

Jewish Community Studies as Seen Through a Business Lens

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Received: 20 October 2016 / Accepted: 31 October 2016 / Published online: 16 November 2016
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Abstract As market researchers, we have spent the past 30-plus years addressing the questions that impact the success of organizations in the service and non-profit sectors. It should come as no surprise, then, that when we bring our business lens and thought processes to the field of Jewish community studies, we also bring methods, approaches, and outcomes that differ markedly from traditional studies. Even more important than our methods, however, is the marketing framework in which we position our Jewish community studies. As a result of our marketing mindset, we look at the issues Jewish communities wish to address, analyze the data, and then draw conclusions and recommendations based on our deep experience understanding buyer behavior, purchase decision-making, and the customer experience. With this article, we hope to shed light on a different way of thinking about Jewish community studies, stimulate healthy discussion about the relative merits of all approaches to the subject, and contribute to the strengthening of Jewish communities everywhere.

Keywords Jewish community study · Marketing · Strategy · Business · Market research · Survey · Consumer behavior

Introduction

As market researchers, we have spent the past 30-plus years addressing many questions that impact the success of organizations in the service and non-profit sectors—from the most fundamental (e.g., “What do my customers really want/need... and are they willing to pay for what they want/need?”) to those that are

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more tangential, perhaps, but equally important to the organization's business success (e.g., "Are my marketing efforts working?" "What does my brand stand for and what does the market think of it?" "Who are my customers and how do I find more like them?" "How big is my target market?" "Am I offering the right services at the right price?" "How will changes to my offering affect the demand for these services?").

It should come as no surprise, then, that when we bring our business lens and thought processes to the field of Jewish community studies, we also bring different methods and approaches to the research process. Even more important than our methods, however, is the marketing framework in which we position our Jewish community studies. As a result of our marketing mindset, we look at the issues Jewish communities wish to address, then analyze the data and ultimately draw conclusions and recommendations based on the information gathered differently from those researchers/investigators who come to these studies from a largely social science perspective.

In crafting our response to the questions posed by Laurence Kotler–Berkowitz in his introduction to this special issue of *Contemporary Jewry*, we hope to shed light on a different way of thinking about Jewish community studies, to stimulate healthy discussion about the relative merits of all approaches to the subject, and to contribute to the strengthening of Jewish communities everywhere.

A Market Research Perspective on Jewish Community Studies

When viewed through a business lens, the issues Jewish federations and other interested parties (e.g., organizations and institutions, etc.) wish to address in a community study are not so different from the business issues facing other organizations (both for-profit and non-profit) with which we work. Much like these organizations, federations and others interested in the results of a community study must do the following:

- Understand their customer base—both current customers (i.e., those who are already involved in/engaged with the Jewish community and its organizations) and prospective customers (i.e., those who are not involved in/engaged with the Jewish community and its organizations). Because of the rapid pace of change that characterizes today's world, this is no easy task. Data grow stale much more quickly than in the past, whereas once, a decade of "check-ins" may have sufficed for sound decision-making. But now, the cost associated with more frequent assessments precludes most communities from pursuing them. Yet, the value of more timely data cannot be overstated. As researchers working extensively in the service and non-profit business sectors, we have seen the value of regular "check-ins" — most notably to act as an early warning system identifying issues that can be resolved before they become major problems — to identify new opportunities that will continue to support growth and strengthen the customer relationship.

From our vantage point, the concept of market segmentation is a useful construct for understanding one's customer base. This means dividing a broad target market into reachable subgroups that have, or are perceived to have, common needs, interests, and priorities, and then designing and implementing strategies targeted to them.

