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A portrait of Linda Wenger, a woman with long, wavy blonde hair, wearing a black blazer over a black top, gold hoop earrings, and a gold necklace. She is looking slightly to the right of the camera with a neutral expression. Her arms are crossed.

Social Power

Viral online marketing rejuvenates
the Jewish National Fund's donor base

Linda Wenger,
director of marketing
and communications



By Amy Syracuse

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Established in 1901, the original purpose of the Jewish National Fund (JNF) was to enable the purchase of a Jewish state. Its early fundraising techniques ranged from the sale of JNF stamps and memorial trees planted in Israel to blue collection boxes placed in Jewish homes. The organization has been highly successful during its 106 years, playing a vital role in land-acquisition efforts, community development and the afforestation of Israel. But a good deal has changed over the course of its history and so, too, has JNF.

In addition to traditional projects, such as tree planting, the organization today conducts extensive advocacy and education campaigns and spearheads diverse ecological initiatives in Israel—everything from sustainable watershed development to fighting desertification. Importantly, JNF's marketing department has played a vital role in

PHOTO: MICHAEL FALCO, NEW YORK, N.Y.



Linda Wenger,
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and communications

the foundation's transformation, spreading the word about its environmental leadership and continuously mining another resource that's not so easily renewed: loyal donors.

"Our history is a plus and a minus," says Linda Wenger, JNF's director of marketing and communications. "Every time you tell the story, people are moved by it. But what does that have to do with people today and how do you turn that into dollars for new projects? It's been our mission to change the perception of the Jewish National Fund with the Jewish population across America."

Building for the Future

The challenges JNF has faced in achieving this goal are numerous. Just four years ago, the organization's average donor was over 65 years old, says Wenger. These were primarily people who came to JNF to purchase trees planted in Israel to memorialize loved ones who had passed away. And while these individuals were an important part of JNF, the organization knew that, alone, they did not provide a solid foundation on which to build a dynamic future.

"We have transitioned to a major donor organization that does huge projects in Israel," Wenger explains. "We've created reservoirs. We do water treatments and build new communities, bypass roads and parks. ... The people who are 65 and older will still come to us to buy trees—that's fine—but it's not really who we want to be today."

To complicate matters, like all nonprofits, JNF operates on a lean budget—one that has little room for blockbuster advertising expenditures. "It makes e-mail and the Web even more important—especially in reaching new people," Wenger observes.

For these reasons, viral online marketing techniques seemed a natural fit for JNF's fundraising and donor acquisition goals. "Getting your donors to do fundraising for you ... [is] a really important way for us to build our database and to get our message out," she adds.

Going Viral

JNF initially tested the viral



JNF extends the reach of its e-mail newsletter by inserting several links within the body of the e-mail that encourage recipients to send the newsletter to

the young Jewish community."

But the real test of JNF's viral online marketing power occurred from October 2006 to January 2007, when the organization

implemented a viral e-mail fundraising initiative in support of its Alternative Spring Break program. Launched in 2005-2006, Alternative Spring Break is an educational project that sends more than 200 college students, graduate students and other young adults under the age of 30 to volunteer in northern Israel during the month of March—a time most students traditionally reserve for beachside lounging in hot spots like Key West and Cancun.

While visiting Israel, the students undertake volunteer projects in support of JNF campaigns. For example, in 2007 participants painted bomb shelters, cleared and replanted forests, and rebuilt parks. In addition, they brought "some hope, warmth and good wishes to the communities that were hit during the war last summer," says Wenger.

During 2006, the inaugural year of JNF's Alternative Spring Break, students were asked to pay a \$650 fee to underwrite some of the cost



To mobilize fundraising for JNF's Alternative Spring Break, program participants created individual fundraising pages through the JNF Web site. They then uploaded their personal e-mail address books, and letters were sent to contacts directing them to the new pages where they could make a donation.

of their trip. The balance of expenses (the total cost of the trip is approximately \$2,200 per student) was funded by private donors. In 2007, however, JNF switched tactics. It required participants to raise at least \$800 toward their trip by creating a fundraising page on JNF's Web site and soliciting online donations from friends and family.

"We didn't just want kids whose parents had the money or whatever the case might be," explains Wenger. "We wanted kids to take responsibility for their own participation."

Leveraging Technology

The Alternative Spring Break viral fundraising program was executed using TeamRaiser™ software from Austin, Texas-based provider Convio. TeamRaiser is designed to help nonprofits tap into constituents' personal networks and mobilize volunteers. The solution primarily is used to support events for which advance fundraising is required, but Tad Druart, Convio's director of corporate communications, notes that some innovative nonprofit groups have used the application to sell virtual raffle tickets via viral e-mail marketing.

The beauty of TeamRaiser is that it allows prospective Alternative Spring Break participants to create their own fundraising page on www.jnf.org, using an online template, "Help" tools and plenty of default options. Users who wish to be more creative also have the option of adding their own text and photographs to personalize the page.

