THE SELLING OF THE SYNAGOGUE

INTEGRATING NEW MEMBERS INTO THE EXISTING CONGREGATION

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Of the myriad responsibilities shouldered by the successful administrator, one of the most crucial is the "selling of the synagogue".

The governing board of the congregation must make several basic decisions before one can adequately serve their best interests. It must be decided where the greatest emphasis of the particular congregation rests. Is the congregation basically a house of worship? Will it have a religious school? Will it have a nursery school? A day school? Should the temple offer an adult education program? Youth groups? Lectures and Forums; art shows, concert series? Will these programs be limited to the membership, or open to the general public? Shall the temple be limited in size or open to all who wish to affiliate? What role will the congregation play in the community-at-large? Should the congregation take an active part in contemporary social issues or should it limit itself to its own house? Is the congregation run by a strong president and/or board, or is the rabbi the major decision-maker? Once these basics are defined, the methods of implementation have to be determined.

The methods of disseminating information to the congregation are numerous. The most common, and useful, is the temple bulletin. These publications come in a variety of sizes, styles and types. They range from several sheets of stencil-run paper stapled together to eight- or ten-page typeset multi-colored "magazines". Congregational size, budget and image dictate the kind of bulletin developed. Despite their different appearance, each temple newsletter contains basically the same information: i.e., service and congregational calendars, rabbi(s)'s, president's and affiliates' messages, upcoming highlights and donation acknowledgements. Most bulletins also contain Bar/Bat Mitzvah listings, "gossip" columns and yahrzeit listings.

Another popular method of "spreading the word" is through the use of a printed service sheet or prayerbook insert distributed at Shabbat Evening Services. These basically contain weekly calendar highlights and yahrzeit listings. Depending on their format, some contain the Order of Service listing pages and participants. These weekly sheets are usually either mimeographed or run off on a duplicator/copier. Use of the service sheet or insert is self-limiting, though, in that it only reaches those people at a particular service - not all of whom are temple members.
The flyer is still quite a common form of notifying members of upcoming events, etc. However, in my experience, I have found that, in this age of junk mail, flyers are very likely to be tossed out without being opened. Also, it is a costly method with the high prices currently being assessed by the postal service.

There are several extremely effective ways to let the general public know of the particular happenings at your synagogue. Local commercial radio and television stations have public service message desks. These offices are usually very cooperative in broadcasting special events for the temple at no cost. It is imperative to bear in mind that this service is not to be used indiscriminately as the station can refuse to air your message.

Local commercial and Federation/UJA newspapers are most receptive to printing temple events. Both papers usually have a Religion Section published on Thursdays or Fridays. These sections typically include a listing of temples in the area, service times, addresses and phone numbers, and names of the rabbi(s) and/or cantor. Additionally, this section usually has articles about the temples. These items can be submitted ready for print, or in some instances, may be given over the telephone to the editor or staff person on duty. The risk involved in oral submission is that of omitting vital information or being misquoted. This risk can be negated, however, once a rapport is established with the paper.

Retail advertising, also, is a popular, however costly, vehicle for transmitting information. Temples qualify for charitable or non-profit organization rates for retail ads. Display ads of this type are particularly effective for special events and the High Holy Days. Since such a great majority of the Jewish population is unaffiliated, many of these people satisfy their "need" by supporting "things Jewish". A clear concise display ad will very likely catch their attention.

The "selling of the synagogue" is an on-going effort. However, at this point, we will briefly discuss several methods utilized to attract and integrate the newcomer, the prospective member, the unaffiliated.

The location of the synagogue will greatly determine the plans implemented to attract new members. If the congregation is located in a small community with slight changes in population, the membership can successfully serve as the temple's salespersons. For the purpose of this paper, though, we will concentrate on urban and suburban congregations where population shifts are an on-going occurrence.
In those temples where the service sheet or insert are used, an invitation
to visitors to contact the office regarding membership is very effective.
A table in the foyer or lobby manned by people on a membership committee
inviting visitors to register is also an effective and tactful way of
obtaining names of prospective members. These people may be contacted
during the following week to ascertain their possible interest in
affiliation.

An active membership committee is a very useful tool in those temples where
there is a concerted membership campaign. This committee, headed by a
chairperson or Vice President, has as its major responsibility the contact-
ing of possible members by phone, letter or personal visit. Where there is
no membership drive, the committee should be used to contact new members
in a "buddy support system". This affords the new members with a link to
the congregation as a whole and eliminates the feeling of being an outsider.

Where membership interviews are conducted, the administrator and/or the
membership vice-president can sit with the individual party(ies). The
membership interview makes available to key personnel in the congregation
the opportunity to ascertain vital information. During the meeting it can be
learned what previous synagogue involvement the potential member has had,
i.e., committees, board and/or executive positions. From these discussions
it is very possible to glean future leaders. Depending on the dues structure
of the temple, finances may or may not need to be discussed. If the congre-
gation has a fixed minimum dues, the administrator should serve with the
financial officer to waive, extend or modify the financial obligation of
the potential member. Assuring these people that this is a temple first
and a business second and guaranteeing complete confidentiality helps
mediate an often tension-wrought situation.

A pamphlet explaining the history of the temple, outlining the structure
and detailing the programs offered is a most effective tool to interest
possible new congregants. Depending on budgetary restrictions, etc. this
pamphlet can be as simple or slick as the administration deems necessary.
These hand-outs should be placed in a heavily trafficked area and should be
included in the initial correspondence with the family.
The rabbi can often be a most effective membership tool. In his/her many hours of meeting people at public gatherings or counselling, the rabbi can stress the benefits to be gained by temple affiliation. It is in these instances that the rabbi and administrator can work as an unbeatable team. Once the rabbi has finished with the family in his study, it is usually very easy for them to be directed to the administrator's office where the details of membership can be completed quickly. It is generally more desirable for the rabbi not to discuss finances - but to alert the administrator if the individual is in need of consideration or a "heavy hitter".

