

READING THE LABEL ON A COOP STAPLE: A LOOK INSIDE THE FIELD DAY BRAND

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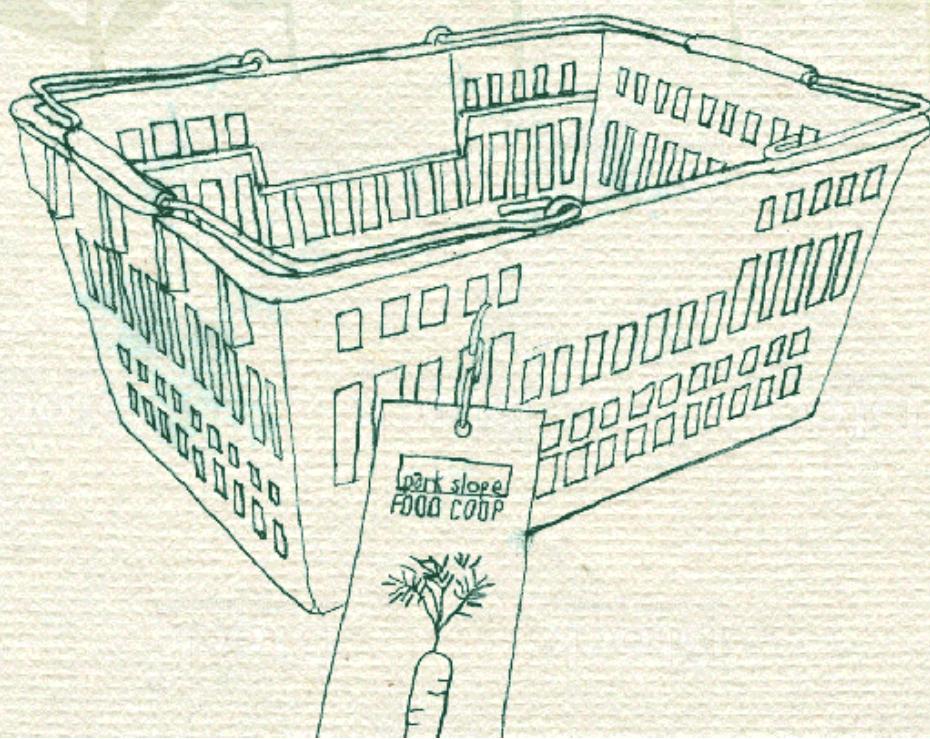


Illustration by Caty Bartholomew

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By *Emmett Lindner*

Any day of the week, the Coop shelves are filled with a variety of colorful produce, a bounty of cheeses and canned goods that can save dinner in a pinch. But in many of the aisles there is at least one constant: a Field Day product.

Whether it's a bag of spaghetti, a can of tuna or a jar of peanut butter, Field Day, a private label, is always stocked and at an affordable price. Some of their products regularly (and staggeringly) outperform competing goods.

Eden black beans, which come in at \$2.29 apiece, average sales of 90 cans a week, while Field Day's equivalent, for \$1.27, has average sales of about 400 a week, according to Gillian Chi, one of the Coop's buyers.

"It's not even the price at that point, because if it tasted bad, people wouldn't be buying that many more cans of it," Ms. Chi said. "I like to buy the Field Day Honey Nut O's, because it is one of the few store-brand cereals that my children will eat."

THE COOP HAS BECOME THE LARGEST SINGLE-STORE PURCHASER OF THE FIELD DAY BRAND IN THE COUNTRY.

A promotion last fall at the Coop helped increase awareness of Field Day's products. Discounts ranged from 10 to 27 percent, Ms. Chi said, and the effects are still making noise at the checkout aisles.

The promotion was the brainchild of the National Co+op Grocers (NCG), of which PSFC is a member, and UNFI, which, when it started, was called United Natural Foods,

Inc. NCG and UNFI jointly launched Field Day in 2009. Ben Nauman, the chief commercial officer and senior director of purchasing of NCG, who worked to get Field Day into members' pantries, said the two organizations were victims of their own success.

"A lot of shoppers tried Field Day for the first time as a result of that promotion, and they've come back to buy more," Mr. Nauman said. UNFI, he added, has had a hard time keeping up with demand: "It's been an exciting thing—a short-term problem, we'll get it solved long term."

The Coop has become the largest single-store purchaser of the brand in the country—across the board, Field Day is the top brand in all NCG member coops, with retail sales 25 percent higher than that of Organic Valley products, according to Mr. Nauman. NCG member coops sold more than \$45 million in Field Day products in 2024.

