

photo courtesy of Gary Wexler

GARY WEXLER making positive change

BY LAUREN KRAMER

Ask most people what they want to be remembered for, and they'd likely be left stuttering. After all, it's not something you think about every day. But when the same question was directed at Gary Wexler, the answer pretty much rolled off his tongue. "I want to be remembered as a person of integrity, who was dedicated to using his profession to make positive change," he declared.

Wexler, 52, is the owner of Passion Marketing for Issues and Causes, a Los Angeles-based marketing firm that works exclusively with nonprofit entities and foundations. First and foremost, this father of three describes himself as a writer, which is perhaps why his articulate answer to my question was so prompt.

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Given to introspection when it comes to his career's focus, Wexler knows exactly what his *raison d'être* is. "I'm doing this because I want to help make change in the world," he says. "Through marketing for nonprofits, we can help our clients reach their goals, change the lives of human beings, improve the human condition and create better communities."

Lofty words, but a quick look at some of those clients reveals many large, influential organizations in the Jewish world and beyond. They include the Steinhardt Foundation, Spielberg's Righteous Persons Foundation and Shoah Foundation, the Andrea and Charles Bronfman Foundation, the Avi Chai Foundation, the Ford Foundation and the Lambi Fund for Haiti, which works with human rights and development in that country.

Wexler's work makes for compelling reading, with positioning statements that capture your attention immediately. One brochure for Cedars-Sinai Hospital depicts the concerned face of a physician looking down, ostensibly at a patient. "What can change all your priorities in a single moment?" reads the caption. Open the folder, and the answer is: Life. Another brochure, for Assaf Harofeh Medical Center, poses the question "What is a Hero?" Open the booklet and the copy and images speak persuasively of the various types of heroism and how they relate to the organization.

So it's no stretch of the truth to say that Wexler is a great copywriter, whose belief in his clients' goals is very transparent from his work. But he didn't start out marketing for non-profits. He honed his copy-writing skills in the for-profit market, working as creative director at Chiat/Day and Ogilvy & Mather, and winning awards for his work from the

New York Art Directors Club, the CA Annual, the Direct Marketing Association and Clio. Fifteen years ago, his clients included Coca-Cola and Apple Computer.

It was quite the jump to non-

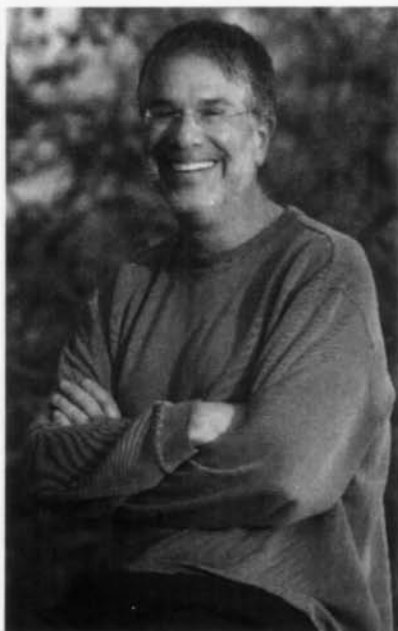


Photo courtesy of Gary Wexler

profit work, and how Wexler got there is an interesting story.

comprised of Hebrew school, which he dropped after his bar mitzvah, and memories of his mother lighting candles on *Shabbat*. The Jewish spark was rekindled, however, when he entered college and became editor of the student newspaper, covering the events of minority groups on campus. "One day I realized I was fascinated by all their cultures, and completely ignored my own," he recalls. "I joined the organization American Students for Israel in 1969 and that is when my Jewish identity began to emerge." A year later, a scholarship from the Jewish Agency led Gary to a summer-long seminar in Israel. "My Jewish identity was formed on the campuses of Los Angeles City College and Cal State Northridge College, and I was very much a secular Zionist until my mid-30s," he reflects.

That's when change came a-knocking. Wexler was beginning to realize that his for-profit marketing

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work as a co-owner of the marketing firm Wexler & Shalek was not contributing meaning to his life, so he sold his share. At the same time, he attended his first lunchtime Torah study session at the Rand Corporation.

"I became hooked," he recalls. "I found it intellectual, deeply meaningful and it hit me deep in my soul. It began to swing my Jewish involvement in a spiritual direction."

He spent the next 11 years freelancing, studying Torah, raising his three children—Miri, Micah and Keren—writing a book and doing volunteer

Born in Chicago, he moved to Los Angeles at the age of 12, with his parents Herbert and Emilie Wexler, a retail store paint salesman and a civil secretary. "I used to tell my parents we moved 2,000 miles to the same place, from the traditional Jewish neighborhood of Chicago's Albany Park to L.A.'s Fairfax area," he jokes.

Wexler describes his Jewish upbringing as being "thin at best,"

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marketing in the Jewish world for various organizations. "I also became president of the day school Parent Teachers Association, and almost gave them a nervous breakdown," he quips.

Wexler's participation in the Wexner Heritage Foundation, which trains Jewish leaders in the knowledge of Judaism, further raised the level of his consciousness and by the time the two-year intensive course was finished, "I realized by the business I did that I have an influence on the Jewish world through what I do," Wexler says.

On a more serious note, working from home during this time made Wexler a stay-at-home parent, an opportunity that bonded him to his children and Dana, his wife of 29 years. "I'm most proud of the type of children that we've raised, who are good people with a commitment to Judaism and to the entire world," he adds.

for profits, it's about gratification. With nonprofit, you're asking for money in exchange for a good feeling in your soul. How do you market to the intangible soul of the human being about the soul of society?"



Photo courtesy of Gary Wexler

the clients to do the work they do," says Wexler. "If they're doing advocacy, for example, it's about how we work with them on their advocacy strategies to reach results that change an opinion about an issue. It's not just about the materials we create. It's about the questions we raise and the results they incur."

Passion Marketing's long list of big-name clients speaks tellingly of the success of his business, and this is a great source of pride to Wexler, particularly given the negative input he received when he started the firm. "People told me nonprofits weren't ready for marketing and didn't have the budgets. They were wrong on both counts. I'm proud of the staff I've built and the commitment of our employees," he says.

I asked Wexler to wander down the road of life and tell me where he wants to be five years from now. "I would hope to be healthy, to have more free time, and Jewishly, to be

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By 1996, Wexler determined it was time to strike out alone again and formed Passion Marketing, dedicating his talents to nonprofits. At the time, he asked specialists in the industry about the discipline of nonprofit marketing, but their advice was ill-founded. "They said I should just bring what I knew from my for-profit work and it would work just fine on a nonprofit paradigm," he recalls.

"That's not true. The biggest difference between the two is that when people deal with nonprofits, they make a decision from the soul, whereas with

It would take Wexler and his team of 13 creative staff three years to learn the ropes. "One of the mistakes we made was not understanding process," explains Wexler. "Nonprofits are based on a process of professional and lay people making decisions together for the organization. We learned that in order to be successful, we have to be deeply understanding of how to deal and interact within an organization's process."

If it's hard to market to the human soul, how do you measure the success of that marketing? "Our success is enabling

living in Tel Aviv for part of the year and studying more Jewish texts. I also hope to have written several books on non-profit marketing and another novel." (His first novel, *The Foundation Stone*, is with an agent.)

Career-wise, Wexler is as ambitious as ever. "I hope to be one of the leaders of nonprofit marketing in the world, and to help make world change on that level," he says. "I chose a career that fulfills me in my soul, first and foremost. I'm proud that I've taken risks in life for what I've believed in, and it's worked." lifestyles