

# Our Challenge: The Under-Demand for Jewish Life

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To “win” in the Jewish community of tomorrow we must continuously imagine what people will need, or what will make a difference in their lives.

by Marc N. Blattner

At the May 2007 national Jewish Federation Leadership Summit, I presented a [paper](#) about lessons the Jewish community should take from Target (the department store). I discussed *then* the consumer nature of the Jewish community and outlined what I believe are the four greatest challenges facing Jewish communal life: *cost*, *convenience*, *value* and *meaning*. Today, I read more and more from others about “Jewish consumerism.” The problem is many still do not want to accept it.

I agree that the Jewish people are more than just a group paying for goods and services. We have a history, culture, religion, tradition, teachings and far more. But let’s be honest. So much of Jewish life has become a “fee for service” model that we have created our own consumer mentality. Examples include synagogue dues (and add more for funerals, *simchas*, supplementary school), camp fees, JCC membership, day school tuition, senior care – and the list goes on.

Our challenge today is that we have entered a period of too much “Jewish supply” and far too little “Jewish demand.”

The American Jewish community was initially built on insular neighborhoods and the inability of Jews to gain access to a full range of programs and services in the general community (community centers, country clubs, teaching hospitals, etc). In response, we developed our own parallel “service system” with Jewish-specific social service, cultural, educational and communal organizations. Today, however, outside of Jewish ritual practice, Jewish (formal and informal) education, and free Israel travel, almost everything the Jewish community has to offer can be found elsewhere. And, in fact, people are increasingly going outside our network for what they perceive as higher quality and more convenient programs and services. Therefore, as Jewish communities struggle to engage more people with a full complement of **choices**, how do we compete? *And should we?*

We live in a world where one’s neighborhood is as much virtual as physical, and in a time when friends and other key influencers are no longer just our Jewish neighbors. For these realities, the traditional Jewish supply-centric “we have all of this to offer you” model has few answers. We are in an era of oversupply – significantly more Jewish activities, services and organizations exist than there is demand. This supply continues to grow with numerous innovative Jewish projects.

It’s time to align our strategies to understand *who and where the markets are, what causes them to make their involvement decisions, and whether there is real interest in what is being offered.*

Market research – not old assumptions and anecdotes (the plural of anecdote is *not* data) – must be used to identify trends and patterns forming in our communities. Market knowledge and quantifiable data will enable the Jewish community to align and change current strategies, resource allocations and services. We still base much of our Jewish communal structure on history and nostalgia. In fact, how different does the current Jewish landscape look than it did in 1985, even with the creation of many new programs?

One of my greatest struggles as a Jewish communal professional is to balance the historic missions of Jewish organizations with the realities of today. I certainly believe we have an obligation to provide “Jewish values based services” in our communities. However, what percentage of clients at “our” social service agencies (who often proclaim they are overwhelmed with clients) are Jewish? The same holds true for Jewish community centers, pre-schools, and nursing homes. Even Jewish day schools are looking at actively recruiting non-Jews to increase enrollment. I am not against serving non-Jews, yet, when you take them out of the “case load,” how much demand is actually coming from the Jewish community?

We learn that today’s most successful companies (i.e. Amazon, Apple, Google) are based on *what customers want*,

*rather than what suppliers offer. Demand - not our kishkes - drives success!*

I learned in school that *Value = Benefits/Price*. From the customer's perspective, value has two components – benefits delivered and the price paid to obtain them. Two “valued” ventures in Jewish life today are PJ Library and Birthright Israel. One continues to grow due to the demand of young parents across the continent, while the other's success has, unfortunately, created long waiting lists. What is the common denominator of these programs – *THEY ARE FREE* to participants. I understand that the Jewish community cannot provide everything at no cost (the issue of “free” is currently being debated), but price matters ... word of mouth matters ... and “what is in it for me” matters.

Today – **consumers consume and move on**. We do it in our own (Jewish) lives. You offered me a free trip or free books with no strings attached .... thank you. Now, many will continue to participate in Jewish life and expand their involvement, but many “take the money and run.” We are in an era of *episodic Judaism* – I get what I want when I need it. It is no longer a life-long commitment. Look at JCCs and their annual membership churn of 25% or more. Look at synagogue affiliation of families following bar/bat mitzvah.

There are those who will say Judaism and Jewish identity are about “meaning.” But for too many, Jewish services are just a commodity. Thus, the foundation for any successful pricing strategy is to *price to demand, not to markets*. Even in those cases where participation fees have been greatly reduced or even made free (i.e. Jewish summer camps, day schools) have we seen the dramatic growth in numbers we expected? Or, are there just a finite number of people interested in Jewish life in the way our communities are currently structured?

At the same time, Jewish communities are more geographically dispersed, while Jewish institutions are often centralized in the “old Jewish” area. Convenience becomes an issue. People are no longer willing to “drive the extra mile(s)” for a Jewish experience, and, instead, just look for the “best” alternative nearby. If communal services are not within a manageable distance from where one lives, people opt out. The demand for what we offer may not be worth the mileage.

The question we must ask ourselves is do we continue to “supply it all” or do we merge and streamline services? “Full” is better than “mostly empty.” This is no different than how the airline industry works. When is the last time you flew on a half-empty flight? Think of the resources our community can save and **reinvest into those programs with considerable demand**.

Today, almost every significant decision people make begins with online research. People have learned to compare thousands of products online. The same holds true in Jewish communities. I always chuckle when I hear Jewish communal colleagues say their organization needs more members, participants, or clients (which is often less about mission and, instead, code for additional revenue).

*Do any of us truly believe that people cannot find those Jewish experiences or organizations if they wanted to? Or, have community members already voted with their wallet and feet to go elsewhere? Maybe 30% (if that high) of people actually enter the doors of our current Jewish communal institutions and organizations.*

Jewish “consumers” are **talking** more than ever before – and in the process, conveying enormous amounts of information about themselves – their desires, tastes, interests, dislikes, needs. They do so in person, over the phone, via email and social media. Is the Jewish community truly listening and learning?

To “win” in the Jewish community of tomorrow we must continuously imagine **what people will need, or what will make a difference in their lives**. Jeff Bezos, CEO of Amazon recently said, “Amazon innovates by starting with the customer and working backwards. That becomes the touchstone of how we invent.” Customer focus is the central cultural issue of today. Identifying trends and recognizing patterns forming in our communities among different customer segments will enable us to gather data about what those customers *will* want. Look at the success of Amazon and others with predictive analysis and modeling. This is 2013, yet I feel like we operate as if it is 1995.

Jewish communities still try to be all things to all people and, instead, end up being relevant to very few. That was the strategy of the past, and it is a recipe for failure now as demand (and dollars) flattens or declines. Real future success will stem from the combination of understanding demand and *then* creating the right “product,” package, price, and message.

**Our challenge as a Jewish community today is not the amount of offerings** – it is the fact we have, unfortunately, limited demand for what is currently being offered.

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