MARKETING THE SYNAGOGUE IN THE COMMUNITY

Submitted by:

Fern M. Kamen
Temple Jeremiah
Northfield, IL
August 1, 1988
When the upper and middle class Jews of Chicago began their migration from the inner city to the suburbs in the early 1950's, they brought their temples and synagogues with them. Temple Jeremiah was founded in 1959 and dedicated to classic reform Judaism.

The congregation is located on Chicago's prestigious North Shore, one of the most affluent groups of communities in the United States. The North Shore area is rich in its choices for religious affiliations as well. Within the twenty five mile radius representing eight suburban communities, there are seven reform congregations, five conservative synagogues, chavurah groups, a Jewish Community Center, Chabad House and satellites of organized Jewish groups from the Chicago area.

Jeremiah, along with most of the other Jewish organizations grew vigorously enough during its early years that membership was never an issue...there were always enough new members. As the migration to the suburbs began to slow, however, so also did the growth of the temple membership until it reached a comfortable balance between member's needs and congregational services. This situation existed for a number of years until it was recognized that a situation existed that needed to be addressed.

For several years, the membership of Temple Jeremiah had remained somewhat constant. The years of membership gain were
labeled "good years" and the poorer ones accepted and/or rationalized because of economic pressures.

Changing economic times were becoming an increasingly important factor in the financial well-being of Temple Jeremiah. The needs of the congregants were changing. The family structure was changing. The demographics of the congregation were changing. The normally small percentage of membership that traditionally supported the majority of the budget was growing smaller as that percentage changed due to the aging of the membership and the increasing presence of the single parent family. Additionally, the volunteer pool was declining. All indicators pointed to one need...increase membership.

The decision to increase the membership of Temple Jeremiah meant that an overall marketing plan needed to be developed. It was determined that the plan was to focus primarily on increasing our membership, but this was not to be our exclusive goal. In addition, we felt that we needed to:

1) identify new markets which would be defined both by age and community;
2) revitalize areas from which we had lost congregants;
3) develop new active membership and leadership;
4) promote a viable format for ongoing membership drives and to provide a base for the future.
Marketing Temple Jeremiah was something that had actually been practiced since the temple's founding, but in an unconscious, unstructured and unevaluated manner. To accomplish our objectives, we needed to develop a cohesive, effective plan that was based on sound marketing fundamentals.

In an attempt to clarify and understand our current position, we began our program with an assessment of our current membership profile. This inventory provided us with a thorough picture of Temple Jeremiah and its member families. Although our basic premise was the need to increase Jeremiah's membership base, it was felt that, in order to determine what groups would be harmonious we had to clarify our existing profile.

Temple Jeremiah represents nineteen communities although only seven are in the immediate North Shore area. Five hundred families have children in school. Sixty five single parent families and two hundred seven have been in the congregation for ten or more years.

We examined our resignations, feeling that by doing so, we could evaluate the reasons that were provided for dropping membership. In reviewing our history and examining the movements in and out of our membership rolls, resignations from Temple Jeremiah seemed to fall into three specific categories. The
first category consisted of families that had moved from the community. These resignations were easily explained and accepted. The second category comprised families who felt that since their children were grown, they no longer needed to affiliate with a congregation and/or affiliation was just too expensive. The last category was a "catch-all" and the reasons for leaving seemed to come from a variety of areas, but they were frequently disguised the real problems by using children and their educational needs not being fulfilled to the parent's satisfaction.

Having developed these demographics we were able to define member profiles that ranged from typically active involved congregational unit to the typical passive "dues only" congregational unit.

The groups we identified were:

1) **active involved**--participated in temple functions and volunteered frequently in a leadership capacity

2) **active uninvolved**--participated in temple functions when asked, but did not volunteer

3) **passive involved**--did not participate in temple functions but wanted to be recognized and perceived themselves as temple leaders

4) **inactive uninvolved**--did not participate and did not
lead--"dues only" members.

Even though we recognized that there was constant movement from one group to another in response to life changes such as weddings, baby naming, deaths, bar/bat mitzvah, confirmation, consecration, religious school enrollment, divorce, we found it useful to develop these labels for specific groups primarily for the sake of clarity.

