group (www.desjardins.com) and The Co-operators (www.cooperators.ca) — do not use the .coop extension.

Five of the six organisations who used the .coop extension on their URLs were based in Quebec (the other was Mid Island Co-op in British Columbia). Four of those Quebec sites are French-language only sites, while the fifth, Citadelle, is a bilingual site.

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to consider why .coop is so infrequently used in Canada, anecdotal evidence suggests that co-operatives are aware of .coop, but are reluctant to change long-established .com or .ca URLs. Others argue that the US\$120 annual cost of a .coop domain registration is prohibitive, especially for co-operatives with multiple websites. (In comparison, a .ca domain costs \$C29.95 per year, which goes down to \$16.95 per year if the domain is registered for a 10-year period.)

The 52 Largest Co-operatives: Total CIWI Scores

After the websites were evaluated on the basis of each indicator, the scores were added up to create a total CIWI score (out of 50 possible points). The CIWI scores for the 52 largest co-operatives ranged from 0 to 46; the average score was 23.6 and the median score was 28.

The top 12 websites, on the basis of their CIWI scores, were as follows:

Co-operative	URL	CIWI score
Citadelle	www.citadelle-camp.coop/maple-syrup/index.aspx	46
Mid-Island Co-op	www.midisland.coop	46
La Coop fédérée	www.lacoop.coop	42
Co-op Atlantic	www.coopatlantique.ca	42
Groupe Dynaco	www.dynaco.coop	42
La Coop des Bois-Francs	www.boisfrancs.coop	42
La Coop Purdel	www.purdel.qc.ca	41
Unicoop	www.unicoop.qc.ca	40
Coop Seigneurie	www.scalaseigneurie.qc.ca	40
Arctic Co-operatives Ltd	www.arcticco-op.com	39
The Co-operators	www.cooperators.ca	38
La Coop Profid'or	www.profidor.qc.ca	36

In some cases, co-operatives with websites containing strong co-operative content did not score high enough to appear on the top 12 list because the co-operative content tended to be located on the third level of navigation, while the home page and second navigation level were devoted to the co-operative's line of business: these included such well-known Canadian organisations as Desjardins Group, Federated Co-operatives Ltd, Calgary Co-op and Mountain Equipment Co-op.

That said, it is interesting to note that that eight of the co-operatives with the top CIWI scores are based in Quebec and two others, Co-op Atlantic and The Co-operators, have bilingual websites, reflecting their bilingual memberships and customer bases. This could be a reflection of the strength and visibility of the co-operative movement in French-speaking regions of Canada, creating an increased perception of the advantage of communicating co-operative identity.

New and Emerging Co-operatives

After analysing the websites of the 52 largest co-operatives all but one of which (IGPC Ethanol) had been established for at least 10 years, the websites of 20 new and emerging co-operatives were reviewed to determine whether they were more likely to reflect co-operative identity, based on the same six indicators. Without first looking at the websites, the 20 co-operatives were selected from a list of co-operatives which had applied for and received funding at some point between 2009 and 2012 from the Co-operative Development Initiative (a federal government programme which provided support to new and emerging co-operatives). An effort was made to ensure that co-operatives from different regions of Canada were represented, as well as different types of co-operatives (consumer, producer, worker, multi-stakeholder). Fifteen of the websites were English-only, three French-only and two bilingual.

While one might expect that a new co-operative would make a better effort to reflect its co-operative identity than a long-established, more "corporate" co-operative, this was not the case. The CIWI scores for the new and emerging co-operatives ranged from 0 to 34 (out of 50), with an average CIWI of 15.7 and a median CIWI of 18.

All but two of these co-operatives identified themselves as co-operatives on their website, 11 of them on their home page. But only 10 — less than half the sample — made any attempt to explain what a co-operative is; only three provided any additional information about co-operatives; only six linked to co-operative organisations; and not one of these co-operative websites referred to or listed the co-operative principles.

Even the top-scoring co-operative in this category, Sumac Community Worker Co-operative (www.sumac.coop), did not list the principles, although it did devote a page to “Investing in a Co-operative Economy”. Similarly, the Funeral Co-operative of Ottawa (www.funeralcooperativeofottawa.coop) included an excellent page on its vision and values, but the principles were not on the site at the time it was analysed.

Only three of the 20 websites used the .coop domain extension, a slightly higher percentage than the larger co-operatives, but not significantly so.

Credit Unions

Although several would have qualified on the basis of business volume and/or assets, credit unions were not included in the analysis of the websites of the 50 largest co-operatives. (Note: Desjardins Group is not a credit union, although the caisses populaires that are part of that organisation are similar to credit unions in purpose and structure). For many Canadian credit unions, public identification with the broader co-operative movement is a relatively recent phenomenon, culminating with strong credit union participation in the 2012 International Year of Co-operatives. For example, one would not expect a Canadian credit union to use the .coop domain extension (in fact, the Credit Union National Association in the US received ICANN approval for a .creditunion domain in June 2013). And they would be more likely to include content on “what is a credit union” rather than “what is a co-operative”.

