


purchasing fair trade products where the producers are able to support themselves and their communities, or choosing to support local businesses that help our communities.

It's also important to recognize that we "buy" products that aren't found on any market shelf. The money we put into banking institutions, insurance companies, and other financial products can be used to support the world we want to create. When we make decisions on which institutions to trust with our money, we have a variety of options. The Occupy Wall Street movement has brought increasing attention to the financial sector and the role that questionable and unethical practices of financial institutions played in the current economic crisis. And it has begun to bring attention to the Sustainable and Responsible Investing (SRI) movement, which for decades has sought to create venues for ethical consumers of financial products out of a desire to reduce harm. The original SRI investors tended to be religious investors who sought to

avoid companies involved in tobacco, alcohol, and gambling. Today, the SRI movement also provides capital for businesses and industries such as renewable energy. Other financial products go even further. Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs) invest in underserved communities in order to enable their economic development and vibrancy. They provide affordable capital to support affordable housing, small businesses, and community facilities. This approach clearly resonates with classic Jewish strategies of alleviating poverty through fostering economic independence. Community investing also supports our other identities: neighbor, fellow citizen, and community member.

Whatever the strategy, as participants and often beneficiaries of a complex economic system that can make our lives exponentially better or worse, we have an individual and collective responsibility to work toward creating a system that values and contributes toward the common good. 

Goodbye, Jewish Brands: Hello, Jewish Memes

JOSHUA AVEDON

The social media revolution is bringing an end to unified brand presentation. Today it is our relationships, rather than direct communication with brand sources, that mediate our perception of brands. Technologies like Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest all empower individuals to become brand curators for their like-minded peers and social networks. Ultra-niche targeting is both cheap and effective. Rather than a unified concept, brand becomes an assemblage of experiences and ideas that get uniquely configured in an individual's mind. Brand messages aren't simply transmitted by users of social media; they get contextualized and refracted for specific audiences. The messenger has become the medium.

Jewishness itself has also become a matter of individual creation. Between the proliferation of Jewish lifestyles and the demand for personal agency in making identity decisions, Jewish brands are increasingly being defined by consumers, not producers. Instead of simply accepting the authoritative version of what it means to be part of a group, movement, or ideology, individuals feel empowered to create unique ways of describing their connection to the collective. In Jumpstart's 2010 survey of

Jewish startup leaders, for example, 61 percent said they were raised Conservative or Reform but only 31 percent describe that affiliation today; 8 percent reported being raised as "post-/multi-denominational" or "Just Jewish," but now 37 percent embrace those labels. There is both a shift in self-identification and in behavior. What was once a useful way to communicate one's Jewish identity can become an obstacle to clarity and nuance. It is now less effective to describe oneself as a particular kind of Jew, rather than describing how one behaves Jewishly.

As we move into a post-label world, not only do audiences fragment, but the ability to create broad messages that can appeal to a large and diverse group becomes more difficult. If the past few decades are any indication, this century will be an even more complex marketplace for consumers and producers than the last one. The idea that there is a single value proposition behind Jewish life is no longer operative.

For many people, brand loyalty is largely a thing of the past — whether to a specific denominational movement, an individual organization or company, or a product. This is having a profound effect on Jewish communal life

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because, especially in the 20th century, Jews were frequently defined by their institutional and group affiliations. Movements, ethnic backgrounds, theology, geography, politics, all once served as shorthand to identify ourselves to other Jews and non-Jews. But no more.

The shift to consumer brand construction is evident in such disparate concepts as the “Occupy” and independent *minyan* movements. Both are organic phenomena consisting of people banding together because of shared values or needs, but without prioritizing brand definition. Both have created powerful ideas that have spread virally to mobilize and inspire new audiences. These ideas, often called “memes,” are the cultural equivalent of genes; they spread through natural selection — adapting and evolving as they are passed along.

Occupy groups haven’t been coordinated by a central authority, given a singular visual brand, or even settled on a widely shared philosophy. Yet the meme of “We are the 99%” is so pervasive that it is now (rather ironically) being co-opted by advertisers in order to sell things to consumers. The indie *minyan* movement has spread rapidly over the past decade, and although it has an organization that helps fuel and empower it (Mechon Hadar), there is no attempt to control, unify, or standardize it. Each indie *minyan* is a unique expression of its participants. Yet, if one goes to a number of different *minyanim*, it becomes clear how memes such as music and food practices are shared and disseminated by individual culture bearers. In

Occupy and indie *minyanim*, we see collective sensibilities derived not from a central messaging apparatus, but rather from the recombination of memes by a multitude of participants.

Unable to count on a controlled distribution system to communicate a unified brand message, producers (Jewish communal organizations) must generate environments that allow for (and even encourage) the highly individual brand mashup happening inside the minds of their target audience. We are at the dawn of an era where meme creation and dispersal is the most powerful force for engaging consumers. While brand makers will lose control, they also gain a vital new distribution system for their content. Peer recommendations are much more persuasive than traditional marketing and advertising. The new paradigm demands cross-pollination, viral marketing, and giving up on the ownership of eyeballs.

Jewish civilization has always been extremely effective at this kind of contagious idea creation. Think monotheism, the Ten Commandments, or the Sabbath. The fact that our civilization constantly generates new ideas is what allows so many different kinds of Jews, Jewish communities, and ways of doing Jewish to exist under the banner of Judaism. Instead of obsessing with building and maintaining organizational brands, perhaps we’d all be better off if our communal institutions stopped trying to sell products and labels that consumers don’t want, and focused more on creating compelling ideas and experiences that they do want. 

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Co-opting Compassion

MARA EINSTEIN

Corporate America has reframed charity as a consumer proposition. Instead of writing a check or volunteering our time, more and more Americans are donating to charities by buying products adorned with a pink ribbon or by inputting a code to an online site in order to generate a donation. Consumers do so because they believe they are making a difference in terms of fighting breast cancer or improving the lives of the poor and hungry. The reality is that charity attached to consumer goods is the least effective means to truly make a difference in the world. The glare of consumerism hides the reality that corporations are expected to help pay for social services because many governments have gutted much of the

social safety net — something that started in the 1980s and continues, unfortunately, today.

Attaching a charitable donation to the purchase of a product is known as cause-related marketing (CRM). CRM began in 1983, when American Express (Amex) helped raise money to restore the Statue of Liberty. Amex promised to donate one penny for each card purchase and one dollar for each new account opened during the final quarter of the year. The campaign was successful in generating much-needed funds for the statue while simultaneously increasing Amex card usage and garnering considerable positive press for the company. It took almost 20 years for this marketing strategy to take off; then, companies began to tie their campaigns to

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