SYNAGOGUE MARKETING

A MARKETING AUDIT

BETH EMET THE FREE SYNAGOGUE

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BETH EMET THE FREE SYNAGOGUE

"The Free Synagogue" was inspired by the late Rabbi Stephen S. Wise who founded a synagogue in New York on the principle of free expression by the Rabbi and its membership. With this spirit of freedom in mind, Beth Emet was founded in 1950 under the leadership of Rabbi David Polish. Rabbi Polish is known and respected throughout the world for his leadership. In 1980 Rabbi Polish retired and Rabbi Peter S. Knobel assumed the leadership of Beth Emet, bringing with him the commitment to the traditional values of Judaism. Rabbi Knobel has been a leader in the local and national Reform Movement. In 1990 we celebrated his 10th anniversary at Beth Emet. His congregation enjoyed a gala evening for this special milestone.

Beth Emet has had a unique mix of members, most of whom live in the Evanston Illinois vicinity. They are extremely involved in synagogue life and are in the forefront of social action in the community. They are also very involved in the religious activities of the synagogue.

The mission of Beth Emet is to enrich and expand the Jewish content of members’ lives through worship, study, and fellowship opportunities; to promote the integration of Jewish ethical teachings into members’ daily lives; and to collectively apply these teachings to the betterment of society and the broader Jewish community.

Since 1980 the membership at Beth Emet had been constant at 650 member units. By 1986 it became apparent to the leadership of Beth Emet that there was an opportunity to increase membership 8 to 10%. It was at this point that they began to examine how to achieve this goal.
In that same year, the National Association of Temple Administrators offered a synagogue Marketing Workshop titled "New Approaches to Viewing Synagogue Segmentation and Targeting your Audience", to all temple administrators. The workshop dealt with attracting and retaining members.

The purpose of this workshop was to open the subject of Marketing to the synagogue community, which up to this point, had been reluctant to use a business term as a way of recruiting and retaining members. The workshop was helpful; it brought the subject of marketing to the forefront with lay and professionals. It was meant to be a "teaser", to ask pertinent questions that each synagogue could use as a starting point for further review in their own way. For Beth Emet, it did just that.

The synagogue leadership and membership chair felt that in order to proceed properly, and to be successful it was important to examine the marketing procedures as a means to our end, increasing our membership.

Philip Kotler, a well known author and teacher of marketing for the non-profit sector, defines marketing in this manner. "To survive and succeed, organizations must know their markets, attract sufficient resources, convert those resources into appropriate products, services and ideas and effectively distribute them to various consuming publics."

It became apparent to the planning committee that in order to be successful, an outside expert would be needed to guide us through this process.

The process began quickly after the hiring of a marketing expert well versed in non-profit organizations. It was decided that the best approach would be a short term marketing audit. We needed to know why people joined Beth Emet and why they didn't. From that information we felt we could make changes where necessary and enhance present procedures.
From the audit we also hoped that we would be able to produce a new membership brochure, one that would speak to the Jewish community as to what we stood for—who we were.

It was then that two focus groups were initiated. The purpose was to gain an understanding of the image, perception and awareness of Beth Emet. These focus groups were seen as a foundation for developing a marketing strategy for Beth Emet.

The marketing strategy was intended to suggest an approach to attracting and recruiting new members, and retaining current members. With the focus group findings interpreted and summarized, the marketing professional should be able to suggest possible marketing approaches to staff and lay leaders.

On October 23, 1986, our first focus group was held in the library of the synagogue. The focus group consisted of 12 participants, one non-member (nursery school parents) and eleven members. These twelve had been associated with the synagogue for three or more years. All of them were generally satisfied with the synagogue. The benefit of this initial group was that the participants were knowledgeable "synagogue consumers" who were also very articulate in expressing the strengths and weaknesses of Beth Emet.

FINDINGS

Re. THE INVESTIGATION OF OTHER SYNAGOGUES BEFORE JOINING BETH EMET

There was not extensive investigation of synagogues once in the Evanston area. Investigation, if it occurred at all, was conducted in other communities before participants moved to Evanston. More than actual site visits, individuals relied mostly on advice from friends and neighbors who already belonged to a synagogue in the community.
Printed literature disseminated from synagogues played a minor role in the selection process. Few participants remembered reading printed literature, and having read it, no one claimed to be impressed or convinced by printed material.

Of those who did actively investigate other synagogues, meeting the rabbi and attending a service were regarded as the most helpful in the search for a synagogue.

