

# Developing an Active Membership and Encouraging the New Generation of Co-operators

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## Introduction

Co-operatives, as member based organisations have a duty to ensure that membership is meaningful, that membership continues to grow and that member records are accurate.

No longer can co-operators rely on past tradition, etc, to attract members, times change and in many cases, family tradition is not the only reason we employ when deciding which organisations to use, who deserves our loyalty or where we spend our money.

Like every other kind of business, we need to make a conscious effort to attract and retain customer loyalty. Because we are member based organisations we have the additional pressures of recruiting new members and encouraging active participation.

This is, in addition to the most important issue facing member based organisations today – how we attract and retain the new generation of co-operators, how we inspire and motivate them to join their co-operative, become active and shape the future of the co-operative movement.

Recruiting and encouraging active participation can be difficult, especially if we rely on the history and tradition associated with co-operation. In a movement which has survived for 160 years, and has developed into a diverse and varied range of member based organisations, perhaps now is the time to return to basics when considering the ways we can attract new members generally, and the new generation of co-operators.

The Co-operative College has attempted to do just that with the production of two toolkits – the *Just Ask Membership Toolkit* and the *Not Just for Profit Social enterprise in the school curriculum* resource pack.

## Just Ask Membership Toolkit

The Just Ask Membership Toolkit is the final output of a two-year action research project led by the Co-operative College working in partnership with Stirling University and

consumer and housing co-operatives in the West Midlands. The project formed part of the West Midlands Social Economy Partnership programme looking at the development of effective support structures for a successful social economy, funded by Advantage West Midlands under the SRB6 programme.

The 'participation chain model' developed by Richard Simmons and Johnston Birchall from Stirling University revealed that the people joined their co-operative because they had been asked to and, when asked why they became more active, the answer was, once again, because someone had asked them to. This led to the title of the Membership Toolkit – *Just Ask* and is the theme we used throughout the toolkit.

"Learning is the process of turning experience into knowledge, knowledge into understanding, understanding into wisdom and wisdom into action."

This quotation is used in the *Just Ask Membership Toolkit* and sums up the process that the authors used in developing this comprehensive step by step guide through the journey of membership of co-operatives and social Enterprises.

As with everything we see around us, the *Just Ask Membership Toolkit* began as an idea. After the research had been completed, it was obvious that there was a place for a comprehensive toolkit dedicated specifically to membership.

In 2001, the Co-operative Commission reaffirmed the importance of membership:

"Successful co-operative businesses require a large and widespread membership that is supportive of the broad principles of co-operation and the participation of an active, informed and representative elected membership."

Co-operative Commission, 2001

Until the production of the *Just Ask Membership Toolkit*, there were no tools available that helped

member groups and member professionals review and set strategies to deal with common issues.

When developing the Toolkit, we had a number of criteria which, we believe have been instrumental to its success.

These criteria were:

1. That we had a vision of what the final product would do.
2. That the toolkit would be of immense use regardless of the users experience.
3. It had to be easy to read.
4. It also had to take account of different learning styles.
5. It had to provide tools that would help those using the toolkit to recruit and develop active members.
6. It had to be a stand alone product but also have the ability to be easily incorporated parts into the member and director training framework.
7. It had to have the capacity to be personalised by individual co operatives.
8. It had to balance research with activities, metaphor and learning opportunities for the user.

## The Process

In order to cover all aspects of membership, we listed everything we could think of and, once this was complete, the items in the lists were grouped into themes, which later became the section headings. The *Just Ask Toolkit* has been written as a journey through membership and was designed so that users with little experience or those wanting to follow the process through can use it as a start to finish tool whilst those with more experience, or specific issues regarding membership, can use a particular section. In order to facilitate and encourage self learning and development, a pragmatic, hands on approach was developed, interspersed with academic research, the use of metaphor, good practice and action planning.

The responses received by those who have used the *Just Ask Membership Toolkit* have been extremely positive. In some situations, completion of some of the activities has encouraged some co-operatives to examine and change their practices. For example, one activity used during committee member training, asked participants to discuss how easy it was

for members to move through stages from being a customer member to becoming a member of the Board of Directors. These participants agreed that in their co-operative it was very easy to do this, until they completed one of the activities in the Toolkit which highlighted the opposite. Evaluation of this process led to a change in their working practices.

Producing this toolkit revealed the enormous power and sense of belonging that membership can bring. This power opens up fantastic opportunities – new routes to learning, new routes to active involvement and new routes to democratic participation in a society where democratic renewal is so desperately required.

## Not Just for Profit

The Not Just for Profit resource pack introduces social enterprise into the 14–19 school curriculum.

As with the *Just Ask Membership Toolkit*, the *Not Just for Profit* pack is also a final output of a two year research project undertaken as part of the West Midlands Social Economy Partnership programme funded by Advantage West Midlands under the SRB6 programme. A wealth of knowledge and experience was brought to this project by the Co-operative College, the Marches Consortium, Dynamix and Wolverhampton City Council.

The outcome of this project was to develop a range of activities which would introduce students to, and develop the concept of social enterprise.

When developing this pack, one of the main objectives was to ensure that the activities that were designed to support the pack were fun, engaging and participative whilst at the same time produced serious key learning points about different aspects of social enterprise.

Although the pack makes a valuable contribution to Business Studies and Citizenship, it is also an important resource which can be used in other areas of the curriculum such as geography, general studies, young enterprise and personal, social and health education.

One of the unique outcomes of this pack is that it combines learning with the building of skills valuable in life generally and in the workplace, such as co-operation, speaking, listening, assertiveness, confidence and participation.

The *Not Just for Profit* pack has many

benefits to both the school as a whole and the students. In particular it provides a resource that can be introduced immediately by using the planning section and the sample menus. Use of the pack provides a series of quick wins, which can achieve specific learning outcomes during a lesson, and longer term projects which achieve more complex learning outcomes over a period of time.

The Co-operative College has run a number of training sessions on the *Not Just for Profit* pack in schools across England for teachers and teaching assistants. All of the sessions were extremely well received and feedback positive and encouraging with teachers expressing the amount of personal learning they have gained from the sessions as well as

the uses within the curriculum. A number of teachers immediately saw the opportunity to introduce the pack across the curriculum, whilst others expressed pleasure in the fact that the pack will fill gaps in the curriculum at present, and with thought, enhance what is currently being taught. Other teachers saw the value of fully involving the students in their learning and for others it provides, amongst other things, an enhancement to the team building activities already in place.

Copies of these two packs are available from the Co-operative College, priced £45 (including postage and packing) for the *Just Ask Membership Toolkit* and £25 (including postage and packing) for the *Not Just for Profit* resource pack.