Once the page is completed, participants can upload contacts from their e-mail address books. Then, the TeamRaiser system automates key aspects of the fundraising process—sending out letters to participants' contacts directing them to the new Web page, updating fundraising progress on participants' homepages, not to mention sending out reminders to donate before the fundraising deadline, and distributing thank-you e-mails when donations are received.

Wenger notes that the platform is ideal for campaigns involving the "MySpace generation"—individuals who are comfortable online and enthusiastic about speaking their minds. Alex Wettreich, Convio's manager of client services, concurs, adding that the most important ingredient in successful TeamRaiser campaigns is actually the emotion displayed by participants.

"For people who really are passionate about the organization, it is almost the best way for them to share that," he says. "However powerful your generic appeal is, it cannot compare to someone the recipient knows personally sharing why they care so much about a cause."

On the back-end, TeamRaiser is supported by an online database that captures key information about participants' online activities and synchronizes it with offline databases. This functionality enabled JNF staff members to monitor participants' engagement with the viral marketing functions—for example, to determine which participants had created a custom page or sent e-mails out to friends and family—and to provide suggestions or encouragement based on that information to maximize the effectiveness of participants' fundraising.

Wettreich says the latter are critical to executing effective viral campaigns. "It is a relatively new paradigm, so not everyone knows how to make the best use of it."

Adds Wenger: "We're trained to be fundraisers; our donors are not. We have to give them the tools where they can ask on our behalf in as easy and nonthreatening a way as possible—to make it as personal of an experience as possible, and as rewarding

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— Mitchel Rosenzweig, chief financial officer

and fun of an experience as possible. If it's fun, they'll come back and do it again."

The Results

Of the more than 370 individuals who created Alternative Spring Break fundraising pages, 201 raised at least \$800 and 132 exceeded the minimum requirement. According to Wenger, on average, participants sent out 37 fundraising inquiries to friends and family and received donations from nine respondents. A total of \$216,806 was raised through the initiative, with one industrious student generating more than \$8,000 for the Alternative Spring Break program by hosting her own fundraising event.

The effort also proved an invaluable public relations tool for the organization, attracting the attention of MTV executives seeking compelling stories for their "Amazing Break" coverage of young people working to make a difference during their spring vacations. MTV featured Alternative Spring Break and JNF in its 2007 "Amazing Break" programming, devoting a full five minutes to telling the story of JNF's student trip to Israel. The organization has since showcased this coverage on its Web site and in its e-newsletters. It also plans to use the video as a marketing tool for raising funds in 2008, says Wenger.

Perhaps most importantly, however, JNF has found that the Alternative Spring Break experience itself is something of a viral marketing tool. According to Wenger, most participants emerge from the experience deeply touched by their time in Israel.

"Getting people to come to Israel is the No. 1 way to make someone a JNF person, to get them into the JNF family," she stresses. "Once you've seen Israel ... [and] what JNF is doing on the ground, you can't walk away without being inspired about wanting to help and be part of it."

As a result, many Alternative Spring Break alumni have become ambassadors for JNF and its mission in their day-to-day lives, introducing their peers and family—people JNF might not have otherwise reached—to the organization.

"We basically have a group of individuals who are out there, reaching out and adding new donors to our system," says Mitchel

Rosenzweig, the Jewish National Fund's chief financial officer. "Yes, they're adding them for the specific purpose of ... going to Israel, but when that student comes back and has had such a positive experience of helping the people in Israel, you don't know what that can mean to a [donor]."

It's 'Infectious'

In the short time they've been a part of JNF's marketing program, the Alternative Spring Break fundraising initiative and other online viral marketing strategies have impacted dramatically the organization's present, not to mention its future.

"It's given us the opportunity to expand our donor base," says Rosenzweig. "We're seeing that in terms of the growth in contributions and the amount of involvement by people in JNF."

What's more, the organization's average donor age has dropped: it's now 61 for offline donors and 52 for online donors. Meanwhile, the average age of donors and nondonors in JNF's database is now 56.

Wenger notes that the increase in younger JNF supporters has been a tremendous boon to the organization's online fundraising performance. "Before, they were mostly \$18 tree sales making up our [Internet] donations. We're now getting some major donations online of \$5,000 and \$10,000."

As one might expect, enthusiasm about such achievements—and the potential for further growth via viral online marketing—has been, well, infectious. In fact, as of this writing, Wenger and her team were preparing to launch a new campaign that will see JNF's board presidents and members reach out to their personal contacts across the country using TeamRaiser. And this means plenty of new audiences for the organization's well-established history.



To help tap into a younger audience, JNF passed along a YouTube.com video created by two young supporters to its JNF e-mail newsletter subscribers as well as posted the footage to its Web site.

"The Web has truly given us the opportunity to tell our story," Rosenzweig says. "People hear about the incredible things that we're doing and how we're involving young people today and they want to be involved." ■

Amy Syracuse is a London-based freelance writer, who wrote about Global Water Foundation's fundraising via the Web site Second Life for the July 2007 issue.



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