As a result, a separate index (Credit Union Identity Web Index, or CUIWI) was created in order to review the websites of Canada’s 20 largest credit unions.

The indicators were as follows:

- 1 Does the credit union identify itself as a co-operative?
- 2 Does the website allude to or explain the difference between credit unions and other financial institutions?
- 3 Does the website list the seven co-operative principles?
- 4 Does the website provide additional information on the co-operative model?
- 5 Does the website provide links to other credit union or co-operative organisations at the local, provincial, national, or international level?

Since the .coop indicator was not used for this analysis, the maximum CUIWI score would be 45. Points were deducted per level of navigation, similar to the analysis of the largest co-operatives.

The results indicated that at least some of Canada’s largest credit unions have as strong a co-operative identity as the largest co-operatives. Thirteen of the 20 credit union websites described themselves as a “co-operative” (usually “financial co-operative”) somewhere on their website.

All 20 of the websites made an effort to describe how a credit union is different from other financial services institutions. Six of the 20 websites listed the co-operative principles in full, while two more either alluded to the principles or listed some of them. Five of the websites provided additional information about the co-operative model. Two of the websites linked to other co-operative organisations.

The credit union websites that indicated the greatest level of co-operative identity were those of Assiniboine Credit Union with 38 out of a possible 45 points (www.assiniboine.mb.ca), Vancity with 34 points (www.vancity.com), Servus Credit Union with 32 points (www.servus.ca) and Conexus Credit Union with 32 points (www.conexus.ca). For example:

At Assiniboine Credit Union, being a responsible financial co-operative is at the heart of everything we do. It's who we are.

Vancity is a credit union, which is a member-owned financial co-operative. Our co-operative model is one of our greatest strengths and makes us fundamentally different from most other businesses. As a financial co-operative, we exist for the sole benefit of our members and their communities. We believe that we can only prosper as individuals if we are connected to a healthy, sustainable community. That's why we help members meet their financial goals in a way that also strengthens their community.

Our members are the owners. They are the reason we exist. They count on us to understand their needs, to work in their best interests and to do a great job of making their money work for them and for their communities (excerpt from Servus Credit Union website).

Conexus is a co-operative organization and as such subscribes to the Co-operative Principles (Introduction to list of principles on Conexus website).

Conclusions

While some Canadian co-operatives, including credit unions, do an excellent job of communicating their co-operative identity through their websites, others are yet to be convinced that co-operative identity provides a marketing advantage as suggested by Leslie Brown and Tom Webb. New and emerging co-operatives are no more likely to promote their co-operative identity than established co-operatives, although that might improve as these co-operatives mature, become more engaged with the broader co-operative movement and add content to their websites. But given the evidence that the online promotion of co-operative identity by established co-operatives remains inconsistent, this is not guaranteed.

The fact that fewer than half the large co-operative websites and none of the emerging co-operative sites, included the co-operative principles, may speak to whether the principles have been adequately promoted within the Canadian co-operative movement, or whether they are viewed by some co-operatives as "old-fashioned" or irrelevant to the co-operative advantage. At the same time, credit unions are beginning to identify more strongly with the broader co-operative movement than they have in the past; the fact that more than half of them identified themselves as financial co-operatives is an encouraging sign, as is the fact that nearly one-third listed the co-operative principles.

The results of this research also raise questions about the future of the .coop domain, at least in terms of its use in Canada. If .coop is to become an effective means of distinguishing co-operatives from other enterprises, it needs to be more widely used by primary co-operatives (as opposed to co-operative associations, most of which already use .coop) than it is at present. Additional research needs to be conducted as to why established co-operatives have not switched to .coop and why emerging co-operatives have not adopted it in any great numbers.

Finally, it is important to recognise that websites do not exist in isolation; they are just one component of an organisation's communications toolkit and are part of a larger communications and marketing strategy. In most cases, the content of any given website is developed by the organisation's communications staff with input from senior management and, in some cases, the Board of Directors.

With that in mind, it would be interesting to pursue further research on how co-operative employees, managers and leaders view the purpose and objectives of their website. It is possible that some organisations use their websites exclusively to market their products and services and use other communications platforms, such as print publications, e-newsletters and

social media, to project their identity as co-operatives. Answering these questions could shed additional light on the results of the research presented in this paper.

The Author

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Note

- 1 The research described in this paper was inspired by an internal research project on co-operative websites that was conducted for the Canadian Co-operative Association (CCA) in 2010 by Nicole Ives-Allison, who was working as an intern in CCA's communications department at the time. This researcher is grateful to Ms Ives-Allison for her excellent work on that project.

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