The profile of the congregational unit has superimposed upon it a fluid structure of financial commitment which changes throughout the working life of the member. The interaction of the behavioral and financial factors may be used to develop a "typical congregational unit" profile to predict behavior at any stage in the congregation's membership continuum.

In addition to these quantitative aspects of membership, Temple Jeremiah attracted and retained its members through a wide variety of qualitative factors. The rabbi had developed a reputation that contributed strongly to the congregation's being perceived as a warm and caring place. The rabbi's visibility and accessibility were factors which congregants and potential members found attractive. This congregational personality manifested itself strongly during Family Festivals, Shabbat Services and life cycle events such as bar/bat mitvahs, weddings, baby namings and even funerals.
The warm and caring personality of Temple Jeremiah permeated the entire staff from the rabbi through the custodians. One of the most commonly heard comments of families who were seeking membership was how welcome and comfortable they were made to feel and how down-to-earth the people were. A new family was always approached and made to feel welcome.

This personality appealed to everyone. The broad cross sections of congregational population reflected this appeal. We have a large group of single parent families, religiously mixed marriages, Jews by choice, senior citizens, young singles and young marrieds.

Jeremiah's membership also included multi-generational families of two distinct types. The first was the three generations that originated from the founders and older long-term members who frequently brought children and grandchildren to temple. The second were newer young member families who brought parents and grandparents.

The social aspect enhanced by Jeremiah's personality was reflected in friendships that were developed among congregant families. Social relationships, friendships and multifamily celebrations were a reflection of this type of involvement. Very often these member families encouraged non-member friends to
affiliate with Jeremiah, therefore, increasing relationships.

These existing social networks were unusual because rather than discouraging involvement in the temple as a whole in favor of a smaller group, they actively encouraged participation. One of the tangible results of this openness was the development of an ongoing chavurah movement. This social behavior was further reinforced by the development of an active sisterhood, brotherhood and youth group.

Part of the inventory we undertook to help us develop directions for our program required a comprehensive look at the physical plant with a view to how it accommodated member activities. The flexible design of the physical plant reflected the personality of the congregation and added to the comfort level. The living room-like lounge made people feel as though they were in a home rather than an institutional setting. And the bright, light, uncluttered sanctuary design enhances the feelings of warmth and encourages participation among worshipers.

The building was designed in a style that not only encouraged its use by members but lent itself to additional usage. Because of its convenient location, extensive parking facilities, flexible design that permits simultaneous meetings by different size groups, Temple Jeremiah had become the focus for many prestigious organizations that did not have their own permanent
facilities.

The movement of these groups through our facility allowed us to come in contact with a large, diverse population and for us to informally share the Temple Jeremiah personality. These people provided conduits of information to their respective groups and communities relating stories of their positive encounters with Temple Jeremiah. Even if these individuals were not prospective members their positive experiences were an asset to our reputation.

Jeremiah also had a reputation for an excellent religious school. Since many families considered this of prime importance the school offered an additional incentive for membership.

Through our inventory, we determined where deficiencies existed and were able to identify the following three groups to whom our program was to be directed:

1) adults 25-30, single or married, no children;
2) adults 35-45 married with school aged children;
3) adults 55+, single and/or married.

The first group, adults between 25-30 represented our hope for the future. Since this group did not presently have children they did not require space in our already heavily enrolled
primary grades of the religious school. The time constraints on the rabbi would be minimal. When this group was motivated they could be groomed for leadership. And finally, this group usually had unaffiliated friends that could be used as a source for potential members.

The second group, adults 35-45, married with school-aged children were committed to the temple and were usually more involved because of their children. They could be counted upon to participate because of the family involvement. Their participation also encouraged their friends to attend religious functions and life cycle events and provided us with additional exposure. This group had traditionally been financially supportive of the temple as well as other philanthropic organizations as they were true "users".

Our preference in this age group was to have intact families. This reasoning was based on the rabbinic counseling demand and financial considerations that many single parent families often required.

