

SUCCESS STORY

Medicine Hat Co-op

During 2009 and 2010, if there was an award being given somewhere for employer excellence, the Medicine Hat Co-op was accepting it. The trophy case includes:

- winner: 2009 Medicine Hat & District Chamber of Commerce Employer of People with Disabilities
- winner: 2009 Medicine Hat & District Chamber of Commerce Employer of Youth
- nominee: 2010 Alberta Awards of Distinction Employer of Youth
- winner: 2010 Medicine Hat & District Chamber of Commerce Community Involvement
- winner: 2010 Medicine Hat & District Chamber of Commerce Employer of People with Disabilities.

This is obviously a company that does more than think about being a better employer; the folks at Medicine Hat Co-op are creating and nurturing a work environment to give those with disabilities a chance at rewarding employment and their community's young people an opportunity to earn and learn.

They do this while supporting events in the communities they serve. If being a quality employer involved in the community seems like an equation for success, consider the Medicine Hat Co-op, now in its 55th year, has some 33,000 members. That's roughly half the population of Medicine Hat. Something is working.



Co-op's Kelly Mastel discussing produce with customers

"We're trying to create a positive family environment so employees want to come to work, ready to provide excellent service to our customers and members," says general manager Ted Rodych. "At the end of the day, exceptional customer service will help us grow and succeed."

Co-op opened as a small grocery store in downtown Medicine Hat in 1956 with 300 members. Four years later, it added a bulk petroleum and agro component. Today, with two malls and a fleet of gas bars and 250 employees, Co-op locations highlight maps of the city. And with outlets in Dunmore, Acadia Valley, Oyen and Redcliff, the Medicine Hat Co-op is spreading its employer philosophy well beyond city limits.

It's a philosophy which can be quantified. The Co-op has three full-time and on occasion casual employees with disabilities (persons with disabilities) who are part of the company's success. One employee has been with the company 13 years, a second for five years. The Co-op has designated positions that will be filled by persons with disabilities, ensuring continued placements.

The Co-op works with the Clients Ongoing Rehabilitation and Equality (CORE) Association and REDI Enterprises Society to ensure it has the support needed to ensure a good working environment for all staff, including persons with disabilities.

Co-op staff embrace their fellow employees who have disabilities. Due to their length of service, persons with disabilities and customers get to know each other, creating an even warmer working environment.

"Get a job, kid." Good advice, but even better would be "get a job at the Medicine Hat Co-op, which employs between 25 and 30 young people. They handle tasks from shelf stocking to working cash in the food stores and gas bars.

The Co-op recognizes their education is a priority and creates flexible work schedules allowing them to work evenings and weekends.

Employing young people can cause stress for both parties in this day, so the Co-op provides

its managers with training in understanding its multi-generational workforce.

Of course, it's not only the youth who enjoy an atmosphere of respect. The Co-op has fashioned a family environment in which everyone, from employers to shoppers, are valued. Managers promote communication and approachability. Employees are fully orientated in customer service and work expectations.

Rather than old-school job descriptions, the Co-op uses accountability agreements, which clearly set out expectations. Excellence is recognized and rewarded through "Above and Beyond" awards, such as gift cards and movie tickets.

The caring goes beyond the shop window, too. The Medicine Hat Co-op is a strong community supporter, honouring donation requests, sponsoring children's sports and serving breakfast for 2,500 at the annual Medicine Hat Stampedede.

This past November, the Co-op bought back, at \$1 per pound, children's Halloween candy, and gave each child a healthy goody bag in return. Some 62 kids brought in more than 270 pounds.

Through its unique gift-card fundraising program, the Co-op paid out \$30,000 in one year to sports, arts and recreation programs. For each Co-op gift card purchased for fundraising by a team or organization for kids 18 and under, the company donates 10 percent towards the organization's fundraising initiative.

In 1974, from those early downtown beginnings, the Co-op built a mall in southeast Medicine Hat, today the Co-op Mall Food/Pharmacy, and Gas Bar. In 2001, it added a Food/Pharmacy and Gas Bar in the north end of the city.

After several other expansions, the Co-op established a 16,000-square-foot strip mall in 2007; the Northlands Market Place includes a Co-op Liquor Store among other tenants.

Success, it appears, is geared to employees after all.