Additionally, another good team is that of the administrator and director of education. In synagogues where religious school is open only to member's children, the two professionals form a natural link. Also, in those temples where there is a nursery school or day school and tuition differences for members and non-members, the educator can and should funnel prospective members to the administrator.

Once a family has joined the congregation, the selling of the synagogue goes into high gear. In communities where the temple is the center of Jewish life, integrating the newcomer into the existing membership is a major task. To accomplish this feat, the congregation has to employ a number of different programs and enticements.

The simplest of these tactics is "personalized" form letters from the rabbi, president and administrator. In the rabbi's letter mention is made of the several affiliate groups which, after reading the member's application form, appear to fit these general categories. The rabbi also signs these letters in his own hand and usually adds some personal note. The president's letter is a general invitation to the member to involve themselves in the numerous committees and activities of the temple. The letter from the administrator includes their UAHC/ Temple membership card and, in the case of Temple Beth El, a parking decal. Additionally, the letter states office hours and the staff's willingness and desire to be of service for any occasion.

The membership committee hosts monthly "New Member Coffees" at the temple for usually thirty to fifty people. These new members are invited to introduce themselves and give a brief resume of their background.
Representatives from the various affiliates and the professional staff are present to give brief overviews. Invariably, there are several families from the same - or nearby - hometown communities - or someone will know a relative or close friend of another. These informal get-togethers serve as ice-breakers and encourage newcomers to mix and mingle. It is an easy, effective and low-cost way to help members take that first step into the congregational mainstream.

As a gift to new members, both the Sisterhood and Brotherhood should extend a year's membership. The women and men are invited to special luncheons, dinners and meetings where programs are outlined, volunteers selected and involvement encouraged. Since these two auxiliaries are the major affiliate arms of the congregation, numerous committees and sub-committees offer people with varied interests places in which to join.

At Temple Beth El, two major projects, jointly sponsored by the Sisterhood and Brotherhood, with rabbinic involvement, are the Dialogue Center and the Mitzvah Corps. The Dialogue Center serves a two-fold purpose: the first being a service to the congregation and the community-at-large as a "friendly ear" to those in need. It is staffed by professional psychiatrists, psychologists and a host of para-professionals. It is not designed to be a counselling center; however, those on call can and do listen to the problems of the aged, the infirm, the lonely and many others. The Dialogue Center also suggests various agencies for additional and more comprehensive assistance. As for purely congregational activity, the Dialogue Center personally contacts each new member and welcomes them. Additionally, the Dialogue Center staff conducts an interview of sorts, wherein they elicit information regarding likes, dislikes, needs, wants and areas of interest. This information is then disseminated to the various committees and affiliates. The committees, etc., in turn, call the new members and invite their participation. This has proved to be a most highly successful and effective way to integrate newcomers. It must be brought out that less than one-third of our congregation was in the temple five years ago when the building was constructed. The overwhelming majority have been residents of the area for less than three years. This phenomenon has a direct bearing of the willingness of the "established" congregation to accept newcomers.
The other major joint project is the Mitzvah Corps. This group has several branches - each independent yet all interrelated - visiting the homebound (in person and by phone), introductions of new members, assisting the rabbis in followup hospital visitations, bringing platters to a bereaved family and providing minyans. It is an all-too-familiar case, a family will only first seek out synagogue affiliation in their time of need. The Dialogue Center and the Mitzvah Corps assist these people during their crisis period and then work to integrate them into the mainstream of temple life.

This fall, in an effort to negate the feeling of impersonalization common in large temples, Temple Beth El has instituted a Chavurah Program. This idea, developed effectively in other large congregations around the country, attempts to group members with common interests into small units for the purpose of fellowship. Criteria used to establish the chavurot can be as varied as age, marital status, family status, occupation or avocation and hobby, among others. The common bond linking one chavurah to another is temple affiliation and the belief in the furthering of Judaism as a way of life. According to our plan, each group will meet on, roughly, a monthly basis. The program will be developed by each chavurah with assistance available from the rabbis and a recently established library of research materials and activities. As has happened in other synagogues, we anticipate a certain percentage of the units collapsing, others functioning marginally, some regrouping - and others flourishing. This is but one more attempt to answer a need expressed by our members to make the temple more than a bet tifila.

In addition to the special projects described, there are various affiliates within the synagogue designed to meet the needs of a diverse membership. These include three separate youth groups, two singles groups and a young couples association. The numerous committees and activities available to the congregation afford the membership unlimited opportunities for growth and self-satisfaction.

The activities and programs outlined in this paper are impressions of personal involvement and experience as either a layperson or professional in four congregations. In order to integrate new members into the existing congregation, programs and activities alone are not enough. To effect these plans, a synagogue needs dedicated lay leaders. More importantly, however, the professional staff must know the membership and have detailed outlines for programs. Individuals affiliate with a synagogue for any of a myriad of reasons.
These are people with very real needs; needs requiring time and attention. It is our responsibility as administrators to play a definite role, albeit behind the scenes, to see to it that these needs are fulfilled, through conclusive and decisive maneuvering and planning. Facilities and budgets vary from congregation to congregation as do demographics and congregational emphasis, but for an administrator to effectively manage a synagogue, one must, in addition to handling the business aspects, be keenly aware of the individuals comprising the membership.