Most adults in the 55+, single and/or married group had frequently been at another congregations and knew exactly what they wanted. They made their needs known and they often had more leisure time to reestablish their temple identity. Usually, if they joined, they made a firm commitment. Since they did not
have children in school the temple need not be concerned with a space problem. Financially they had become established and were supportive of the temple. This group also completed the generation cycle by introducing young adults, their children, to congregational life.
The Elements Of Our Marketing Program:

Based on the information generated by the evaluation, the marketing program was begun. We developed a step-by-step process that began with promoting awareness of the temple in individuals of each of the three groups we had targeted and culminating with a signed membership application.

The elements of the process that we used were similar regardless of which audience we were trying to reach. Of primary importance was the need to identify enough positive benefits of membership to make Jeremiah a valuable and important priority. The translation of these elements into membership benefits depended on an interpretation that was relevant to the specific audience's needs.

For example, the rabbi as a resource appealed differently to each of the groups. The younger member viewed the rabbi as an approachable religious leader. One new member even referred to him as a "regular guy". The group with school-aged children saw him as an accessible role model with whom the children could interact. The older groups associated with the rabbi on more of a peer basis.

The steps of the marketing plan we developed for Temple Jeremiah are summarized as follows:
1. developing awareness;
2. meeting individual perspective members;
3. detailing features of congregational life;
4. translation of the temple features into membership benefits;
5. conversion of interest into membership.

**Awareness:**

Developing awareness for the congregation was really communicating a message that was the sum total of all aspects of the temple's operation. Translating that presence to an individual level was achieved by developing messages targeted at our identified audiences. Creating messages to stimulate awareness was done in two general categories: institutional information and individual need fulfillment.

To communicate the institutional personality, an events calendar, bi-weekly bulletins, program handouts and local press releases were all elements whose sum total projected the temple's image. Messages concerning opportunities for fulfilling needs were delivered from one individual to another. Face-to-face encounters among friends or between prospective members and current members, between staff, new member coffees, prospective
member shabbat services were among the ways face-to-face discussions were initiated to explore the needs of members interested in affiliating with the temple.

By fully understanding and utilizing all these available tools, on both institutional and individual levels the temple began to develop the awareness of its value which constituted the first step in our marketing plan.

Meeting Individual Prospective Members:

At this stage of the plan individual effort was important to the communication plan. By now, prospective members had the opportunity to become aware of the temple, its position in the community and what it represented within the continuum of Jewish life. They had been exposed to articles about programs offered by the temple. They might also have, in their own "shopping" been to a religious service and/or an activity at Jeremiah. Now was the time to engage them in a dialogue which allowed them to express their questions and to show how the specifics of the temple could fit their own personal needs.

These dialogues ranged from a brief telephone call to arranging an interview between the family and the professional staff. Organizational vehicles included new and prospective member coffees held at members homes, new and prospective member
shabbats, dinners and/or brunches.

In our experience these were critical steps to attracting new members. Usually a positive interview resulted in a completed membership application. An additional benefit seemed to be that through this process the new members felt more importantly integrated within the temple family. This attitude produced a more active, involved and positive new member family. The time, importance and value spent here by the professional staff in a face to face session cannot be overestimated. Our experience over and over again proved that a positive interview resulted in a positive member association. And conversely those faceless new members who simply sent in applications and checks remained faceless and uninvolved members.

Detailing of Features of Congregational Life:

To achieve a level of awareness, a careful and clear description of the features offered by the temple, data was gathered from brotherhood, sisterhood, youth group, committee chairpeople, religious board, the professional staff and Board of Directors. The summary of the activities of the temple was clearly described and understood in order that they could be successfully communicated to prospective members.
We discovered the in-depth introspective analysis that had been done prior to our actually developing our marketing plan generated information at two different levels. On the one hand it served as the basis of information for the temple to articulate in its search for new members and on a second level it served as a clear summary of the temple's strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, this analysis document was useful to us in both internal and external evaluations.

Translating Features into Membership Benefits:

This step required explaining how the features of the temple could be adapted to the needs and benefits of individual new members. One example of this type of "feature-to-benefit conversion" is that at Jeremiah, family members may request tickets for early High Holiday services for their extended family. The benefits to the members of this feature is that the shorter service allows older members to attend and sit through a complete service; those members with additional family obligations such as baby-sitting problems and family dinners could also participate in a complete service. All family members from the very young child through great grandparents may share this religious experience together.

