



Strengthening Community with Social Media

By Lisa Colton

Congregations are about relationships, which means they need to be where the people are. And these days, people are on social media. In 2011, approximately 169 million people in the U.S. and Canada used Facebook monthly (Facebook statistic), and more than half of users are engaging with the platform at least daily (Pew Internet and American Life Study).

Recognizing the power of social media, many congregations have launched Facebook pages and developed their voices on Twitter—some to great success, others meandering, and still others struggling to wrap their heads around these new tools.

What about your temple? How can *your* congregation use social media effectively to engage members and potential members?

1. Social Media is About People

Social media is not about technology; it's about people, relationships, and communication. Think about it. You'd never say that talking with your daughter is "about your larynx" or that having a conversation with an old friend is "about the telephone." You'd speak about what was said and how the conversation affected you, your relationship, your life.

In person or on the telephone, you

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are used to employing facial expressions or changes in intonation to communicate. Most of us are still learning these social nuances when communicating on Facebook or Twitter. How do we learn to use *social* media in *social* ways?

Today we are working in an *attention economy*. Now that everyone is both a producer and consumer of media, we are all struggling to filter out the content blitz vying for our attention, and focus instead on the information that is most valuable and can help us lead happier, more satisfying, and successful lives.

In the old "one-size-fits-all" communications paradigm, messages were broadcast in one direction to large num-

bers of people. Let's call this the "hub and spokes" model. The synagogue as the institution sits in the center, sending out information and solicitations to members or prospects. When the institution is perceived as the "center of the universe," and when the rest of us are, by necessity, prioritizing our limited time and attention, if we perceive an "institutional agenda" at work (to get us to become a member, give a donation, attend an event), we are less likely to offer the sender our attention.

In the new paradigm, individuals, families, and community are the center; the institution exists to support them and their shared goals; and the institution's messages are tailored to the community of individuals in order to earn each person's attention. From the user perspective, when the institution is helping me clarify and achieve my goals, that's worth paying for with time, attention, and dollars. Sign me up.

Given that we are trying to strengthen relationships among synagogue members and the community as a whole, social media is much more than a soapbox; it is an opportunity to promote knowledge sharing, provide a platform for communal conversation, and add value, convenience, accessibility, and sometimes humor. Like the biblical Abraham welcoming the strangers as they approached his open tent, social media is a modern way of being open and welcoming.

In short, social media technology isn't a free bullhorn to promote your events and ask for contributions. Using the new tools in the old way is not the means to build trust, strengthen relationships, and get attention.