- With respect to current customers, we often look at two major subsegments— those who choose to use and/or need their services/programs, and those who support them with their time, money, and/or expertise. Given that these subsegments are not necessarily mutually exclusive, the viewpoints of those at the intersection can offer especially useful insights into community functionality.
 - Not surprisingly, understanding the needs and wants of prospective customers offers a more difficult challenge, since these individuals are typically not yet on the radar screen of community organizations. Here, too, we have identified two main subsegments: those who are interested in becoming engaged with the Jewish community, but who have yet to do so, and those who are not at all interested at this point in time (and who may never be).
- Satisfy the needs and wants of their customer base. In reality, federations and their funding partners must be sensitive to the demands of their two primary customer segments as noted above — namely, those who use/need the services/programs they sponsor, and those who support the work of a federation and its funding partners through donations of time and money;
 - Create and deliver those particular products/services their market wishes to acquire, at a place that is convenient for them and at a price they are willing to pay. As with other organizations, federations and their funding partners must be sensitive to the interests and needs of prospective customers if they are to grow their “market”;
 - “Go to market” with a brand philosophy that is clearly understood and relevant, and with compelling messages that invite action. For federations and other Jewish organizations, this means having a clear identity (as derived from its mission and vision), communicating it in a way that touches customers and prospects emotionally and authentically, and continuously evolving to ensure that it will remain relevant to the community;
 - Develop accurate and timely market-based information to successfully address issues relating to changing market size and composition; and
 - Allocate available (albeit often limited) resources to optimize impact on the community.

Armed with such market-based information, organizations are better able to anticipate changing community needs, to develop and deliver programs and services responsive to those needs going forward, to set strategy for the future, and to make

thoughtful investments in a way that will drive the development of strong, vibrant, and connected Jewish communities.

The federations that have approached us about conducting studies of their community are united by a common, overarching goal. Simply stated, that goal is to better understand their community, so that local communal institutions can determine how to better serve the needs of the community. In many cases, however, communities are also interested in developing detailed information that goes beyond this overarching goal in order to address particular strategic imperatives—e.g., “What is the philanthropic profile of my community and how can the community better leverage these interests for the betterment of the community?” “How do we define and measure the health of our Jewish community, take action to positively impact it, and then track changes in its health over time?” “How do we create community and interest among those who are at the margins of the community but who could represent future growth?”

With this in mind, here is how we define our role as market researchers:

- Develop context: Listen to those community leaders who are driving the research initiative both to gain their perspectives on the community and to understand the decisions they need to make based on the information gathered;
- Provide realistic parameters: Listen to community leaders and other key stakeholders to assess information needs and ensure realistic expectations with respect to study results;
- Offer guidance based on our relevant experience: “Tease out” the important questions that they may not have formulated but that should be considered;
- Get the most bang for the buck: Shape a research design that delivers the most useful and appropriate data within existing budget parameters while at the same time clearly acknowledging where the design presents limits for analysis;
- Bring our knowledge, insight, and experience to bear on the accurate interpretation of the data gathered; and
- Communicate study results to federation leadership, community leaders and members, institutions, and other interested parties in a way that is especially meaningful and useful.

However, as we all know, the devil is in the details. For us, the most significant methodological problem encountered is one that lies at the very heart of the community study—namely, determining who are the “community members” (i.e., the customer base—both current and potential) and then deciding how best to reach these individuals and gather their views.

To aid in this process, we conceptualize the Jewish community as a series of four segments arranged around a center core. In The Melior Group’s Jewish Community Model, each ring is unique from the others; each has its own distinct behaviors and attitudes. The farther away from the center core, the less engaged and involved the segment is with the institutional Jewish community. The four segments are described below:

- **Core segment.** At the heart of the community lies the core segment. These people live and breathe communal institutions and their missions, are active in

community events, and are supportive of the Jewish community with their time and financial resources. They are the known members of the community, and they are easy to find for research purposes as their contact information typically appears on communal institutions' membership and event-attendance lists; they often have strong relationships with community leaders, and they are visible and vocal.