Re. HOW PARTICIPANTS FIRST LEARNED ABOUT BETH EMET

There was almost a unanimous recollection among participants that they were almost "automatically aware" of Beth Emet's presence upon moving to the community. The physical presence of the synagogue served to remind individuals that the "synagogue was there, right in the middle of things."

Friends, neighbors, and relatives (most of whom were Beth Emet members) were the primary sources of information about synagogues and Beth Emet in particular.

Re. HOW EXTENSIVELY PARTICIPANTS EXPLORED BETH EMET BEFORE JOINING

Again, discussions with friends and relatives who were already Beth Emet members played a more significant role in decisions to join than actual visits to functions or services. If a pattern could be detected, participants did convey the importance of meeting the rabbi before actually joining.

Two participants mentioned meetings with the synagogue's executive director, but did not regard such meetings as important in their final decision to join. (The meetings were seen as a way to get information. A positive experience with the executive director would not necessarily serve to convince that Beth Emet was the right synagogue.)
Re. FACTORS CONSIDERED WHEN CONSIDERING SYNAGOGUE AFFILIATION

Religious affiliation was an important factor in the decision process. Interestingly, the reform affiliation was one that many of the participants would never have considered. Through encouragement of friends and relatives, participants pursued exploration of Beth Emet even though their image of a reform synagogue was mostly a negative one. After experiencing Beth Emet, the negative feelings about a reform synagogue were erased.

Proximity to home, or the sense of community, was another important factor in considering synagogue affiliation. Some participants, who were relatively pleased with their prior synagogue memberships, switched to Beth Emet because it was "part of the community in which we were now living". Residing and belonging to a synagogue in the same community was important to these individuals.

The rabbi and his approach to his pulpit duties was recalled as an important factor in the decision making process.

Again, it was important to participants that friends and/or relatives were already members of Beth Emet when they were considering membership.

Re. DECISIVE FACTORS IN JOINING BETH EMET

Participants repeated the importance of community and friend/relatives who already belonged to Beth Emet. Depending on the structure of their families at the particular time, the availability of nursery school and other programs for children was seen as especially important. For many, it was precisely because "the children were of the age where Jewish identity was important" that prompted them to join Beth Emet.
It was during this part of the focus group where the rabbi was designated as the single most important
decisive factor in joining Beth Emet. It was the rabbi who demonstrated early on to many of the

group a "special warmth and caring for us". Through discussions with the rabbi, participants felt they
would be "very comfortable belonging to Beth Emet".

Re. BETH EMET'S RESPONSE TO INQUIRIES ABOUT MEMBERSHIP

There were no very precise and favorable recollections about the response process to membership
inquiries. Some participants did recall the lack of proper and/or timely follow up to their inquiries.
Interestingly, the improper follow up did not deter them from pursuing membership in Beth Emet (i.e.
the favorable image and desire to join overshadowed any failings in the inquiry follow up).

The discussion about the follow up procedures indicated to participants that there needs to be a
clearer understanding of, and plan for proper follow up to membership inquiries.

Re. SATISFACTION LEVEL OF BETH EMET PARTICIPATION

For the most part, the participants in this focus group were very satisfied members of Beth Emet.
They were active members who felt that Beth Emet gave them the full satisfaction of membership. The
principal benefits of membership as articulated by the group included access to the rabbi, the sense of
community and friendships, religious satisfaction, and the choir.

Participants expressed different areas of dissatisfaction, ranging from membership dues that are too
high to facility related problems. One common and significant area of complaint and concern
concerned the process of penetrating the "Beth Emet family" after joining. Many participants recalled
long periods of feeling alienated and apart from the rest of the membership soon after joining. One

participant recalled two years of agonizing over whether to keep the membership because "we felt so left out from everything". All expressed concern that efforts to bring new members into the fabric of the Beth Emet family after they joined were nonexistent or inadequate. This was an area of concern deemed by the participants of utmost importance.

Re. **WEAKNESSES OF BETH EMET**

The area of dissatisfaction as related above was repeated as the key weakness of Beth Emet. Other areas of weakness mentioned was the recurring problem with finances and building deterioration.

Re. **MEMBERSHIP RETENTION**

It was unanimous among the participants who are Beth Emet members that Beth Emet has become an important part of their lives. There really is no longer a conscious consideration of whether or not to renew membership. It has evolved into an automatic thing. When asked what changes would negatively affect decisions to retain membership, the following factors were cited: a change in rabbi, fees that were unaffordable, drastic changes in synagogue philosophy or orientation, drastic deterioration of facilities.

