

Israel Is Considering Outsourcing Its PR in the United States

From 'Salsa and Kugel' events to LGBT outreach: outsourcing of Philadelphia consulate's PR reveals Israel's communications strategy for America.

Uri Blau Sep 20, 2015 2:19 AM

Israel is considering outsourcing to private communications firms the public relations of its diplomatic missions in the United States in an effort to better connect with groups and population segments that are gaining increasing influence in the country, Haaretz has learned.

Over the last few months the Israeli consulate in Philadelphia has been working with a local PR firm as part of a pilot project, which could lead to similar outsourcing deals for other consulates in the United States.

The agreement with the company, which has been obtained by Haaretz, sheds light on Israel's PR strategy in the United States, which includes targeting districts of key members of Congress, reaching out to local gay groups and strengthening ties with the Hispanic community.

Last year, the Israeli consulate for the Mid-Atlantic region was chosen to be the first diplomatic mission to hire an outside group to handle its communications, including PR and social media efforts. Ceisler Media and Issue Advocacy group – a Pennsylvania firm specializing in public relations, grassroots advocacy and strategic communications – drafted a plan for the consulate and at the end of 2014 signed a \$90,000 contract that is set to end in November.

Larry Ceisler, principal of the firm, said that his staff has been taking part in meetings at the consulate, leading its social media efforts and organizing other activities. He also took some of his employees to Israel - at his own expense - to see the country and meet Foreign Ministry officials.

'For the love of Israel'

"We are doing it more for the love of Israel than for the money," he said in a phone interview.

The company's plan seeks to change the American public's perception of Israel, saying that many in the United States only know the Jewish state for its religious character or think of it as a war zone ravaged by terrorism and discord.

The blueprint promises to connect the consulate with key legislators, as well as community, business and opinion leaders. Some of the groups listed as potential targets by Ceisler – such as Jewish organizations, synagogues and religious groups – are traditional marks for Israeli PR efforts. More novel recommendations include LGBT organizations, the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce and regional environmental groups.

For its gay outreach, the firm suggests promoting "Israel's tolerance of LGBT rights" and getting in touch with youth groups "to demonstrate the success of LGBT youth in Israel." When it comes to Hispanic communities, it recommends connecting with pro-immigration groups and creating events titled "Salsa and Kugel."

'What if Gaza was near your city?'

Ceisler's ideas for more politically-linked activities include developing roundtables or panels around "hot-button Israeli issues" such as Iran's nuclear program and a project named "What if Gaza was Near Your City?". It also suggests to "identify members of Congress serving in leadership and on key committees to target their districts for targeted outreach."

Ceisler provides two case studies which, the firm writes, can be replicated across the region: the districts of Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives John Boehner and of West Virginia Senator Joe Manchin. In the first example, the firm recommends connecting with synagogues and chambers of commerce in the

area, while in the second case it suggests building “a database of people that sit on the boards of cultural organizations who also are involved in/connected to politics.”

Asked about this aspect of their work, Ceisler acknowledged that it appeared in the proposed plan, but added that “we probably have not done this per se.”

Ceisler said he is not sure if the pilot will continue once the contract expires.

The Foreign Ministry refused to allow consulate personnel to discuss the project with Haaretz. The ministry wrote in a statement that “the pilot examines cooperation between the consulate and a local PR firm to enhance and add value to the consulate’s work in the public space.”

Next year the ministry will evaluate the results of the pilot and examine further cooperation with the company, it said.

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