- **Casual segment.** The first ring beyond the core consists of those who participate in the community, although not to the same degree as core members. They attend some community-sponsored events. They often are members (though not necessarily active members) of traditional communal institutions such as synagogues, and they support the community philanthropically, although their primary philanthropic interests may lie elsewhere. Like those in the core, people who belong to this segment are known members of the community and are easy to find for research purposes.
- **Covert segment.** The next ring out from the core is comprised of people who are open to and interested in participating in the Jewish community in some way at some point in time, but they have not yet done so or they have done so in a way that leaves them flying below the radar screen. Although they are unknown community members in the sense that they do not appear on any membership or event-attendance lists, they may be identified for research purposes using other approaches (e.g., purchased lists/samples of likely Jewish households). Once identified, coverts are likely to participate in community research efforts although not nearly to the same degree as those in the core or casual segments. It is interesting to note that this is a segment of great interest to many communities, as it is perceived to represent untapped market potential that could be unleashed if only the right programming were in place.
- **Remote segment.** This outermost ring is comprised of people who identify as Jewish but who have no interest in being involved in the larger Jewish community. They are usually remote from their local Jewish community emotionally, spiritually, religiously, and, often, geographically, even though they still reside within the community's catchment area. Like those in the covert segment, these people are unknown to the community, yet they can be found for research purposes via other methods. Once found, however, they are highly likely to decline to participate in any research efforts.

It is important to note that this model is institutional in nature in that it features Jewish institutions/organizations as the framework for conceptualizing the Jewish community, simply because it is these Jewish institutions/organizations that will be charged with meeting the needs and wants of the community. Even so, we recognize (and have seen) that it is possible to be deeply engaged in Jewish life and to have a strong Jewish identity without ever having involvement in the local institutions (e.g., federation, synagogues, the Jewish community center, etc.) and that such individuals may be present to varying degrees in all of the segments noted above.

In addition to conceptualizing the various rings that comprise this model, it is also important to note that the model is not static. Rather, there is constant movement across the rings as some members become less involved with the

community (outbound flow) while others become more involved (inbound flow) during different stages of their life cycle. This migration across segments may be rooted in many different causes, among them life-stage changes, life-cycle events, personal trauma, etc. It is clear that where community members sit in the model (their ring location), in conjunction with the direction (inbound or outbound) in which their Jewish journey is taking them, is critically important for understanding what the community looks like and where it is headed (Fig. 1).

As noted by Kotler-Berkowitz in his introduction to this special issue of *Contemporary Jewry*, much has been written about the difficulties associated with Random Digit Dialing (RDD) probability sampling — for example, declining response and coverage rates, decreased efficiency and rising costs, increased potential for introducing bias into the study results, etc. — for social science research purposes. The same is true in the market research world. For both general and special populations (of which the Jewish population is one), there has been a notable increase in reluctance to participate in telephone surveys (Fahimi and Kulp, 2009; Pew Research Center, 2011). Aided by advances in technology (e.g., Caller ID and the National Do Not Call Registry), cooperation rates — that is, the percentage of all qualified respondents who complete the survey — are also on the decline.

Given this shift, the market research community has transferred a large proportion of its consumer survey research to the web; political polling companies are doing the same in a move to improve the accuracy of their results (Reid, 2015).

