

HOW THE COOP USES SOCIAL MEDIA

November 5, 2024



ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHEN SAVAGE

By Zach Schiffman

November 5, 2024

The Linewaiters' Gazette in recent years has made the transition from print to digital, with our journalism accessible through the web or an email digest sent to members' inboxes. But the Coop has also made strides using social media to inform members about various goings-on—not to mention to evangelize about the virtues of the Coop's produce and other wares.

The Coop is on X (formerly Twitter), Bluesky, Threads, Pinterest and Instagram. (Inter-

estingly, the Coop has never had a Facebook page.) The handle everywhere is @food-coop, so any other account with PSFC, food coop or Park Slope Food Coop in its handle is not an official account run by General Coordinator Ann Herpel and Membership Coordinator Karen Mancuso.

Herpel and Mancuso say that the Coop joined Twitter first, in September 2008, and joined Instagram in 2013. In response to my questions, Herpel and Mancuso offered insights into how they run the Coop's social media accounts.

What kinds of things do you like to post?

We mostly post photos of members shopping or working but also food! Speciality or holiday items, seasonal items, delicious fresh produce. We re-share Instagram Stories from members a lot, which is a nice group participation aspect of our social media presence. It's an especially good way to get pictures in the mix from behind the scenes—like compost squad, cleaning squads or cheese processing.

Our top priority in posting is communicating changes to hours, emergencies, introduction of new policies or procedures or changes to policies and procedures, special foods, etc. Our second priority is informing the community of special events such as the anniversary party, making posts to answer repeated member questions, like our hours, product suggestions, visitor policy or new member enrollments.

