

More than bagels and lox

What it means to be a *Jewish* Chamber of Commerce

By CHRIS LEPPEK

IJN Assistant Editor

The *Oxford Dictionary* defines the phrase “chamber of commerce” with clipped clarity: “A local association to promote and protect the interests of the business community in a particular place.”

Fair enough, but it only scratches the surface of what a local incarnation of the concept — the Denver Jewish Chamber of Commerce — considers itself to be.

er and decided they really wanted to give it a little structure, formalize it as an organization. They renamed it the Denver Jewish Chamber of Commerce and helped build up the structure to where there were three to five events every month and helped it grow more effectively.”

Things had accelerated by 2019 when the organization realized that its slate of activities had grown to

The “chamber of commerce” dimension of DJCC is very much a part of why people become members and participate in its many activities.

“Ninety-five percent of them are there for business purposes, although it’s a social thing too,” Ripps says. “We’re getting to know each other, but people are there to network and grow their business.”

“It may not be directly. I’m a financial advisor but I’m not going to be talking personal finances to somebody right there in a meeting; there are going to be questions and resources and people I can lean on for my clients’ help. I go to the chamber frequently for legal help, for accounting help, for real estate referrals, for lending, those types of things. I use the directory pretty heavily as one of my first go-tos, rather than looking for the first name that comes up on a Google search.”

Making contact — and ultimately doing business — with fellow professionals whom one knows personally, and who are members of a cohesive community, makes solid business sense, in Ripps’ view.

“There’s an extra element of trust that I think comes with being in the community. It’s one step closer in that trust category.”

A typical chamber gathering, whether it be an in-person breakfast or a kosher lunch, features a member speaking, often about their own profession.

“They get a decent chunk of time to talk about what they’re doing in their business, usually some sort of informational piece about what’s happening in their industry that we should know about. That’s a good opportunity for somebody to showcase who they are, what they do and why, and for people to get to know

them on a more intimate level and in a broader context.”

The chamber offers what Ripps calls a “very welcoming” vibe to all of its members, especially newcomers or prospective members, for whom quarterly events are held.

“We encourage one-to-one interactions and make it so that people feel comfortable doing that,” he says.

“We really encourage new members, you know: ‘You’re here, you’re part of it, I’d love to sit down with you and learn more about you and your business, and talk about mine.’ That welcoming concept, I think, is a major part of what draws new people in.”

That open attitude, Ripps adds, extends to non-Jews who are interested in joining the chamber.

Jewish members of the chamber go out of their way to make non-Jewish members feel at home, he adds. When such typically Jewish phrases as *tikkun olam* are exchanged, definitions and explanations are usually offered.

“Listen,” Ripps says, “we know that Jews are a minority. And there’s a language there that’s not necessarily English, and there’s Yiddish to throw on top of that. If you’re Jewish, those things get tossed around.



Brad Ripps, Denver Jewish Chamber of Commerce president

For people who aren’t Jewish, we know enough to give some definition as needed. I think people feel welcome to ask those questions.”

Being a specifically “Jewish” business-oriented organization, however, means a lot more than enjoying bagels and lox or occasionally using Yiddish phraseology.

To DJCC, it also means incorporating Torah-oriented ethics and morality into how the chamber’s members conduct business.

“First and foremost, who do you do business with?” Ripps asks. “You do business with people you know, like

its repeated emphasis on diversity, reflected in everything from its openness to non-Jewish membership to a welcoming attitude toward people from the fully observant Orthodox world as well as those from the LGBTQ communities.

“We’re reaching out to those who aren’t Jewish,” he says, “and we know that the Jewish community has its own struggles with accepting each other.”

For example, it was brought to our attention that because we were holding our breakfasts and lunches at the New York Deli News, which isn’t kosher, this wasn’t sufficient.

“By not offering a kosher option,

we were excluding a major part of our own community. So we upped our game a little bit and also began offering kosher lunches at East Side Kosher Deli. So we’re saying to the community, ‘Hey, we heard you, and this our best effort to be inclusive of your group.’”

Well into his busy two-year term as president of DJCC, Ripps predicts a bright future for the organization.

He sees it as “definitely growing” in terms of membership, and steadily becoming more adept, both at serving as a “hybrid” group for both professional and social contacts as well as streamlining its balance of actual and virtual connections, “so people can land on us digitally, from our website presence, and then come to us in person.”