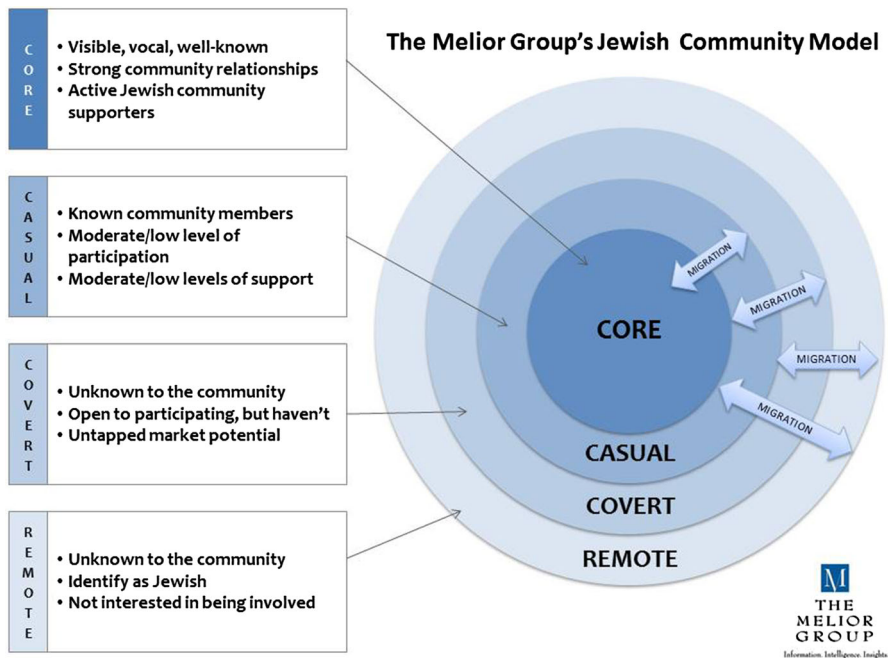


Fig. 1 The Melior Group's Jewish community model

According to a 2015 Pew Research Center study, “One key factor that has made this shift possible is the fact that the vast majority of Americans now use the Internet.” Pew Research Center telephone surveys have documented the rise in Internet adoption, which has grown from 14% of the US adult population in 1996 to 89% today (Pew Research Center 2015a, b). This same study also notes that in a general population, for most of the topics studied by the Pew Research Center, “The size of the bias caused by excluding the non-Web respondents is quite small. Across 406 separate survey items, only nine yielded estimates that differed by five or more percentage points” (Pew Research Center, 2015). While clearly not a panacea, web surveying provides a viable option for encouraging broad-based participation (albeit not a random sampling of the targeted audience).

In recognition of the coming of age of web surveying, we rely primarily on this methodology to gather the desired information (i.e., the majority of responses in the studies we have conducted are completed online). We do recognize the value of telephone surveying, and we can incorporate this survey channel into the study design using purchased telephone samples (for outbound calling) and/or the establishment of a toll-free number (for inbound calling). Our goal here is to ensure that those who may not have Internet access, who are not computer savvy, or who prefer this more personal experience still have an avenue for participation. We also provide options for assisting those who meet these criteria (e.g., setting up a temporary survey participation center in an area frequented by the target audience including trained volunteers with electronic devices who can help interested individuals complete the survey online).

In considering the evolution of community surveys, there has also been much discussion around the value of random sampling vs. opt-in/non-probability sampling (Sheskin and Cohen 2015). The notion that only random sampling reaches people who might otherwise not be reached because they are distant from the community (e.g., geographically, emotionally, or psychologically, etc.) does not take into account the impact strong survey branding, marketing, and personal outreach efforts exert on survey response. Such promotional efforts yield substantive numbers of responses, not just from those who are affiliated and motivated (i.e., core and casual segments), but also from those with minimal interest or involvement (i.e., covert and remote segments) in their local Jewish community. These efforts are successful because they leverage the power of marketing (especially social media marketing) and interpersonal connections to broadly grow the survey participant base. This approach, a form of snowball sampling,¹ has long been recognized as useful for overcoming the problems of reaching and sampling concealed populations (Atkinson and Flint, 2001). This would include hard-to reach-populations such as the remote and covert segments of the Jewish community.