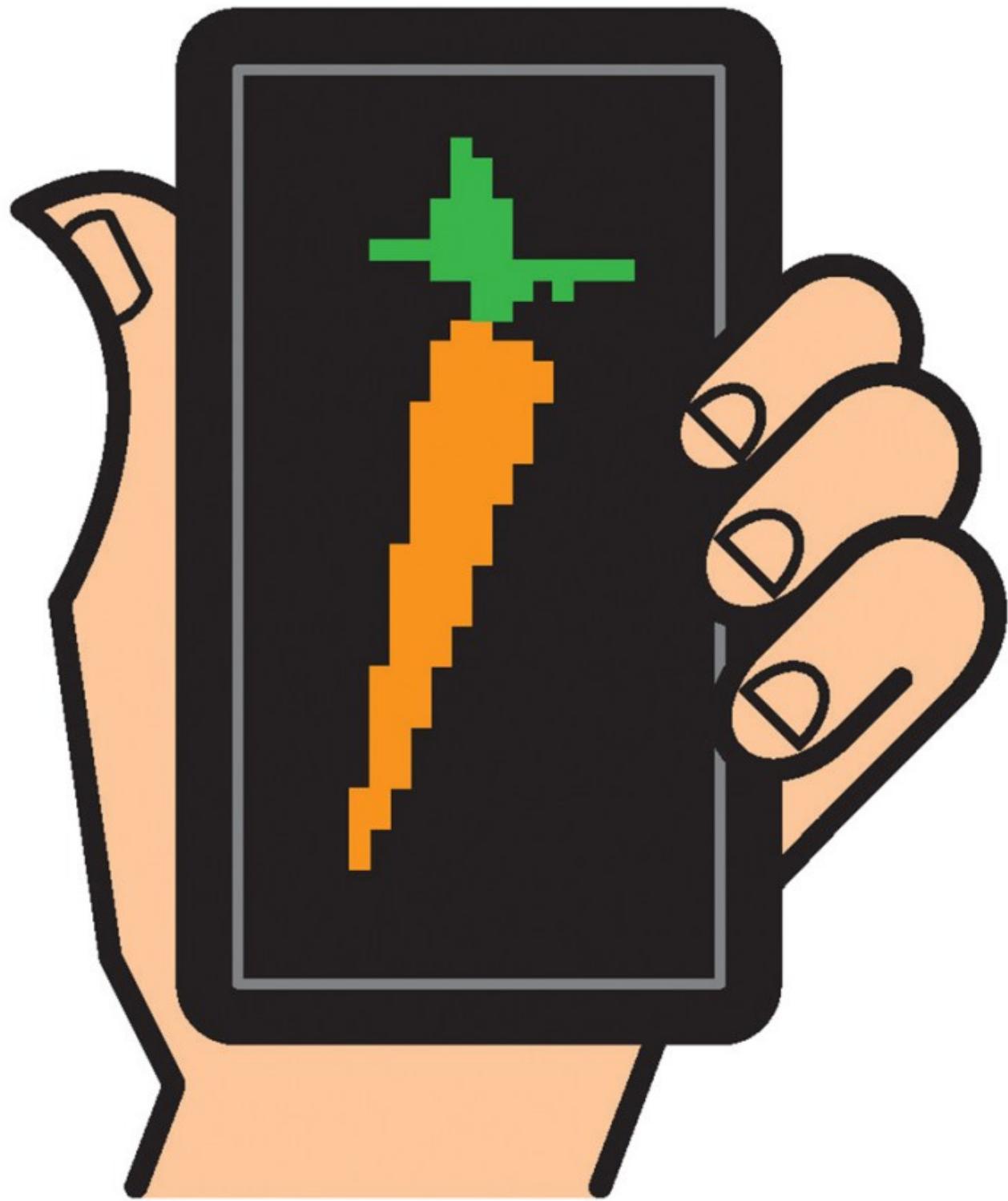


ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHEN SAVAGE

Is there a strategy in what/when you post?

We stick to posts with direct Coop involvement—store business and supplier/product information. We're not a general outlet for the many interesting things around Brooklyn members are involved with. With very few exceptions, we stick with photos taken inside the store rather than commercial product shots.

Our aesthetic is lo-fi! Posts are what a member might hear if they were in the Coop rather than marketing campaigns from suppliers. When emergencies happen, we try to update the socials with specifics to keep people in the loop, for example, "ConEd has us in brownout conditions at 80% power" along with "no ice cream until our refrigeration is restored."

We don't give medical advice and we don't advocate any particular diet. When we take someone's picture, we try to explicitly make sure they're OK to be on our socials. The best practice is to show the picture to the person to get approval.

We do feature kids if we get explicit approval from the parent to post on social media. We show the parents the photo so they see what we will post. We often text a copy to the parents if they want it for their archives! We won't repost pictures with kids without permission from the kid's guardian because half the time the parent is unaware/doesn't want the child's picture on social media (we learned this from cute and hilarious posts like #prisonersofthecoop of kids in carts).

When we started on Twitter we reposted links and info from the buyer-written product blog. I'd say what platform the blog was on but I don't remember—maybe blogspot? (Here it is, looking like a proto-Twitter feed back in 2005: <http://psfc.blogspot.com/>.) Our main dry goods buyer, Janet Schumacher (R.I.P.), wrote with depth about the food supply chain, research and reading she was doing, and considerations for ethical consumption. The beer buyer wrote about beer and the cheese buyer wrote about cheese, and we filtered it over to Twitter.

When Covid hit, social media became a bigger, more serious communications presence for us. We went from posting casually two or three times a week to daily posts with hundreds of member comments. We communicated important health information, protocols for shopping, updates on stock (remember toilet paper shortages?!), hiring members to work as temp workers when member labor was suspended, and, importantly, the reopening plans. We also coordinated more with the all-Coop emails we sent so we had a multipronged communication strategy.

In 2024, we've relaxed back into posting less or posting when something catches our eye—that could be twice in one day or twice a week.

In what cases do you avoid using social media?

We're not on Instagram to answer questions about obvious stuff that's readily available on the website, or act as an extension of the office. If a member needs the office, members can visit in person or use Member Services on foodcoop.com. Staff on the floor are super busy and definitely not looking at Instagram to answer questions about what's in stock.

How is social media helpful for a thriving coop?

Social media is increasingly an important tool for any coop. Some members use social media, especially Instagram, as their primary way to keep up with Coop activities. They don't engage with foodcoop.com, in-store signage, contacting the office or reading Coop emails. Members also engage by tagging us in their posts about working their shifts, shopping, cooking, etc. The feed is made richer because we have members who engage and share images and posts with us that we can use to promote our community.

Where can it be unhelpful?

It is unhelpful when members try to promote their business by tagging the Coop. The

Coop has a large presence in Brooklyn and people sometimes think tagging us could be a way for members (or even vendors) to get eyes on their own social media.