“I’d like for us to be the landing spot where people go to for resources, for networking, for posting jobs, for looking for the services they need. We’ve got plumbers, roofers and cleaners, those kinds of folks, as well as white collar stuff — legal, real

HYBRID ORGANIZATION

Business and commerce, of course, but also helping those in need

Brad Ripps, that organization’s current president, readily acknowledges that the usual application of “chamber of commerce” does, at least partially, describe the DJCC. Its members are, in many different ways, involved in business, and when they get together actually or virtually they make contact, sometimes make deals, exchange expertise and make referrals. All those things that keep the river of commerce flowing smoothly.

“A significant part of what we do, of course, is business promotion,” Ripps told the *INTERMOUNTAIN JEWISH NEWS* in an interview last week. “It’s designed around networking, helping people grow their businesses, providing resources, those kinds of things.”

But DJCC has also mobilized to assist the family of a member forced to deal with a serious illness, provided meals to the community’s needy, involved its members in any number of Jewish community festivals and gatherings, helped a member who lost everything to the Marshall Fire in late 2021 and lots of other things that transcend the usual parameters of business or commerce.

“We are a true hybrid organization,” Ripps says. “Part of that hybrid concept is *tikkun olam*, just improving the world. How do we do that as an organization that’s focused on business and commerce. When there are people and things in need, then that’s part of what I would call our inherent obligation as part of the community.”

The Denver Jewish Chamber of Commerce sincerely wants to be part of that community — both the Jewish and the general communities of metropolitan Denver — and from the looks of it, it’s definitely making that happen.

A group of 10 or 15 Jewish businesspeople got together in 1995 and formed the nucleus of an organization that originally called itself the Denver Jewish Business Association.

“They were members of the community that said ‘We want to try to bring together the Jewish business community and find a way to connect to Jewish entrepreneurs and professionals as some sort of organized group,’” Ripps says.

“They kind of clicked along for another, I guess, 15 years or so as an organization that was loosely organized, relatively informal.

Then, in 2011, B’nai B’rith and the Jewish Business Assn. got togeth-

the point where part-time volunteers could no longer keep up with managing it. It hired a full-time professional, Sheila Abrahamsson, to serve as program administrator.

Its president at the time, Jonathan Defez, did an interview with the *IJN* which was read by the St. Louis-based philanthropist Michael Staenberg (who has supported many Jewish causes in Denver, including the JCC, which is partly named for him).

Staenberg “saw the article and just loved the concept and everything the chamber stood for,” Ripps says. “He called a meeting with Jonathan and asked, ‘How can I help?’”

The philanthropist ultimately offered funding support for the chamber, not in the form of an endowment, but to help it grow to the point where it could become self-sustaining.

“It was a huge validation of what we were doing,” Ripps says, “and a kick in the pants to really help us grow. He was our first benefactor and that led to our benefactor program. We now have somewhere between 10 and 12 benefactors who believe in supporting the organization. That’s really been a major directional change and has allowed us to be a lot more involved in the community and in the ways we can participate with other organizations.”

In the last couple of years, the chamber has substantially grown its virtual presence, to the point of using a “virtual assistant to help manage the communications.” It connects with membership through its website, weekly emails, a monthly newsletter, the “Chamber Chai,” and regular messages from the president and benefactors.

The organization has grown to 123 members, most but not all of whom are Jewish.

“We get that question all the time,” Ripps says. “You don’t have to be Jewish. You just have to subscribe to the Jewish values of dignity, inclusivity and integrity. That’s our focus. Everyone’s welcome.”

All of the chamber’s members have an active interest in business, although Ripps admits that can be a very wide definition. Members work in everything from plumbing and home repair to law and wealth management, such as Ripps himself, a financial advisor affiliated with Northwestern Mutual.

“I would say that everybody’s in business,” he says, “in one shape or form.”

\$38 million raised for fair hiring

Finding ways to get more diverse candidates in the door

By **BRIAN BLUM**

Israel 21c

Two Israeli startups believe they have cracked the code to getting more underrepresented candidates — women, people of color, individuals with disabilities, veterans — into the workforce.

Yet the two companies, TaTiO and

‘So many solutions still rely on resumes’

Joonko, are using very different methodologies.

TaTiO has developed a set of online simulations a candidate must complete and pass before being presented with relevant positions listed on the TaTiO job board.

Joonko is essentially “recycling” candidates who almost got hired by a company, lost to another jobseeker in the end, but have much to offer to the right employer.