Another example of how a feature of the temple was defined
in terms on the individual group's needs was the sisterhood. The Temple Jeremiah Sisterhood as a feature was translated into a benefit for each of the three targeted groups in different ways. For the young woman with no children the sisterhood represented a way of integrating herself into temple life and developing new contacts and friendships. The sisterhood allowed the woman with school-aged children to develop new relationships within the congregational family. The woman of the third group used the sisterhood as a means to retain her vitality and commitments in her older years.

When we interpreted institutional features into personal benefits we needed to remember that while there were a finite number of features, the needs of the new families varied widely from person to person. That meant that the discussion of any of the temple's features had to take into account the needs of the individual with whom we were speaking.
Conversion of Interest Into Actual Membership:

The assumption was often made that this last step of converting the individual's interest into membership is automatic. It wasn't and the individual frequently had to be guided into completing the membership application.

Clearly this step did not involve high pressure sales tactics. What it meant was the reinforcement of the decision to join, encouragement to discuss membership with the spouse and help in assessing solutions to the needs which the prospective member had identified.

It also became clear that the prospective new member simply couldn't remember and digest all the information. Therefore, all prospective and new members were given a packet of information and received follow-up telephone calls and/or letters. In the unlikely event that this family did not affiliate, their names were placed in a "tickler file" which was reactivated for follow up on an annual basis. Our experience is that some families may take from 3-5 years to affiliate, although they may attend some temple event in the interim.

Public Relations and Advertising:

Public relations operated on several simultaneous levels to
different audiences. Keeping temple personnel and activities in the public's eye helped generate name recognition while serving to inform the community of events and activities.

Developing a working relationship with the local newspaper editors helped gain acceptance for articles or releases that came from the temple office. An important element in insuring the success of the public relations program was maintaining a constant flow of information to community newspapers, radio and local magazines.

Paid advertising also played an important role in the communications between the temple and the community. Ads in the local newspapers were generally not expensive and were highly effective in targeting information about a program or an event to a specific and, often, receptive audience. The local paper newspaper staff provided layout and graphic assistance to create "eyecatching" and cost effective ads. Personally delivering or following up on the release very often helped convince the editor to include it in an upcoming edition.

It was valuable before planning the ad to review and familia-

rize ourselves with a recent edition of the paper. In this way, we came to better understand the structure of the newspaper and this allowed us to request specific sections of the paper for our target market. We discovered, for example, that people read the
"Community Events" section before the "Religious News" which often tended to be just a boring and tedious listing of dates.

Additional media opportunities that proved useful included Federation newspaper and newsletters, Jewish Community Center bulletins, flyers passed out in religious school, community bulletin boards, local television community news, outdoor marquis signs of local merchants, etc. Personally delivering and following up on the release very often helped convince the editor to include it in an upcoming edition. This kind of personal relationship often resulted in the photo coverage of the event by the local press. As often as possible we included photographs with the releases to make an attractive package that was easy for the newspaper to use.

The most effective way we discovered to insure that the newspaper used the material was to make the release as thorough and as well written as possible. The less work the newspaper had to do on the material the more likely it was to be used.
Conclusion:

At Temple Jeremiah, what began several years ago as a single marketing program with specific objectives, has evolved into an ongoing, multifaceted program that not only effectively helps to establish a presence for the temple within the community but also encourages volunteer participation in our widely varied activities. Our marketing function, both then and now, serves to provide both a challenge for self-examination while encouraging a dynamic expression of the temple's value to its various congregational audiences.

Marketing is a discipline that requires careful examination, precise articulation, and dynamic presentation of the core elements of the congregational community. When done well, a temple marketing program can help the temple achieve a defined set of goals and objectives. The key to marketing success is defining those goals and developing a plan to achieve them. Once we defined marketing as a results-orientated energetic tool to achieve our defined needs, it was accepted as a positive valuable asset in ensuring and maintaining our ongoing congregational success.