



11 Tips for a Great Synagogue Website **ShofarSites.com**

1. Set Goals

The mission statement for your website doesn't have to be long or fancy – just state clearly what you want to achieve. The goal of your website is to support your synagogue community, but you may also have specific web objectives, such as better communication between members, e-learning, registration forms for synagogue events, the ability to accept membership fees or donations, online fund raising, etc. The content, design, and tools on your website should support your website's main purpose.

2. Know Your Audience

Consider your audience – what is the average age of your members? For example, people under 40 are heavy users of technology, so if your goal is to attract more young people to the synagogue community, keep in mind that email, text messaging, and websites are favored ways to communicate.

If you are catering to an older population, make sure your website is easy to read (no tiny type) and to navigate, but keep in mind you may require more “help” text to engage your senior visitors.

3. Delegate Authority / Assign Tasks

Depending on the size of the congregation, you may want to form a web committee; one member of the committee should be the project manager. The project manager doesn't have to be a programmer or a graphic designer, but should act as the lead person and coordinate the project. Make the 'project manager' a title, not just a person. If someone leaves the committee mid-stream, he or she should be able to transfer responsibility to another staff member or congregant. Keep good records. Managing volunteers, especially, can be tricky – you need to set deadlines but keep in mind the limited time people may have to devote to the project. Keep expectations realistic.

4. Keep Synagogue Politics in Mind

Keep politics in mind – you may have a board of directors, the Rabbi, various committees and different departments to deal with. The board of directors will probably have the final say on a site upgrade – but the web committee may include a board member, the Rabbi, several congregants, and relevant staff

members. If the Rabbi or other congregational leader will not be active on the committee, make sure they are kept informed of the process. You may want to create an email list and provide regular updates, for those who have an interest in the site, but who are not going to be decision makers.

5. Moderate Content

Set guidelines for content. While the specific guidelines may depend largely on your congregation's hashkafa (religious philosophy), most congregations will want to have rules against profanity, missionary material, and flaming (sending or posting hostile and insulting messages).

Comments and forums can be moderated – you can choose to have a moderator approve comments and forum posts before they appear, or have the moderator delete comments or posts that are inappropriate. You can also assign certain members to have a higher level of access – 'authors,' for example, can submit articles to the site that are not published until approved by a 'publisher.'

6. Keep Graphics Simple

Less is more – keep your graphic layout clean. Avoid animation and anything flashing, rotating, dancing, etc. Keep graphic files small so pages load quickly. Provide plenty of white space around text; remember that it is easier to read dark text on a light background, than to read light text on a dark background.

Ultimately, while a nice design is important, the site should be easy to view and use.

7. Highlight Contact Information

Make sure the most important information is easy to find. Visitors should be able to tell by looking at the home page of your site where you are located and what denomination (if any) you are affiliated with. Many site visitors will be looking for a phone number, a contact email, an address, or directions (you may want to provide a local map); if the actual contact information and directions are not on the home page, there should be a clear link to it.

8. Plan your Navigation

You may have dozens of topics you want to include on your website. Sit down and create a hierarchy – a top level menu should, optimally, have fewer than eight items. Use submenus as you go further into the site. A section for adult education could include the schedule of classes, links to other Jewish educational sites, the latest dvar torah, etc.

A section for services might include the calendar of services, information about the synagogue's approach to prayer, information for newcomers to the synagogue, etc.

Create a navigational chart for your menu framework.

9. Include Interactive Tools

A dynamic website should provide tools to build a sense of community – so make your members active participants in the site. Provide areas for them to post pictures of their trip to Israel, a discussion forum to talk about changes at the Hebrew school, an area where members can submit their own dvrei torah. Consider a place for feedback about the new website; ask “What works?” and, “What doesn’t work?”

10. Prepare to Update Content Regularly

Have you ever been to a website where the “latest” event listed was three months ago? It’s important that calendar items and information about holidays and new classes are updated regularly, so that site visitors will view the online content as a reliable resource and come back often. It doesn’t have to be a constant task – decide what parts of the site need to be updated and who will be responsible. The director of the Hebrew School, for example, may be responsible for updating the website with information about school snow cancellations. Also, keep in mind that certain content can be used again and again – you may have a pdf of a Guide to Preparing for Passover – no one will object if a link to the pdf shows up every spring!

11. Promote Your Site

Mention your website in newsletters and announce it at meetings; include the website address on all printed materials. Ensure that your website appears in online search query results (Google, Yahoo!, etc). Submit your website to appropriate online directories and lists, or other places where your audience might look for the information contained on your website.

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