

Organising a wholefood co-op order

Contributed by Viking_Chick

Buying from wholefood co-ops can be a viable alternative to the supermarket for a whole range of goods, the downside is that there are usually rather large minimums, here Viking Chick shares her experiences of organising a group to buy in bulk.

The more people find out about a local wholefood co-op, the more are interested and want to join. There are really two manageable ways of going about this either split into small groups that order individually and so keep the organising of the orders fairly manageable or get organised!

Having a larger group does create more work there is no doubt about that but it does have its advantages as well, such as the costs being met by the members of the group and not just the individual that started the group in the first place, and that minimum order values for free delivery are easier to reach – especially in the more remote areas.

Group organisation

This is down to the individual group, but points to consider would be:

Formalising the group:

if this is a large-ish group, providing a structure not only helps everyone feel involved and allows them to have a say in the running, but also helps with providing clarity re financial arrangements.

Structure:

will all members be on the committee in fact will you have a committee? Who are the office bearers? Who is responsible for organising the order both before and after it is placed? This can be done by election or by rota or by a mix of both. Our office bearers are elected, as are the co-ordinators, but when it comes down to sorting the goods once they arrive then all committee members are expected to take a turn and help out.

Finance:

will you place a levy on members to help pay for costs such as printing, postage, telephone calls, petrol, catalogues etc? Currently we pay 1.5% of our individual order total on top of the cost of the goods to pay for admin, although we did consider a membership fee initially. What about financial transactions – will you have a separate bank account for the group? This aids transparency and also makes record-keeping easier to maintain. Anyone can see the bank statements and financial records of the group.

Orders:

How will this be organised? With Suma the electronic catalogue is easier and cheaper to distribute, but not everyone has excel, and the printed catalogues are prettier (with the drawback of being more tempting!). Will the orders be place by

paper or by excel spreadsheet? Again, using excel makes things easier – orders can be collated and sorted with a couple of mouse clicks, and the totals can be automatically calculated (including the VAT and any levy) to make things simpler for the person placing the order. Paper orders are more open to error both in the addition of the prices and the transfer of the details to the main order. I would recommend that you set a firm ‘order by’ date and stick to it, maybe sending out a reminder a couple of days in advance for any late-comers. Suma catalogues prices are valid for a two month period, so to make things simpler it is best to get the catalogues early within the first month and place the order before the second month has passed, so that there are no price changes to deal with after the order is received. (suma prices seem to change regularly). I would also recommend setting the ‘order by’ date not to near the end of the month, so that you can ensure all cheques have been cleared before the order is placed. When orders are received, the name of the ‘orderer’ is typed against the goods that they have ordered, before going into the main spreadsheet. This enables us to sort it alphabetically or by order number, yet we still know which goods belong to whom so that it makes for easier sorting when the goods arrive. As an aside – sometimes items go out of stock. Suma usually phone and see if we would like an alternative instead – the perk is that the people that place the order get to sub, but they don’t ask the rest of the group as it would take too much time.

Sorting the order:

This can be a big job for our order it usually takes 3 or 4 of us a whole morning to do but this will very much depend on how many people are in your group. We have two people on the physical side and two on the paperwork. The sorters take the goods and shout out to the paper people what they have. The paper ppl then tell them who it belongs to, and mark it off the list, while the sorters put it into the correct pile/bin/car boot. At the end of this a note is taken of anything that has been omitted and anything received in error.

Differences/refunds/underpayments:

It might seem like that should be the end of it, but there is still work to be done! Once the orders have been picked up and any discrepancies reported back to the co-ordinators, the coordinats tally up all the items ordered, received, amount charged and see where any differences lie. In our group, any differences of under £5 are carried forward to the next order. Anything over £5 is repaid (if overpaid) or is requested as payment (if underpaid). Our coordinators always send out a spreadsheet to each individual detailing where the differences lie for the sake of clarity. Any differences are subjected to the same 1.5% levy (which in the case of an overpayment is refunded).

Contacts:

Click below for the websites of some of the most well known co-ops

[Infinity](#)

[Suma](#)

[Essential](#)