

What's Your #ish? - Campaigning Through Active Listening

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By now, many of you have probably seen the **Jewish Federations of North America #ish** campaign.

JFNA, with the help of its marketing agencies, is asking you (especially if you're 18-36) to share your #ish - something about what being Jewish means to you - on Twitter, Facebook, or their own **microsite**.

In return for each #ish shared, Federation promises to donate 25 cents, up to a total of \$50,000. But the campaign isn't about fundraising - the total budget of the campaign is about 250k-300k. It's about branding and awareness and reaching out to young adults.

It's an interesting strategy.

Derek Shevel, creative director at Taxi New York, says it is important that the campaign “can’t feel too much like advertising,” because “you’ve got to open up a conversation where” the members of the target audience “feel they’re controlling it.”-New York Times, May 16th, "**You Don't Have to Be Jewish to Love this Campaign**"

This approach resonates with research on the Jewish identity of young people. In "**Grande Soy Vanilla Latte with Cinnamon, No Foam...**" **Jewish Identity and Community in a Time of Unlimited Choices**, for example, discusses how the cultural emphasis on choice, even to a consumeristic extent of defining and having things exactly as you like them, has trickled down into the way that young adults approach their conception of themselves as Jews. "What's your #ish?" seems tailored to appeal to that impulse. It's personal, not institutional.

The study also found that, in fact, young Jews have less awareness and feel little connection to even major Jewish institutional organizations - a state that this campaign is meant to address, at least with regard to Jewish Federations.

In some ways, then, this campaign seems to be exactly what is necessary for its time. From a historical perspective, it's an interesting development.

It's been over a hundred years since the federation of Jewish organizations into unified bodies was the gleam in some of our ancestors' eyes.

In 1909, Jacob H. Hollander published "**The Unification of Jewish Communal Activities**," in which he lauded the new movement of federation of local charities into unified bodies as a brilliant and necessary evolutionary step towards increasing efficiency of fundraising and service delivery and reducing labor redundancy (the piece also contains an interesting discussion about the status of Russian Jewish immigrants in

American communities).

Joseph Jacobs' 1917 article, **The Federation Movement in American Jewish Philanthropy** is a good source for an early history of the federation movement. It recaps the earliest federation processes, starting in Boston, and reflects on federation's benefits for communities. Its focus is not only on efficiency, but also, and in contrast to the modern individualistic take, cooperation. It actually uses the word "impersonal" in its praise for the new system

...the whole plane of Jewish philanthropy, it is claimed, is raised by this more **dignified** method of collecting and distributing the means by which charity lives. Appeals can no longer be made on the ground of personal friendship, but are purely of a spiritual and philanthropic character...A more democratic spirit is also claimed to be evolved by federation. Each institution, however small its income, has its representative on the Central Board, and can feel that it is performing a useful function in the communal organism. When occasions arise on which a general appeal has to be made for charitable purposes, it would perhaps come with more force from a central body representing the consensus of philanthropic activity in the community, than if it emanated from the directors of a single institution. To all these claims is added the signal one, that the whole tone of charitable activity is raised to a higher atmosphere when personal interests and rivalries are eliminated in favor of a more **impersonal** and altruistic method of collection and disbursement.

The enterprise seems pervaded by a very bureaucratic spirit that seems both out of sync with today's zeitgeist, but also somewhat inspiring. For a more detailed look at the intricacies of bureaucracy involved in the organization of these ventures, there's this 1919 article, **Federation for the Support of Jewish Philanthropic Societies of New York City**, which tells the story of how Manhattan and the Bronx Jewish agencies confederated (Brooklyn was way ahead of them). It includes the bylaws of the organization, funding and voting rights information (\$10k of contributions got an agency one vote), a list of the New York machers involved (including Jacob H. Schiff), and more.

Times change, institutions change with them, and above all else, marketing must keep up. I hope that the #ish campaign will be successful at keeping the Federation system, which was brilliant from its very beginnings, lively and relevant for future generations. I also hope that the beauty of its original spirit of efficient communitarianism can also be remembered and sustained. But of course it makes sense that a BJPA #ish would include bringing historical data and wisdom to present and future Jewish undertakings.