

Ozark Natural Foods, Fayetteville's Cooperative natural foods store, has been an iconic Fayetteville business for over four decades. They had a website early on: a solid green screen with the store's logo and hours which they had created themselves. When they first went online, Fayetteville had no professional web designers, and in fact many of the Co-op's shoppers didn't even have internet access.

Things have changed. Ozark Natural Foods is now a full-service natural foods grocery with a deli, more than 6300 owners, and a modern-meets-organic sensibility that draws people from all walks of life... and Fayetteville now has a burgeoning IT industry.

So when Ozark Natural Foods decided it was time to step up to a custom website, they were able to choose local web professionals to create their site, just as they choose local farmers to supply their produce.

The team creating The Co-op's new website, which will go live this week, is in many ways representative of Fayetteville's new web industry.

Dr. Tom Hapgood teaches web design at the University of Arkansas. With a background in corporate and commercial web design, he also enjoys doing freelance projects that let him apply his artistry. He serves as a consultant for commercial firms, and recently has done consulting for Monster.com and *U.S. News and World Report*.

Rebecca Haden is a web content writer who works from her home for a global clientele including the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, American and European technology firms, and individual clients on three continents. She writes websites, articles, instructional materials, and corporate blogs, and her company builds websites and conducts social media campaigns.

Shan Pesaru is CEO of Sharp Hue, a Fayetteville-based web firm providing design, development, and hosting for local clients from GameExchange to CaseStack, as well as services for more distant clients nationally and internationally. Sharp Hue's offices are on the Fayetteville-Springdale border, and Shan specializes in serving small businesses in Washington and Benton Counties.

Among them, the three typify the variety of web professionals now making Northwest Arkansas their homes.

It was important to Ozark Natural Foods to work with local people on their site for philosophical reasons, but there have been direct benefits. Jeremy Stevens, Information Systems manager for The Co-op, says, "It's encouraging and appreciated that they've clearly taken the time to understand our needs instead of applying a cookie-cutter approach like many firms do."

Hapgood created the design for the website, based on the colors of The Co-op's newly redecorated store, as well as the feeling of the business. The design combines photo illustration focusing on the natural beauty of the region with a gallery of photos incorporating clever technology. "I've reached the point," says Hapgood, "where I feel like, if I'm not going to do something unique with every project – why bother?" The special effects on The Co-op's new homepage are designed to showcase their modern take on green and healthy living, without interfering with the speed, function, and search results of the site as older approaches to online photo galleries can do.

Hapgood also designed the site for greener printing and accessibility for people with limited vision – both things he knew would be important to Ozark Natural Foods.

Haden specializes in making websites that work well both for the people visiting the site and for search engines. “You can have a wonderful web site, but if it’s languishing on a back page at Google, people won’t see it,” she says. “Ozark Natural Foods is the most important local supplier of natural foods, so they deserve front page search rankings for a lot more things than they currently have. When someone in Northwest Arkansas looks for natural food, health, and beauty products online, they’ll be happy to find The Co-op.” Haden’s job involves research and writing to make sure that the website performs for The Co-op, as well as expressing their message. She also had the job of figuring out the best way to get all their important information onto pages that would work with the way people use websites, since that’s different from how we read print.

Pesaru is The Co-op’s new webmaster, and is also doing the engineering behind the site. As a web engineer, he combines design with highly technical things that don’t always show on the surface, but which improve the speed, usability, and value of the website. “Just as I optimize the language of websites for usability and search,” says Haden, “Shan optimizes the stuff under the hood. Between us, we’re able to create very successful websites.” For Ozark Natural Foods, Pesaru made sure that people going to bookmarked pages or old links from the old site would easily find the new one. Pesaru also built and integrated a dynamic page for Ozark Natural Foods – a web page that The Co-op has control of, so that they can update their information whenever they like.

Hapgood, Haden, and Pesaru are all long-time Fayetteville residents, but Northwest Arkansas has been attracting high-tech businesses from elsewhere, too. Northwest Arkansas’s position as “the Green Valley” of sustainable technology has brought in large and small players in the areas of biotechnology, nanotechnology, and information technology, among other fields. High tech industries offer Northwest Arkansas the opportunity to provide desirable career options while maintaining the natural environment and quality of life The Natural State is known for.

Fayetteville was recently ranked #4 on the Forbes list of “Best Places for Businesses and Careers,” while Springdale-Rogers made #2 on their list of “Recession Recovery” areas. The Arkansas Research and Technology Park, the University of Arkansas, and business and community leaders are joining forces to make the region welcoming to high-tech businesses, including information-based industries like web design and development.

Pesaru, who started his company while completing his MBA at Sam Walton College of Business, sees Northwest Arkansas as the perfect place for new IT businesses, “because of the local resources that have sprung up to support Walmart vendors, a growing sustainability movement, and a technology and innovation center fueled by the University of Arkansas.”

Part of the reason Northwest Arkansas is in some ways the epicenter of this is the local focus on education. All three members of the team that built the Ozark Natural Foods website are committed to education. Hapgood is Assistant Professor of Fine Arts at the University, and is responsible for training many of the area’s web professionals. He is a scheduled presenter for the upcoming local WordCamp Fayetteville conference on WordPress, a popular online tool.

Haden teaches writing at NWACC. “There’s a lot of talk in educational circles about 21st century skills and the global marketplace,” she says. “Since I actually work in that milieu, I think it’s important to share that.”

Pesaru specializes in corporate training, and conducts technology training for the Arkansas Small Business Development Center and area Chambers of Commerce, as well as IT groups.

“When you have a pool of educated workers,” Haden points out, “you’re in a strong position for the information industry. The perception of Arkansas as out of the mainstream becomes irrelevant when we can collaborate online.”

Pesaru joins Ozark Natural Foods in a commitment to supporting local businesses, the cornerstone of his firm’s work. “Northwest Arkansas seems to be a breeding ground for new and innovative ideas -- because of our economy’s relative stability, we see a large number of entrepreneurs with big ideas ready to make their mark on the world,” Pesaru says. “Startups, young companies, and established small businesses alike are much more likely to taste success with a web presence that has been optimized by professionals. Working with local professionals keeps our economy growing and says, ‘I believe in the future of Northwest Arkansas’.”

The Ozark Natural Foods website is Haden and Hapgood’s sixth project together. Pesaru and Haden have worked together for two years, collaborating on dozens of projects. Hapgood and Pesaru are currently planning another joint project. ““We have a great group of Web professionals in Fayetteville, “ says Hapgood, “with expertise in everything from design, coding, programming, usability, search engine optimization, and project management, to hosting and copy writing. This project for Ozark Natural Foods has demonstrated the wonderful, collaborative spirit in our community.”

The site will be live at OzarkNaturalFoods.com at the beginning of April. Customers and friends of The Co-op will be able to keep up with the news of the Co-op, check the menu at The Deli, and find information on healthy and green living, local alternative health practitioners, and the community.