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COVER: High Holiday Marketing Goes High Tech

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Columnist

The biggest ticket of the year in synagogue life is for High Holiday services. Synagogues fill their pews with members, and nonmembers try to get a seat. Whoever sits in the sanctuary, most synagogues rely on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur ticket sales as an important revenue source for their yearly operating budget.

Enter the Atlanta Jewish Experience.

This free High Holiday learners service hasn't earned a nickel, operating via contributions from supporters. But for four years it has brought in people who are moved by the group's untraditional approach to tradition, offering "fewer prayers, more perspective, Q&A and more." This year AJE even offers a free book on the Jewish holidays.

The question is, what has moved these people, including a young contingent, through the doors of Congregation Beth Jacob, "the Orthodox Synagogue for All Jews"? The answer is a combination of strong marketing, inspiring lay leaders and great word of mouth on the street. And this year an added boost comes from high-tech support out of New York.

Marketing-wise, the theme this year is "You can't fake a genuine experience," as the service features two laymen who have been positioned as the "Genuine Fake Rabbis." They even have their own seal of approval attesting to this self-proclaimed certification. The testimonials of attendees show that the lay rabbis live up to their "genuine" label.

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The Atlanta Jewish Experience's Joel Alpert (left) and "Genuine Fake Rabbi" Matt Lewis greet people at the Jewish Festival on Aug. 26, introducing them to the free High Holiday learners services at Congregation Beth Jacob.

Their Web site, www.AtlantaJewishExperience.org, has gone higher tech, featuring a quick, fun video on every page, online friend referral and an instant online ticket, personalized, with a map to services. More on the tech in a moment.

The "genuine" lay leaders mix explanation of tradition with inspiration that's personal and traditional. Matt Lewis is an anesthetist who "promises not to put you to sleep," and Kivi Bernard is a diamond-dealing outdoorsman and lecturer from South Africa who promises not to bring his machete to services. OK, I feel safer already.

They've created a safe place for participating and learning in bite-size pieces, including an informal "Ask the Genuine Fake Rabbis Anything on Judaism" session, and they even encourage questions during services.

Word of mouth started to spread farther last year, based on the Genuine Fake Rabbi handle. A reporter from The Associated Press picked up on this idea for the advertising and wrote an article that appeared in 30 publications across the country, including Long Island's Newsday, The Miami Herald and Forbes. The Genuine Fake Rabbi idea stuck. This year, people from all Jewish backgrounds - Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist and unaffiliated - have inquired to see whether the GFRs were coming back so they could, too.

The added boost for 5768 - which "cometh from the Lord," or at least from an organization in New York - comes in the form of more sophisticated technology via Search Engine Optimization (SEO). When people search for a term like "High Holiday Services Atlanta" on Google, they'll probably find a link to the national site www.NoMembershipRequired.com, which directs them to a city-by-city list of services (tell folks in other cities about them). The Web site has been developed by Discovery, a Jewish educational and social organization.

The terms that people search for can be purchased - they are called "adwords" or pay-per-click - and when someone searches for one of those terms, a link to the No Membership site appears on the "matches found" page. The organization has tested and tracked the terms people tend to use and has bought rights to appear on the first page of search results for them (it's a commodities market, where the buyer pays per click). This search program, paid for by Discovery, has been a good source of referrals for the Atlanta Jewish Experience. As targeted marketers, we recommend both paid and "organic" (free) searches, depending on the company's needs.

Wherever you go to synagogue, whether you pay for a ticket to help support the yearly budget or get a freebie, may you have an inspiring experience that leads to a greater appreciation of our special mutual heritage. L'shanah tovah!

Joel Alpert of MarketPower works with business, consumer and nonprofit marketers. His company, at www.MarketPowerOnline.com, specializes in targeted marketing, branding and making sure that strategy leads to tactical results. He has worked with the AJE since 2005.