The bottom line is this: Whether contacted as part of a random sampling methodology, or inspired to participate by direct email invitation or as the result of strong marketing efforts, all participants in a community survey have opted-in to do

¹ Snowball sampling is a technique for finding research participants in which one participant recommends other participants who recommend other participants. This method seeks to take advantage of the social networks of identified respondents to provide a researcher with an ever-expanding set of potential contacts.

so. However, there is one important distinction — in a probability study, researchers control those asked to participate, while in a non-probability/opt-in study, all who wish to participate and meet the eligibility criteria for participation can do so. It is interesting to note that the communities we have worked with have made a conscious decision to focus their resources on learning more about the first three rings — the core, casual, and covert rings — rather than those in the remote ring, because of the decided lack of interest among these segment members in participating in the Jewish community. It has been our experience, however, that remote ring members do participate in sufficient numbers to yield meaningful insights into their attitudes, interests, and behaviors.

To address the issue of participation (or lack thereof) associated with the various rings of our model, we have pioneered the use of an “open-arms” (non-probability) sample. As we have noted, using a combination of web and telephone survey methodologies, our goal is to hear from as many community members as possible. In this way, we ensure inclusion of the widest variety of opinions, views, and experiences from a pool of participants that is both diverse and robust, ranging from those at the margin to those most highly engaged. While this openness may run the risk of affording those with an agenda to pursue or an axe to grind the opportunity to complete a survey multiple times, it is possible to take steps to mitigate that risk — for example, by dropping “cookies” on the respondent’s computer or permitting multiple responses from only certain IP addresses.

We gather the contact information of prospective participants from Jewish community institutions, organizations, and event-attendance lists and then invite their participation directly. We supplement this sampling frame —the list of known Jewish community members — with lists of possible Jewish household mailing addresses purchased from a commercial list broker² and, as noted previously, with purchased telephone samples. This constitutes the sampling frame of likely unknown community members. However, through our skillful use of branding and marketing strategies to create and promote a unique image and message for the study, we have been successful in moving beyond these standard sampling frames to reach and attract the participation of a broad array of community members. This approach generates a robust survey population, and allows for a thorough analysis by a wide variety of demographic, attitudinal, and behavioral segments; it is especially useful for making comparisons across segments as opposed to precisely estimating the size of those segments within a total population.

Once the data are gathered, we apply various statistical analyses to understand the differences among various segments of the community and the factors that drive their behavior, values, attitudes, and activities. These analyses include correlation and regression and multivariate analyses to evaluate drivers of qualities such as engagement and connectedness. We work to get underneath the numbers to understand motivation and its linkage to behavior, and it is this information that provides the critical link to strategy formation going forward. Once customer

² A commercial list broker sells categorized lists of people in a specified geographical area for use in marketing campaigns. These list brokers use dozens of sources along with their own proprietary software to create lists of individuals for purchase based on the demographic characteristics specified by the list purchaser.

segment motivation is clearly understood, so-called purchase behavior — whether measured as connectedness to the Jewish community, the strength of one's Jewish identity, attendance at events, use of services, donor support, volunteerism, or some other behavior — can then be influenced.

As part of our analysis process, we also review relevant demographic and economic data for the community. This review serves two purposes:

- To provide a backdrop (i.e., the community-at-large) against which to array perceived changes in the Jewish community as identified in the quantitative survey. This helps to tell the story of the Jewish community within the context of the larger world in which it lives, not just as an isolated group sheltered from outside forces. We use a variety of sources for this analysis, including the US Census; Jewish population databases, such as the Berman Jewish DataBank, the Steinhardt Social Research Institute's American Jewish Population Project (AJPP), the Jewish Virtual Library, and JData; and individual community-level data sources produced by the Chambers of Commerce, state and local governments, and local organizations; and
- To provide a context for rebalancing (weighting) the survey data to adjust for over-representation or under-representation by segment. Depending on the nature of the secondary information available, the survey sample may be adjusted for age, geographic location, gender, or income, or a combination of these types of factors. For example, in one community we studied, county-level Jewish population estimates from the AJPP database, along with county-level general population data from the US Census Bureau, indicated — not surprisingly, given the nature of the community— an over-representation of respondents in one of the three counties participating in the study. As a result, the data was weighted to more accurately reflect the responses of participants in the two under-represented counties.