Re. **COMMUNICATION BETWEEN BETH EMET AND MEMBERS**

Participants referred to the communication from Beth Emet to members as "adequate, but could probably stand improvement." Some participants complained about not knowing about significant events prior to the event. All agreed that communication has improved during the last few years, but that it needs to get better.
Re. THE PROMOTION OF BETH EMET TO PROSPECTIVE MEMBERS

The group was concerned that Beth Emet be promoted in a dignified and sophisticated manner. They acknowledged the aggressive and effective advertising of competitive synagogues and the need for a directed approach to effective promotion. They expressed reservation about any promotional or advertising campaign that was too glitzy or commercial.

Regarding current promotional efforts, participants referred to occasional ads placed in neighborhood newspapers and the current synagogue brochure. They said they were eager to see a professional direction toward any changes in the brochure or general promotional activities.

Re. THE FOCUS GROUP PROCESS

During and after the focus group, participants expressed a very strong appreciation of the process and urged that such groups be convened on a regular basis. Participants felt the discussion highlighted both the strengths and weaknesses of Beth Emet, and they looked forward to next steps in the development of a marketing strategy.

A second focus group was convened soon after the first of the eight participants, six had been members for one year and two for a two year period. Similar questions were asked by the moderator, and answers were in line with group one.

The one area that was more pronounced, was in the inability for some of the newer members to incorporate themselves comfortably into the "Beth Emet family."
An attempt was made to convene a prospective and non-member focus group with no avail. However, calls were made to fifteen non-members, names of people on Beth Emet’s prospective member, basically to question them in a very similar way as had been done in the focus groups. The results of the non-members poll are sketchy, however. The question of "would they consider Beth Emet" had a positive response.

From the data compiled by the three groups, a "Marketing Director Outline" was established.

Re. TO DATE

As related in the focus group findings, the focus group was an unusually productive session. Participants were free with the insights and feelings and were very articulate about benefits of affiliation with Beth Emet. It was felt that the focus group participants accurately represent the larger synagogue membership.

ANALYSIS OF DATA

"Word of Mouth Factor"

The findings of the focus group indicate that word of mouth plays a pivotal role in an individual's decision to join a synagogue.

"The Rabbi" - Given the very positive impression the rabbi makes on prospective and current members, he must continue to make himself available for a heightened exposure to a larger audience.

"Community" - Focus group findings indicate that members feel they are part of a very special community. This sense of community serves to strengthen their own family structures.
"Orientation of New Members" - As part of the marketing plan, a consistent and reliable approach must be developed to properly orient and welcome new members into the "Beth Emet family".

"Communication" - An analysis of current communication must be undertaken, and a program of communication must be developed that fully supports the goals.

Follow Up
The planning committee found the marketing audit very useful to them in proceeding with a membership brochure enhancing the areas that were positive and attempting to change areas of weakness.

In the past five years in response to the audit we have hired a part time membership co-ordinator who tracks prospective members over a three year period, corresponds with them and does follow up on their progress. A membership inquiry form is used by all office personnel when the first contact is made. The information on the inquiry form is helpful as a profile of the prospective member and gives the professionals an opportunity to see what this family may be interested in before they join.

As the synagogue membership increased over the past five years (8%) it became apparent that various sub groups needed different approaches. Attempts have been made to segment these groups by meeting individually with them at the Rabbi's home. As of summer 1991, we have met with young marrieds with children and young marrieds without children, single parents, new member families under 40 and new member families over 40. In 1992 we plan to meet with empty nesters and older adults.

It was mentioned in the audit that the physical plant had deteriorated and this was of great concern to those interviewed. In fall of 1986, the synagogue undertook a $2,000,000 capital campaign. Major
upgrading has been done over the past five years and the building is constantly being examined by a very involved properties committee. Each year dollars are set aside for building improvements and there is now a contingency fund for unexpected major building expenses.

The area that Beth Emet leadership continues to find as an area of concern is the ability of new members to penetrate into the "Beth Emet family". This change will take the mobilization of all existing members being committed to welcoming new people into the synagogue.

Summary

Philip Kotler says, "Marketing is a way to harmonize the needs and wants of the outside world with the purposes and resources and the objectives of the institution".

Beth Emet’s mission is clearly stated in the beginning of this paper. A synagogue without an active membership cannot fulfill its mission. Understanding the marketing process will help us to maintain a viable organization with a diversity of membership.

There are many challenges that face our congregation in the years to come, we feel that we have the staff and lay leadership to meet these challenges.