



The Unique Challenges of Synagogue Marketing

Like many nonprofit organizations, synagogues tend to be stretched thin both in human and financial resources. Their audiences include active members, inactive members and unaffiliated individuals and families, across all demographic and lifecycle stages, with different interests, perceptions and biases (both positive and negative) about Jewish communal life.

What's more, a synagogue rarely has a cohesive sense of its personality — or in marketing terms, its brand. The person answering the telephone makes a different impression than its program staff and educators. The web site uses a different vocabulary and style than the print newsletter. Flyers, announcements and the occasional ad lack clarity and a unified voice.

STAR's challenge to the Synaplex synagogues has been to absorb basic marketing principles, first in the Synaplex Initiative and then in the synagogue as a whole. We began with a more holistic understanding of what marketing is, within the context of furthering the purpose and mission of synagogue life.

"Marketing has been a taboo word in synagogue culture for a long time," notes Rabbi Jonathan Case. "It's something businesses do," he adds, making the very word sound treyf.

Rabbi Case and his Conservative congregation, Temple Beth-El of Poughkeepsie, New York, have started to break the taboo — but gently. As a participant in the Synaplex Initiative of STAR (Synagogues: Transformation and Renewal), Temple Beth-El has begun using the traditional tools of marketing — press releases, print ads, professionally designed brochures and posters, giveaways and even a television commercial — to communicate its values and unique programs to an ever-widening audience.

A series of press releases executed over several weeks set the stage for Temple Beth-El to position Synaplex as something new and exciting. Brochures and posters spoke as much about the needs of the audience as about the details of the program. Synaplex planners and volunteers shared a consistent message in their personal contacts with members, non-members and representatives of the media.

The result: an overflowing, exuberant Shabbat celebration, on an otherwise ordinary Saturday. "It's never been so full, with the possible exception of the High Holy Days," says Rabbi Case. "There was something for every age

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Gather the People... Experiments and Experiences in Synagogue Marketing

by **RABBI HAYIM HERRING** and **ROBIN NEIDORF**

group, and they came out for it. Some of the alternative programs, which focused on a theme of 'Body and Soul,' were standing-room-only."

The Synaplex Initiative is one of STAR's flagship programs, designed to help synagogues create a multitude of authentic, diverse Jewish experiences in synagogues on Shabbat. Over the course of a three-year period, eleven synagogues, representing each denomination, receive grant funding and professional expertise to develop, implement, evaluate and sustain Shabbat communal experiences that build on and provide alternatives to traditional prayer.

A significant portion of STAR's grant funding and support is earmarked for marketing and communications. But the first hurdle has been to shift the thinking of synagogue leadership about the nature of marketing itself.

"We're definitely raising some eyebrows," says Rabbi Case. "But we're also seeing the impact. We're able to reach a whole new audience we never reached before."

We then identified three concepts for integrating marketing into synagogue life:

Marketing Isn't Something You Do, It's Who You Are

The taboo surrounding marketing arises from a basic misconception. Many nonprofit organizations think of marketing as crass commercialism. In fact, marketing can be better understood as a coherent expression of an organization's personality, in addition to its opportunities, resources and program offerings.

At Baron Hirsch Synagogue, an Orthodox synagogue in Memphis, Tennessee, many programs already existed prior to the start of the Synaplex Initiative. But by clustering these programs in a single package and then developing the marketing for Synaplex, Rabbi Larry Zierler and his leadership have been able to identify a unifying concept. They ultimately chose "A meaningful Jewish journey." According to Rabbi Zierler, "Synaplex has

Why Emphasize Marketing?

When STAR designed its Synaplex Initiative, it built marketing into the program. Each of the eleven Synaplex synagogues must spend \$10,000 on marketing per year for three years. STAR provides half that amount, and the synagogue must secure the other half.