It is important to note that communities that require precise, statistically reliable estimates of community size will likely find their needs better served by a traditional, random sample/probability research approach. However, those communities wishing to understand segment differences and motivations in order to develop strategies to achieve their goals will likely find their needs better served by a market-research-based approach.

When asked to define our standard deliverables, there is only one deliverable that is truly standard — namely, providing answers to the research questions that were clearly defined at the outset of the research. We tailor all deliverables to the needs and interests of the organizations with whom we work, all of which are defined during the project-scoping phase. These could include, but are not limited to several elements: a comprehensive report of all findings; drill-down reports on segments of interest, such as seniors, schools, shuls, special needs, and philanthropy; data files and cross tabs; in-person and webinar presentations to various community groups; and other ongoing research support as needed. Our goal is to be as transparent as possible, and to leave a rich record of the research process and results such that someone who was not involved with the study effort would be able to become as

knowledgeable and informed about the results as someone who was intimately involved from the start.

The communities we have worked with have used the results of our research in ways both large and small:

- Upon learning of a higher than expected number of local adults and children with intellectual and developmental disabilities, one community embarked on the first significant expansion of its campus in more than 20 years in order to house new programs and services to meet the needs of this segment of the community. In less than three years, these new programs have become fully subscribed and a model for other communities to follow.
- Another community learned that although many there would prefer to obtain social services from a Jewish organization, they believed the services offered were inferior in quality to those provided by non-Jewish entities. As a result, new strategies were put into place both to assess quality and to address the root cause of these perceptions.
- Although one federation we worked with had experienced a name change years before, the transition to its new name was not yet complete, owing, at least in part, to fear among some key supports of losing visibility. Study results showed that this situation was actually harming the federation's brand. People were confused and, as such, less likely to engage with or support the organization. As one small step in its efforts to strengthen the brand, the federation updated all of its office telephones to reflect the new name for Caller ID purposes.

While comparisons of one community's results to those of other communities are interesting and can provide a useful context for assessing a community's performance on specific measures, unless these are apples-to-apples comparisons, the value of such comparisons for strategy formation and agency decision-making is quite possibly diminished. As Ira M. Sheshkin noted in *Comparison of Jewish Communities*, these limitations stem from comparing information with different study dates, different sampling methods, different questionnaires, small sample sizes, missing data (treating missing data and "don't know" responses differently), different definitions of Jewish households, and time-specific conditions — for example, economic downturns on income and philanthropy or the political situation on Israel-related questions (Sheshkin 2015).

In addition to these methodological differences, it has been our experience that innate differences in local community circumstances make even comparing the results of communities of similar sizes questionable in terms of value. For example, is it truly useful to make one-on-one comparisons between two communities of equal size when one is defined by its geographic sprawl and a mostly suburban/rural profile, while the other is compact, primarily urban in nature, and plagued by road congestion? These comparisons are interesting and nice to know, yet not likely to yield much of value for a given community's individual strategy formation and decision-making purposes.

However, we do recognize that when performed thoughtfully — for example, by the selection of a meaningful peer group whose experiences may shed light on

aspirational or even current community performance on particular attributes/qualities — such comparisons can be helpful. This entails identifying a peer group of communities, or possibly of segments within those communities — for example, donor behavior in mid-size communities — aggregating the data of interest to determine norms for the segment, and then comparing individual results to those of the group. In this way, our data could be viewed as comparable to at least some of the studies contained in the Berman Jewish DataBank, particularly those conducted using non-probability sampling.

In our view, setting goals and making decisions for a given community based on what's been achieved in other communities over a broad period of time, with widely varying populations and widely varying results, is not the most effective way to make decisions. Rather, we believe that gathering detailed information to understand a given community's composition, values, goals and aspirations, potential for change, and trends over time is the route to informed, accurate, and actionable decision-making.

