

ISRAELIS SUPPORTING ISRAELIS

Back in 1998, when “The Spirit of Israel” launched its very first fundraising campaign in Israel, nobody expected the television commercial to generate any response. Twelve years later, the organization’s database now includes 240,000 donors and it has played a significant role in changing the Israeli culture of giving / Rebecca Kopans

When that first commercial aired on February 26th, 1998, even Joe Dushansky, The Spirit of Israel’s Executive Director, was surprised to discover the next morning that 121 people had pledged a contribution. Just as he suspected, the Israeli public was receptive to the concept of social responsibility and eager to participate in the effort to help the country’s weakest citizens.

The Spirit of Israel, founded by the Jewish Agency and Keren Hayesod, raises funds and resources in Israel for social causes and instills new values of involvement, volunteerism and social responsibility in Israeli society. It supports a large variety of different projects, including boarding schools for at-risk children, the Youth Futures program for disadvantaged youth, assistance for lone soldiers and projects to improve the quality of life for Israel’s elderly population, many of whom live below the poverty line. The Spirit of Israel has also focused on aiding indigent Holocaust survivors.

Light-years behind

“Israelis are among the most generous people in the world,” asserts Dushansky, “but the culture of philanthropy is light-years behind. It simply isn’t part of the culture.” He lays much of the blame on unaccommodating income tax laws, which limit the amount of tax deductible contributions and don’t encourage large organizations to give to charities. Unlike most other countries, there are no Israeli endowment funds. In fact, says Dushansky, “large contributions are met with immediate suspicion, which is why we don’t reveal the names of our donors.”

Early on, the ‘Spirit’ team understood the importance of branding and marketing. “When you start out from zero, you can’t just march in to the offices of big donors - they don’t know

who you are,” says Dushansky. The organization’s name was conceived by the late Ehud Manor, one of Israel’s preeminent songwriters, who was also one of the first two volunteers.

In the early days, marketing efforts focused on direct mail campaigns, which at the time was considered an innovative method of fundraising for non-profits. The results were “fantastic,” recalls Dushansky. They mailed one million direct mail letters every year, targeting “anyone who could make a contribution of at least NIS 10 (around \$2).”

Average Israelis proved eager to give, and many continue to contribute to The Spirit of Israel every year. Although in 2009 the average donation stood at NIS 87 (approximately \$20), somewhat lower than in the past, Dushansky points out that the current economic crisis has not affected the amount of donors. “People are saying that they don’t want to stop giving, but they are giving less,” he claims.

Thanks to the hard work of its dedicated staff, The Spirit of Israel has succeeded in establishing itself as a well-known and trusted organization with widespread brand recognition throughout all sectors of the Israeli public. Since that very first commercial in 1998, Dushansky has secured an open-ended agreement with Keshet, one of the two concessionaires running Channel 2, Israel’s leading commercial television channel. Keshet donates thousands of commercials a year to The Spirit of Israel and has provided various free platforms to help promote its campaigns.

Recently, the final episode of the Israeli version of the popular TV show “Big Brother” urged viewers to send text messages to vote for their favorite contestant. Keshet, together with all the cellular phone companies, pledged NIS 1 from each text message to The Spirit of Israel, which earmarked the money for the Jewish Agency’s Youth Futures project for



Children at a youth village supported by The Spirit of Israel

disadvantaged kids. The TV show raised NIS 500,000 (around \$125,000) for the project.

Another joint venture with Keshet involved the annual “Yom Tov” televised fundraising campaign, which was broadcast five years in a row and generated NIS 70 million (\$17 million) for various causes championed by The Spirit of Israel. When other organizations started to imitate Yom Tov, its impact diminished and the organizers decided to discontinue that particular effort.

The Shalmor Avnon Amichay/Young & Rubicam advertising agency handles The Spirit of Israel’s account on a pro bono basis, and all of their campaigns are personally handled by the agency’s owner himself. Recently, they even won a prestigious award at the New York Advertising Festival for Non-Profits.

Tangible results

“There is a major difference between us and typical Jewish fundraisers overseas,” remarks Dushansky. “Our message is different from that of the UJA because Israelis like to give to specific projects and programs.” They like to follow up and make sure their money is doing something for that project and they like to be involved. “There are two big ‘problems’ with Israeli donors,” Dushansky jokes. “They live here and they have a car. They like to go visit their project and some visit every few weeks. If an Israeli donor could implant each sheqel with an electronic chip and follow it, he would.”

“There are 400,000 children at-risk in Israel and it is a genuine emergency,” stresses Dushansky. “There is still nowhere near enough money to even make a dent. We need hundreds of millions of sheqels.” Each child who is removed from his parents’ home and placed in a youth village costs \$18,000 a year. Although the government participates in that



The Jewish Agency for Israel

cost, most of the funding comes from the Jewish Agency and other donors.