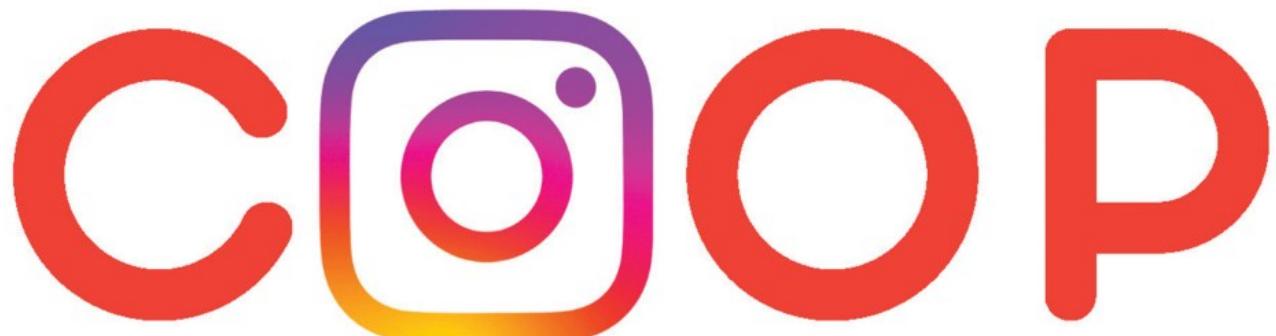


ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHEN SAVAGE

Have you ever considered making the duties of being a social media manager a shift?

One member has been our social media manager since 2008 when the Twitter account launched. The member signed us up for Twitter with a staff member (who is no longer on staff). Their aim was to communicate more readily with members at the time when the Coop's communication was limited to the *Gazette*, member snail mail, signage in the store and a pretty rudimentary website. This member wants to remain anonymous and we respect her choice. Her position would be more difficult if members could identify her in the Coop or on social media. If a member does have a social media question or concern, Herpel is the one who fields those questions.

The member is supported by staff. Staff communicate ideas and urgent items, and provide photos. On a regular basis some buyers send the social media manager weekly updates on products (especially produce), which help the community be more in-

formed about what's available at the Coop and answer a lot of questions that we cannot answer by other means, especially phone calls.

Do you think the Coop community is engaged with us on social media?

Yes! Members who are on social media engage with us. But we have a lot of members who are not on social media. It's hard to quantify how many. But we learned during Covid that some members were not on social media so we had to regularly update the website to keep those folks in the loop.

Engagement ebbs and flows depending on what's going on, of course. People use it to discuss upcoming votes at the GM, or ask fellow members what to do with kohlrabi (the answer is slaw!). There are a bunch of members who regularly comment and tag us or send pix by direct message. Many, many more follow the accounts and just enjoy the pictures. Our 18.3K-account Instagram following includes vendors and members who have moved away and sort of keep in touch via our socials. It's never been the entire membership—plenty of people don't use social media!

Tell me more about when you repost “members cooking.”

We use the Stories on Instagram to repost things from the community—the contents of shopping carts, favorite or unusual produce members send us, and Members Cooking/Members Baking—people tag us! We don't advocate any particular diet but we tend not to repost much of the meat products members have cooked because it upsets some non-omnivores. Not everyone wants to see a whole roasted chicken or rare beef first thing in the morning!

We usually don't re-gram blurry pictures, and we tend to re-gram fewer videos than still pictures, and almost no boomerangs. A post has to be set to public for us to share it—we've had people tag us and not realize their account and posts are private, making it unshareable. So, tag us if it's a Coop thing and make sure your post is shareable. If you're doing stealth promotion of something other than your groceries that

came from your coop, we probably won't repost.

Have there been any social media controversies?

The most recent incident was related to masking. Anytime we post something Covid-related, strong conflicting opinions are voiced in the comments. If people engage respectfully, we're happy to host. If not, we might delete a comment or choose to close comments altogether on a post, but that is not the preferred option for our media manager.

Most recently, we took a picture of the big bag of garbage produced every 3-4 days by single-use mask waste at the Coop and posted it with a plea to members to bring their own reusable masks when shopping on Wednesday or Thursday.

A few members complained in the comments, by direct message, and at the General Meeting—afraid that the post might be seen as criticizing masking rather than as a message about avoidable waste.