Navigating the Broader Context in Which Local Community Studies are Produced

In his introduction to this issue, Laurence Kotler–Berkowitz asked Jewish community researchers to discuss how they “navigate the communal and broader social contexts in which studies are produced” and to “address the interaction between the research... worlds where they primarily operate as professionals and the communal worlds to which they connect.” As professional market researchers, we believe all market research should be driven by clear, focused objectives. It should yield accurate and reliable data, provide insightful analysis, and report study results in a way that leads to and supports decision-making. As professional market researchers approaching Jewish community studies, we believe our role is to design research efforts that are in the best interests of our clients. To do that, we must be sensitive to the information needs of the communal organizations that hire us, and use our deep experience and knowledge of Jewish communities and their concerns to help them to craft the most appropriate, viable, and achievable set of research goals. To achieve these research goals, we must also adhere to market research industry principles and values. That is to say, we must use established methods, be honest and ethical, treat respondents and subject matter professionally and fairly, be respectful of respondent time and views, and be transparent.

Per the questions raised in our introduction, we believe our primary responsibility is to our clients, but we also recognize the importance of individual community studies to the larger, national exploration of our Jewish community. In that sense, we welcome the opportunity to share and discuss our philosophy, approach, and results with other researchers. However, as with all of the studies we conduct, ownership of the actual work product, such as interview guides, surveys and related materials, data files, reports, presentations, promotional materials, and logos, resides with our clients. Given this, it is our belief that the decision whether to share study results resides with our clients, not with us.

Our clients engage us for the quality of our thinking, the creativity and reliability of our methodologies, and our ability to accurately interpret data and develop insightful recommendations. Peer researchers within our firm who are knowledgeable about the subject matter and issues, yet not directly involved in the project, review the results of our studies before they are released. We find that this process ensures the clarity and comprehensiveness of the results we deliver to our clients.

Although our work may help to shape policy, we are not typically involved in the implementation of the study results. Instead, we design research that allows clients to implement results that provide the depth and breadth of analysis to allow plans to be made and implemented. Our recommendations are detailed and specific and provide a clear path for action on the part of our clients. In working through strategies and tactics based on the research results and our analysis of them, however, our clients often use us as a sounding board to help them to determine appropriate courses of action.

We view the dissemination of study results as part and parcel of our role in the community-study process. Our efforts in this area take many forms – including shaping presentations for the leadership of the sponsoring organization(s) to deliver to their constituencies, and giving our own in-person presentations at community-wide meetings. We also conduct working sessions on the implications of the findings for topic-specific audiences such as seniors and those with special needs, and we can aid in the preparation of videos for use on the research sponsors' website. We take a hands-on approach to the dissemination of study results, under the parameters for involvement established by our clients.

As market researchers, it is our job to provide clients with the information they need to make sound decisions. We work in a field that is constantly evolving in its quest to understand consumer decision-making. The incorporation of neuroscience, behavioral economics, and big- data analysis into marketing research are just a few of the areas into which the field has been expanding most recently. We believe strongly in keeping current, and we look forward to introducing new techniques and ways of thinking to our clients, while at the same time leveraging tried-and-true approaches to develop insightful information in a fiscally responsible manner. Our goal is to make timely, meaningful community information accessible to every federation, no matter its size or budget, and the marketplace tells us that our creative, tailored research designs are meeting this need. Our role is to bring our best thinking, research methodologies, and analytical skills to bear on the questions at hand, not to critique the findings and methodologies of local community studies conducted by others.

Clearly, while those of us who conduct Jewish community studies offer different approaches, experiences, and perspectives, it is just as clear that we have a shared goal — to provide accurate, useful information upon which community leaders and the organizations that comprise their communities can make sound decisions leading to more vibrant, engaged, and sustainable Jewish communities in the future.

Acknowledgements The authors would like to acknowledge the contribution of Jason Shames, CEO and executive vice president of the Jewish Federation of Northern New Jersey, to the conceptualization of The Melior Group's Jewish Community Model.

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