

Communicating and Connecting Better with the Help of Technology

Introduction

It's time to bring your synagogue into the 21st Century! The rabbis of the Talmud understood the concept of *hilkheta k'vatraei*, the law follows the latest generation of authorities. While technology is certainly not *halakha*, it is becoming a part of the latest generation of critical resources for synagogues. The church world has realized that technology is a tool for ministry. It's time that synagogues also recognize that technology is a means to the ends of enabling congregations to spend more time doing what they do best – touching the lives of their congregants.

Of course, technology can be a loaded word when paired with synagogues. First, technology covers many potential areas of synagogue life, from education to dues billing. Second, for some it conjures up images of distance and aloofness—terms that no one wants associated with their synagogue. But think of technology as another tool for a congregation. When used skillfully, it can be a major asset for synagogues. This article will examine information management and communications—two interwoven areas of technology that can help synagogues more effectively reach and involve members and greatly enhance their purpose and mission.

Congregation Management Software (CMS)

Congregation Management Software (CMS) is a way to keep track of a synagogue's most precious assets – people, money and physical resources. All of these software packages keep basic information about congregants – including names, addresses, phone numbers, email addresses, family relationships, alternate addresses (summer residence or college dorm). Most also track funds including dues, contributions, pledges, gifts and religious school fees.

Good CMS packages connect people and money to each other. So, for example, if Mrs. Cohen calls to find out how much she has paid on her annual dues that information is a just couple clicks away. CMS programs can assist synagogue staff to manage their budgets. Check writing, payroll, monthly or annual individual tax reports – these are all functions easily managed through one software package.

An area underutilized by many synagogues is tracking the non-monetary gifts that members bring to enrich their congregations (time, talent, skills and expertise). Given the high level of achievement of American Jews, this is a substantial loss to congregations. All congregations have members with talents that go untapped simply because they are unknown to the rabbi or executive director. In fact, one study of sixteen synagogues found that only one third of members surveyed reported that their congregation “makes good use of my skills and my abilities.”¹

¹ The Congregations of Westchester. Dr. Amy L. Sales, Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Brandeis University, April 2004.

For instance, if the synagogue wants to produce a video documenting a youth event, the usual options are to ask a parent to produce the video or hire a professional. Parents often provide marginally useful video, and the professional charges a lot of money. With a quick search of the database one can find members who are novice videophiles or perhaps even video professionals. A new resource found! An important by-product is that now volunteerism becomes a proactive task rather than reactive. Rather than having the same stable of volunteers doing all the work the synagogue can now reach out to individuals who might otherwise stay in the shadows but are thrilled to help out.

CMS packages designed for synagogues are expensive. Economies of scale dictate that since there are many more churches than synagogues the software designed for churches is less expensive. Except for some unfamiliar language and the lack of native ability to calculate Jewish calendar dates these church software packages are more than adequate for most synagogues. In fact several low cost (around \$500) church packages offer more functionality than synagogue software costing thousands of dollars. Many of the church CMS packages allow the user to either change the descriptions of fields - baby naming or b'rit instead of baptism date, or offer user-defined fields. As far as Gregorian to Jewish calendar conversion there are several inexpensive software products that can easily do this.

Many CMS packages offer direct access to email. For example if, the rabbi needs to convene a meeting of all members of the ritual committee. With a couple of clicks a search is completed and all members receive the appropriate email message. That is, of course, if the synagogue is getting member email addresses, something lacking in many synagogues. Email is now the preferred method of communication for many Americans. According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, 48 million Americans use email. The days of the "frequent flyer" congregation (those that send lots of flyers each week) have ended. Email is faster, more efficient and cheaper than creating paper copies and using snail mail.

Email content can also offer interactivity. For instance, a notice about an upcoming special Shabbat dinner can go out with a link to a registration form. In a matter of minutes a congregant can read about the event, register and even pay if there's a fee. Think of all the steps this replaces – no phone calls for registration, no sorting the mail for registrations and no checks to deposit. People are also more likely to make a quick decision about participation when they have the option to immediately register rather than putting the notice on their desktop pile where it's inevitably forgotten.

Another method of communication closely linked to email is a synagogue website. Many congregations use (or should we say misuse) their websites as an online brochure, and miss some of the major capabilities of the Internet. Congregational websites need interactivity. Websites are an excellent source of information – both for and from synagogue members. With simple forms synagogues can get all kinds of feedback from their members. Imagine the CMS scenario above in which a member wants to know how much they've paid on a pledge. Now imagine that they could get this same information in a matter of seconds through their synagogue's website! This would require no

interactivity with synagogue staff. For the security conscious, offering information this way is actually more secure than by mail or fax.

Another feature of a congregational website is online transactions. For example, if your synagogue calendar is online and lists all events, interested participants could click on an event, read about it, register and pay if appropriate. Some congregations are even taking donations online. A synagogue could have a page of all the *tzedakah* options listed and explanations of each. Congregants could select the fund to which they want to contribute and make their donation by credit card or automated check draft. While these transactions cost the synagogue a small fee, churches have seen an increase in giving by offering online options. Many people are just more likely to donate money if they can do it immediately, when the “spirit moves.”