Youth villages which have benefited from intervention by the business community enjoy a clear advantage. At Ramat Hadassah, for example, matriculation exam results are now higher than the national average thanks to the involvement of business donors. 'Spirit' brought the needs of these children to the attention of one of Israel's leading local businessmen and, after numerous on-site visits, the donor recognized that the opportunity existed to transform the intervention model for these children. Pulling together a team of like-minded Israeli philanthropists, the donor, together with 'Spirit,' the Jewish Agency, the Ministry of Education, outside experts in child therapeutic rehabilitation and senior staff of the village, developed programs to bring these disadvantaged children back from the edge, giving them the life skills to become productive citizens.

Another high-priority project which was implemented was the establishment of a literacy-learning center at Ramat Hadassah. Since a large percentage of the kids arrived at the village illiterate, this state-of-the-art facility is dedicated to bringing reading, writing and comprehension skills up to the standard level of "regular" 13 and 14-year-olds within a short period.

Additional projects at the school include a new mathematics and computer learning facility, a zoological center incorporating a therapeutic animal care unit and a sports center under the auspices of the Hapoel Keter Tel Aviv Youth Soccer Club.

"Our donors who have become so passionately involved in this project do not view it as philanthropy but rather as their social responsibility," explains Dushansky. "As they spend increasing amounts of time with these kids, they are not looking to identify the best and the

brightest. They are committed to bringing each and every one of these children back from the fringes of society, equipped with the skills and the confidence they need to line up at the starting gate of life." In just a few years, these kids' outstanding results attest to the success of investing in a place such as Ramat Hadassah.

High-tech involvement

Although The Spirit of Israel is grateful for every donation received regardless of the sum, it is particularly proud of its "major donors division," which includes around 500 individuals and businesses who have contributed over NIS 10,000 (\$2,500) each. The largest donor is a businessperson who gives \$2 million a year, while several others in this category donate NIS 200,000-300,000 (\$50,000-75,000) annually.

Today it is much easier for The Spirit of Israel's staff to approach potential big donors. It is also not unusual for big donors to approach them after seeing an advertising campaign, and to ask how they can become involved. One of The Spirit of Israel's notable donors is Check Point, the Israeli Internet security company. Like many other high-tech companies, Check Point has a fundraising committee which makes decisions about allocating the company's philanthropic contributions. Every

At the Ramat Hadassah youth village, matriculation exam results are now higher than the national average thanks to the involvement of business donors

year, a delegation from The Spirit of Israel appears before the committee and makes a pitch. Competition is tough, with thousands of other non-profits vying for those same sheqels.

This year, The Spirit of Israel organized field trips for all 900 Check Point employees to show them a variety of projects, such as youth villages, to which they could potentially contribute. It was quite an operation but well worthwhile.

Another Israeli high-tech company which has become closely involved with The Spirit of Israel in recent years is Ex Libris, which has effectively adopted Kiryat Yaarim, a village near Jerusalem run by the Jewish Agency for at-risk youth. Ex Libris decided to establish a computer track in Kiryat Yaarim's high school, in order to train kids for productive and respectable careers.

The first group recently completed the pro-

gram and Matti Shem-Tov, the CEO of Ex Libris, invited all 12 graduates to attend the company's annual Rosh Hashana party. In front of all the employees, Shem-Tov spoke eloquently about the Kiryat Yaarim program and its kids, and then announced that all 12 graduates have jobs waiting for them at Ex Libris after they finish the army!

Riva Friedman, one of The Spirit of Israel's staff members, notices a big change in the corporate culture of Israeli high-tech companies over the past decade. "Today most high-tech companies have someone whose full-time job is overseeing the company's community involvement," she says. "This trend is definitely growing and there is now a much higher degree of commitment at the corporate level."

Celebrity spokesman

Although most of the projects The Spirit of Israel supports are ongoing and long-term, the organization has also organized emergency campaigns on several occasions. During the Second Lebanon War in 2006, for example, the Jewish Agency decided to move all the children in the North who were in the line of fire to summer camps in safer parts of the country. Spirit's team made phone calls and in just two weeks they succeeded in raising NIS 13 million (\$3 million). "The response was terrific," recalls Dushansky. "Our major donors not only gave generously; they also helped by making calls to their friends. But many regular citizens gave small amounts too."

In 2009, The Spirit of Israel is proud to be a Jewish Agency non-profit company. In the past year, the Spirit of Israel brand has become closely identified with Israeli celebrity Tal Brody - a former star of the Maccabi Tel Aviv basketball team. Brody became the third chairman of the board, following tenures by two other high-profile Israelis, Aaron Zucker and Nicky Capelouto.

Most Israelis assume that Brody gets paid to star in the organization's television commercials, but the truth is that Brody has been volunteering extensively for The Spirit of Israel ever since it was founded. In fact, he is one of the original two volunteers, together with songwriter Ehud Manor, and devotes a large amount of his time to the organization. "We are lucky and privileged to have him on board," says Dushansky. "He opens lots of doors for us because everyone wants to meet him."

While Israelis from all sectors of society are now more aware than ever of the enormous needs of the country's disadvantaged population, they are also increasingly appreciative of organizations such as The Spirit of Israel which enable them to conduct *Tikun Olam* and contribute to the improvement of Israeli society. ■

For more information about The Spirit of Israel, please go to www.spiritofisrael.org.il (Hebrew only) or write to info@spiritofisrael.org.il.