TaTiO (formerly Skillset) was founded by two women — Maya Huber and Mor Panfil — who had worked in human resources for 13 years. Nir Familier joined them as the company’s CTO.

“We had clients approach us to find jobs who had a resume full of gaps or that didn’t represent their skills because they did some kind of career change or there was a shift in the market,” Huber tells Israel21c. “The main thing is that their resumes don’t reflect what they can do.”

The problem, as Huber sees it, is that “so many solutions still rely on resumes.”

Huber knows that from her own experience.

Even though she has a PhD and 15 years of experience in HR, “no one will consider me for a role like ‘head of product.’ They don’t understand the relevancy. There are so many people like me. Why should a company miss me as a qualified candidate?”

TaTiO’s simulations are tailored to the job. So, candidates interviewing for a sales rep job will go through a simulation where they enter a CRM (customer relationship management) tool and try to close three deals while interacting with prospective clients. TaTiO’s software tracks the candidates’ progress online.

“We collect 150 data points about

one’s performance,” Huber says. “The candidate then receives a report” which can help him or her improve next time.

The software doesn’t just look at what a candidate types during the simulation but analyzes the audio and video, too — all anonymously,

Huber stresses. “We don’t do any facial recognition video analysis.” Natural language processing (NLP) converts the audio to text.

If a candidate doesn’t pass the simulation, TaTiO can suggest a job in a different field, along with more simulations that last anywhere from five to 30 minutes.

Once a job is presented and the applicant clicks the button to move forward, the process continues on the employer’s website.

Before choosing a simulation, a candidate doesn’t see job titles but “opportunities,” Huber says, describing TaTiO as “a job experiences board.”

From a business perspective, TaTiO is B2B — their clients are the employers who pay an annual fee to guarantee a certain number of slots will be held for that company’s available jobs.

TaTiO is targeting candidates for entry-level, blue-collar, evergreen or volume hiring positions, “the kind that don’t normally advertise on LinkedIn,” Huber says.

“When the volume is higher, the impact is greater,” Huber explains. “Those markets are really missing candidates.”

TaTiO’s platform is entirely automated with “no humans involved,” Huber notes. “We only get involved if a jobseeker asks questions.”

Huber launched TaTiO in 2019 and the company has raised \$5 million. The product is currently an “open beta” with about 12 paying customers. The service is only available in the United States, although the company ran a test for Israel’s Ministry of Welfare and Social Services to hire more people with disabilities.

COVID impacted TaTiO’s business — how could it have not with so many people out of a job or working from home? “Many people

were forced into a career change,” Huber says. “They have great skills, but their resumes say they’re not qualified.”

Huber’s bottom line: “I wake up every morning and want to change the world, to create a workforce where people are hired based on competencies. It’s a new paradigm.”

Joonko’s focus is on “silver medalists,” individuals who interviewed at a company and almost made the cut.

These are highly qualified, pre-vetted candidates and, says Joonko CEO Ilit Raz, they deserve another chance at a different company. This is how Joonko hopes to help underrepresented candidates rise to the top.

Raz and her team first ask companies for a list of their “silver medalists” to present to other Joonko clients. In exchange, those companies get access to other silver medal-



TaTiO founders Nir Familier, Maya Huber and Mor Panfil.

TaTiO

ists beyond their own databases.

“Let’s say you applied to Nike for a marketing manager position but didn’t get the job. But you might be good for Adidas,” Raz explains.

Raz discovered the market opportunity for Joonko “by accident,” she says.

“We were trying to hire a woman data scientist. One of our investors realized how hard it was to find a woman for such a role and said,

HIRING

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Chamber of Commerce

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estate, accounting, financial services, banking.

“All of those folks are in there.”

Ripps also foresees the chamber increasingly becoming an integral part of the organized Denver Jewish community.

“We have what we call a Star of David program, where all of the religious organizations, the synagogues and temples, are free members. We’re working really hard to reach out to them . . . so when those rabbis hear things from members that cross into the business world, they can say, ‘Hey, you should go check this

group out.’ Then we can both cross-promote. That’s an area where I think we could unite the community a little more, provide some valuable resources.”

He is convinced that the chamber’s orientation toward Jewish values, its integration into the community and its central role as a business connector are why the organization is growing and will continue to grow in the future.

“It’s who we are. It’s why we’ve grown and it’s why people are so excited to be part of it,” Ripps says, summarizing the chamber’s goals in this way: “We’re just trying to do well, and to do good.”

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