Like any highly visible product, members can be left to wonder about the story behind the label. In an interview, Mr. Nauman discussed Field Day's origins, its appeal and what's next for the brand. This interview has been edited and condensed.

How did NCG's relationship with Field Day begin?

The Field Day brand was initially launched in 2009, at a point in time when NCG was actually in the middle of doing private-label research. What would it take for us to own our own brand?

Whole Foods has the 365 brand, Kroger has the Simple Truth brand. When they go to get products manufactured with their label, they typically will go to a manufacturer or a co-packer to do that, and it's very difficult, even with NCG's combined volume of all of the coops nationally, to secure the product that you need, and at the cost that you want to get it at.

UNFI created the brand from scratch. They launched it with a very small number of items, and also with pricing that was a better value. If you were to look at Field Day

pricing in 2009, versus Westbrae or Eden, it was a better value, but [it] was not comparable to Whole Foods 365, or Kroger Simple Truth or Trader Joe's pricing. It was only in 2015 when we focused on trying to get the pricing dialed in to be more competitive with other retailers' private labels that it really took off.

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What did you want out of a private label, and how did Field Day fit those needs?

In terms of the desire to have a private label, it's really to provide for the need of the opening price point in many product segments. Most food coops don't operate with the Park Slope model, where you have extremely low retail margins that are provided. Most of our desire for private label was really driven by being able to make organic and natural and better-for-you products more affordable, and accessible to more of the shoppers.

Field Day was a good fit for us because they share many of the most important values that we have in terms of product attributes and what sort of product specifications are required for the brand.

On a couple of different occasions, we've actually put the business out to bid and allowed competitors of the Field Day brand to bid to be our partner, doing something like what Field Day does. And Field Day has consistently come back with the best economics.

What attributes, specifically, made Field Day attractive?

By and large, we're looking for products that are natural. We're looking for products that are free from a lot of different food additives and organic wherever possible. UNFI was willing to look in the space of things like sugar, where adding fair trade certification or fair trade spec without adding any additional cost was really meaningful to us, since we know that that matters a lot to some of the smallholder farmers that are involved in the sugar business.

Similarly, they've been willing to work with us on packaging specs moving towards either more recyclable or glass packaging in some areas where that's really important to us, ensuring that the packaging is BPA free.

Where does Field Day source their products?

They've got both an international and national supply chain. For a product like Field Day, more often than not, there's very little that is actually manufactured and then produced by a single label.

Most of the products are actually produced by what are referred to as co-packers. Oftentimes, the Field Day items are going to be piggybacking a production run for a brand like Whole Foods 365 or a brand like Kroger Simple Truth. They may know who the supplier is, and they may go to that supplier and say, "When you finish the Whole Foods run, do an extra three truckloads for me in the Field Day label."

You'll often find then that there's a lot of similarity in product when comparing one retailer's private-label product to another, and that stems in part from this contract-manufacturing business model, where a retailer (or in the case of Field Day, wholesale grocer) pays the manufacturer to keep the production line going and simply change the label. It's also one of the reasons private-label products tend to cost less than many of the brands we're familiar with, and in most cases will result in a retail price typically at least 20 percent lower than the national brand.

FIELD DAY WAS ABLE TO CUT IN HALF WHAT IT TAKES TO BUY A BAG OF SUGAR, AND WE DID THAT AT A FAIR-TRADE SPECIFICATION, WHICH IS FANTASTIC.

As Field Day grows, does that mean more new products?

In the next year, I think we'll add 50 new items. I think the year after that, we're planning on 75 additional new Field Day items and starting to push into some of the perimeter departments in the refrigerated case and the frozen case.

Is there one that you're most excited about launching?

I do really like the sugars. I'm excited about those, because I think if you looked at what was available in the natural products industry prior to the Field Day sugars coming to market, we were able to cut in half what it takes to buy a bag of sugar, and we did that at a fair-trade specification, which is fantastic. Organic sugar versus a bag of Domino, or a bag of C&H [from the California and Hawaiian Sugar Company], that sort of thing has always been awfully expensive, and sugars really come down a lot with Field Day.

What is the foundation of the NCG?

National Co+op Grocers is a purchasing coop, first and foremost, and we've got about 160 members with over 200 retail locations throughout the United States. We were created by regional associations of food coops, and, kind of curiously, those regional associations created NCG, initially, to go out and develop a private-label program.

There were some logistical challenges inherent in doing that. And so NCG had to reinvent itself, and one of the ways in which it did that is to create one strong national organization, so all of the regional organizations combined, and now we're able to go to market as a national, virtual chain of retail food coops. We basically pool the purchas-

ing power of food coops all across the country to provide lower costs and better terms of service to our community-owned food coops.

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