Does your synagogue have a Judaica shop? Why not offer items online?

According to the Pew study cited above, the most frequently cited use of congregational websites was to attract new visitors. Many people now “shop” for congregations online before they visit a new city. And whether we like it or not online appeal is important. In a survey done by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, “People who use the Internet to ‘shop’ for a church home will likely be turned off by a poorly produced church website, while a slick, interactive site could help draw new members in if a church invests the right resources.” This is especially true for younger adults, the very people that synagogues seek to attract.

A Blueprint for Getting Started

With a sense of how technology might help a synagogue better communicate with and connect to members, how might a synagogue get started? Here are a few basic steps:

1. Create a Technology Team

What is a Technology Team? Well, it is *not* a collection of techno-geeks. Rather it is a group of people charged with determining what your synagogue wants to do with technology; prioritizing and shaping these wants into needs; creating a specific plan and timeline; following through with the purchase, installation and training needed to make the plan a reality; monitoring and evaluating the newly-acquired technology as it is put into use; and doing it all over again.

Why create a Technology Team? Because there is a lot to do to use technology wisely. Using the Technology Team approach works!. It enlists the ideas and support of all aspects of a congregation as it plans how to use new technology tools. A Technology Team also builds wide congregational support. It gets a lot of stakeholders involved. A Technology Team creates new opportunities for volunteer involvement, especially for younger members. That way your plan is not just one person’s idea.

Make sure that all major program and administrative areas are represented on this Team. These are the stakeholders—the people that have a stake in what happens.. The Technology Team should have members that represent both the staff and the central program areas. Staff representatives might include the rabbi and cantor, executive director, secretary, religious school principal and various program directors. Don't forget to include financial secretaries, youth program leaders and committee leaders from your board.

2. Use professional help

This seems a sore subject for many congregations, but experience has confirmed the anecdotal belief that volunteers aren't always the best implementers. Professional help used wisely and judiciously, will actually save money. There are individuals who can assess your current usage and then make implementation recommendations. They can suggest vendors for both hardware and software and manage the project. This help on the front side always saves money – it saves a congregation from making mistakes, most often errors of omission. This is not to say there isn't a place for volunteers. Quite the contrary, volunteer help in conjunction with professional integrators is the most effective way of handling a congregation's technology needs.

3. Training, training, training

Include more training than you think you will need. A common and disheartening scenario for congregations is budgeting only for necessary hardware and software, having it installed and then discovering no one knows how to use it. Make sure staff and volunteers have adequate access to initial and ongoing training.

4. Talk with other congregations

There is no better resource than the church or synagogue down the street that's done just what you are going to do. Find out how successful they are at using hardware, software, consultants and training venues. Be sure to talk with more than one person – often the rabbi's perspective is much different than the administrator's!

5. Buy just what you need

Don't worry about technology advancing past you. If you purchase current hardware and software, it's likely that you will still be using the same equipment 3-5 years from now. Some upgrading will be necessary along the way, especially with software. The personal computer industry is in large measure governed by the consumer who plays high-tech games. Unless your staff is going to be playing games in the office, today's technology will work just fine!

6. Get all your records on computer and back up your data

It is safe and secure to store things on a computer. Actually, it is more secure storing data on a computer than on paper. But, accidents do happen and data can be corrupted or lost. If you have a systematic program for backing up data, you'll be back in business in a matter of hours, rather than days.

Concluding Thoughts

Integrating technology into the culture of a synagogue is not a small task. It is truly a culture change. This article has provided a blueprint of how a congregation can begin to make this culture change and some specific examples of technology use. A key to making technology a part of the congregation's culture is to understand that wise technology use requires an ongoing commitment. With some thoughtful planning and skilled advice – and maybe a little prayer – technology can reward synagogues with greater connections of members and prospective members.

Further resources for technology planning:

- *40 Days and 40 Bytes: Making Computers Work for Your Congregation* by Aaron Spiegel, Nancy Armstrong and Brent Bill, available at amazon.com and alban.org
- *Introduction to Technology Planning: Why and How to Start a Technology Plan*, <http://techsoup.org/howto/articlepage.cfm?ArticleId=535&topicid=11> (TechSoup is an excellent technology resource for non-profits)
- *Picking the Right Church Management Software: What Do You Want To Do? The Top 50 Things to Ask* by Nancy Armstrong, <http://www.centerforcongregations.org/PickingTop50.asp>
- *Picking the Right Church Management Software: Thirty Congregational Culture Questions* by Nancy Armstrong, <http://www.centerforcongregations.org/PickingThirty.asp>
- *The Congregational Resources Guide*, <http://congregationalresources.org/ShowCat.asp?CN=1&SCN=17>
- *Jewish Networking: Linking People, Institutions, Community*, Hayim Herring and Barry Shrage. The Susan and David Wilstein Institute of Jewish Policy Studies, Fall, 2001.

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