

Fedco Seeds

A Consumer/Worker Cooperative

by CR Lawn

Should Fedco Seeds outsource its order fulfillment? So advised an article I read recently in one of those trade journals with horrid

names like Multichannel Marketer. For a business growing rapidly like ours (about 50% in the last two years) into that awkward medium-size range, that's the conventional wisdom.

Outsource? Order fulfillment? The very lingo is cold and distant, conjuring images of Orwellian newspeak. To outsource order fulfillment is to hire someone else for a fee to do the dirty work of pulling and shipping orders for you, leaving you with the supposedly more fun tasks of picking and pricing your products and writing your catalogs and promos.

For us, that advice couldn't be more wrong. Why? Because we've achieved success by doing as many of our own jobs as we can—even those routinely farmed out by other businesses to consultants, specialists, or outside experts with big machines (and bigger egos).

Did our roof need repairs? Gene put together an in-house crew with sufficient interest and skills, giving our workers an opportunity to do something outside the normal routine and to hone new skills on the job.

Did we want to accept internet orders? Other companies hired a webmaster. Gene and David became their own dreamweavers, creating a nearly seamless system in a couple of years for no outside fees.

Employ an outside payroll service? Not a chance. As our sheaf of checks has grown, five different persons on our staff have handled the job. Now we use payroll software instead of my head to do the math, but we still do it ourselves.

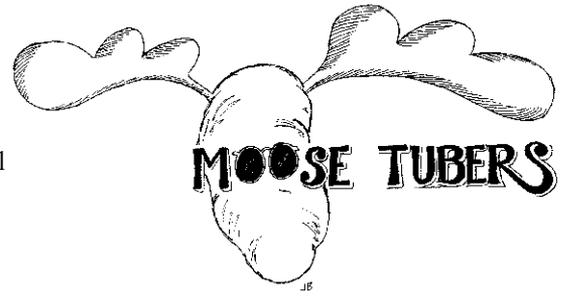
Seed packing machines to fill the more than half million packets of seed now ordered each year? No, our packers have disdained them. The machine is their hands, scooping rapidly. We like to touch and smell the seed.

How about that

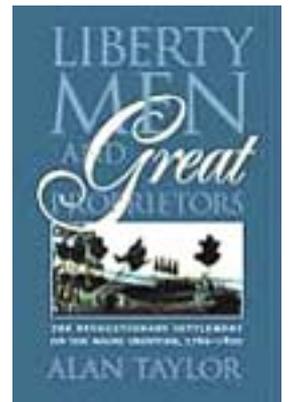
annual bugaboo of all small businesses—the dreaded Form 1120 corporate income tax return? I learned on the job and have been filing ours for more than 20 years, not only saving Fedco many thousands of dollars in accounting fees but also developing a deep understanding of our inner financial workings. From routine postings to elaborate financial statement preparation, I see all the details. No Bernie Madoff or even a petty cash version thereof could ever emerge from within, given that close scrutiny.

Who do you think will do a better job of collating, pulling and shipping orders accurately—workers who have built up personal relationships with customers over 30 years or firms of hired gun consultants far removed from their real clients? The answer lies in caring and taking responsibility. For it to work, we must all be one community: gardeners, farmers and group-ordering customers, workers, managers and even many of the growers of our seeds and trees. We all have the same interest in delivering and receiving excellent products, accurately pulled, packed, and backed by good information and decent fair service. If we can concoct creative catalogs and have a few laughs along the way, so much the better.

CR Lawn founded Fedco Seeds in 1978 and has worked for the cooperative ever since.



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Revolutionary Fervor Launched Maine Land Rebellion

In 1776, Davistown's settlers addressed their neighbors, "Your deliverance from final poverty, from infamous oppression, from entailed miseries to posterity now depends on the union of the people."

In the book *Liberty Men and Great Proprietors, The Revolutionary Settlement on the Maine Frontier, 1760-1820*, Alan Taylor provides a fascinating and detailed account of the farmers who settled in the Maine back-country between the Kennebec and Penobscot Rivers and their struggle to prevent the landed gentry—the Great Proprietors—from laying claim to the land the farmers had cleared. With expectations about liberty, justice and equality raised by the Revolution, in which many had fought, the Liberty Men were determined to protect their right to homestead the back-country, saying, "These lands once belonged to King George. He lost them by the American Revolution and they became the property of the people who defended and won them'."

The Great Proprietors, backed by the Congregational Church, sought to provide "elite counsel to calm their expectations" and to "smother forever the confiscating avarices of Democracy." The Congregationalists sent missionaries to the back-country to promote the idea that righteousness depended on higher church authority and the rule of law. They were deeply disturbed by the evangelical fervor of the local ministers who believed salvation came from a direct experience of the holy. Nor did they welcome the evangelical message "that the earth could sustain all in comfort if every family enjoyed equal access to the resources they needed, or cooperation supplanted possessive individualism."

Taylor summarizes: "In mid-Maine, agrarian protest and visionary religion grew side by side and proved mutually reinforcing as each promoted a more decentralized, egalitarian culture that seconded the settlers' growing distrust of centralized authority and elite expertise."