Through group and one-on-one meetings with Synaplex synagogues, STAR staff and consultants provide education on such topics as:

- Synagogue SWOT — Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats
- Building a marketing plan that is achievable and effective
- Identifying and understanding target markets
- Writing a press release, and getting it in front of the right people
- Cultivating media contacts
- Incorporating web-based communications as an integrated component of marketing

The very nature of the Synaplex Initiative presents additional challenges. Most synagogues concentrate their Shabbat experiences in the realm of prayer (*tefillah*). Synaplex enables congregations to create more participatory communities by offering Jewish experiences in the realms of social and cultural gatherings (*keneset*) and learning (*midrash*) in addition to prayer. Synaplex, with its multi-faceted programs and activities, mirrors the diversity of the American Jewish community.

STAR has developed a detailed brochure, a display poster and a ticket book that Synaplex synagogues can customize to promote their particular offerings. Many of these materials can be found on www.starsynagogue.org.

Since most Synaplex programs were launched around the High Holy Days, it is too early to draw definitive conclusions about the impact of marketing. Still, preliminary observations suggest:

- Synagogue participation increases with robust, professional marketing efforts.
- Synagogues can and should call upon members who are marketing experts to help design and execute their marketing plans.
- Successful marketing creates “buzz” in the community, and further draws participants.

WHAT ARE YOU SEEKING?

Engagement
Community
Study
Spiritual growth
Prayer
Authentic Jewish experiences...

You can find it at a Synaplex synagogue.

Synaplex: Expanding the Many Dimensions of Shabbat



given us the context for making this idea a reality and for communicating the value of it to members and the community.”

It's Not About You, It's About Them.

The most fulfilling synagogue experiences will not succeed unless potential synagogue-goers know of their existence. With limited budgets, synagogues need to use creative, targeted marketing materials.

Most of the marketing education STAR has provided to the Synaplex synagogues can be summed up in a sentence: It's not about *you*, it's about *them*. All effective marketing focuses on the *audience* — the needs, desires, fears and wants of the member or seeker.

Audiences vary by geographic location, stage of life, generation, spiritual direction, education level and all the other factors that make them unique. A synagogue marketing program needs to speak the language of these audiences (sometimes literally, as in the case of Russian or Israeli audiences), achieve press coverage in the publications they are reading, emphasize aspects of synagogue life that *matter* to these individuals, and to do all of this while maintaining the synagogue's own brand integrity.

The practicalities of audience factor into Synaplex marketing in many ways. Rabbi Zierler came to Memphis in the summer of 2003, following many years in Cleveland. In discussing Baron Hirsch's overall Synaplex marketing, he comments on the differences between the two cities. “Memphis is a smaller community, and a highly affiliated community,” he notes. “We don't have the breadth of possibilities in terms of marketing outlets or partnerships that I had previously. We have a local Jewish paper; we *have* to use it as a marketing vehicle, or we simply won't have credibility with our audience here.

“At the same time,” Rabbi Zierler continues,

“We're looking at alternative papers; we're creating partnerships to draw people in; I had a member come to me with the idea of creating an introductory Synaplex multimedia CD we can give to all our families and to others who want to know about the program. We have plans for consumer items, like bumper stickers and magnets — things that people use and handle and see all the time that will keep Synaplex in their minds.”

Creating and Sustaining Relationships

If a marketing campaign pulls in 500 people who never want to return, it is not successful. Ultimately, the purpose of Synaplex is not merely to put people in synagogues but to build and sustain relationships that enrich synagogue life and the Shabbat experience.

Choice of language can be critical. Rabbi Shira Milgrom of Congregation Kol Ami, a Reform synagogue in White Plains, New York, notes, “By structuring a program of Jewish music featuring presentation rather than participation and a dinner that we called ‘candles and quiet conversation’ [subtext: no little kids running around], we were able to bring back a large group of our founding members.”

Significantly, Synaplex synagogues report that advertising — everyone's first thought when it comes to marketing — is not nearly as effective as more hands-on (and lower-cost) forms of marketing. Word-of-mouth, partnerships with other organizations and program delivery can help create an overall “branded” experience that is satisfying to both synagogue and seeker.

“This is now a key area where we're focusing attention,” says Rabbi Case. “We opened with a splash, but now we have to sustain the energy. Now, our marketing focus is: how do we keep communicating, keep working with our members to expand our offerings, keep reaching out in new ways.” ❁