

# Boardroom Diplomacy

Fighting Israel's information battle, says a business-based model, is too important to be left to the pros

**Sandy Cash**

**I**F RATINGS RECEIVED BY THE recent TV hit series "Ambassador" are any indication, Israelis care deeply about their country's dismal image abroad. A reality show in which 14 telegenic finalists duked it out for a real job pleading Israel's case in New York, "Ambassador" made headlines in the local press. But stemming the rising anti-Zionist tide — especially in Europe, where a recent survey showed that two-thirds of the population consider Israel to be the greatest danger to world peace — will take more than great hair and a winning way with the camera. In fact, according to a new, business-based model of *hasbarah* — a Hebrew term translated as "advocacy" or "propaganda" — one of the most important contributions to Israel's PR efforts takes place behind closed doors. Some high-tech companies have found that knowing how to deal with issues like the separation fence or the upcoming disengagement is also good for business, developing sympathy that eventually can translate into sales and profits.

The Business Network for International Cooperation is a membership organization that aims to improve Israel's standing in Europe by giving senior business executives training to effectively communicate a pro-Israel message during their frequent trips abroad. Founded just after Operation Defensive Shield — the 2002 military cam-

paign into the West Bank in the wake of devastating suicide attacks, which triggered sometimes uninformed criticism of Israel's policies — BNIC was the brain-child of high-tech magnates Eli Ayalon and Yehuda Zisapel. Both Ayalon, chairman of the board and CEO of the DSP Group Inc., a leading wireless chip-making firm, and Zisapel, founder and president of Israel-based communications giant Rad-Bynet, are extraordinarily busy men. But according to Emmanuel Navon, a 34-year-old political communications consultant they hired as BNIC's director, busy people are often the best at getting the job done.

"With all the anti-Zionist sentiment out there, and the resurgence of efforts to create an anti-Israel boycott, advocacy training has become an essential part of business strategy," contends Navon, a nattily dressed man with a trim beard who received his early training at the elite Sciences-Po school for diplomacy in his native France, then moved to Israel at age 22. "Business leaders, more so than politicians, have the power to influence opinion because their colleagues respect them and are willing to listen. But BNIC is realistic about the time executives can devote to this. We keep training sessions short — about an hour — then supplement with one-page e-mail updates that prepare our members to handle the difficult discussions that inevitably come up."

Moshe Zelnik, a BNIC member and chief financial officer of Ayalon's DSP Group, believes even this modest amount of training can pay dividends, in more sympathetic customers. "At a conference in Italy, I had lunch

with a colleague who asked what I thought of Israel's 'apartheid wall.' Because I was prepared, I calmly explained how this wall has been very effective at protecting Israeli citizens. I elaborated with a personal story — another strategy suggested by the training — about my daughter who was a volunteer paramedic in the ambulance that arrived first when a Palestinian sniper shot and killed Noa Leibovich, a 7-year-old girl who was riding in her parents' car on Route 6, inside Israel, where there is a section of the barrier that is a wall. "My Italian colleague now has a more balanced view of Israel."

There are currently 60 BNIC members, and Navon hopes to expand this number to 200 over the next two years. The membership policy is easygoing, reflecting the ideological motives: "We ask for a minimum annual fee of \$1,000, but the actual amount depends on the company size," he says. While plans are in the works for recruiting venture capital, some 40 percent of the organization's initial seed money came from founding fathers Ayalon and Zisapel (each donated \$12,000, and some members of the board of directors gave similar start-up sums). And according to Navon, if BNIC achieves its financial goals — while refusing to divulge exact budget figures, he hopes to reach \$250,000 in income from dues and fees in 2005, which will be plowed back for the cause — Ayalon and Zisapel's support will drop to about 10 percent of the operating budget.

Not that BNIC seems to require much investment in pure business terms. Fueled by the energy of its more active volunteer members, its budget line is mostly devoted to paying for Navon's services, which include preparing and running training seminars and providing content for BNIC's weekly bulletins. The organization's rent-free headquarters are located within the offices of RAD, the company headed by Zisapel, and legal services and accountancy are provided pro bono by BNIC members.

**A**MONG THE MANY ISRAEL ADVOCACY organizations, Navon contends that BNIC is the only one geared specifically toward the business community. But it is not the first group to galvanize business talent in the interests of patriotism. The U.S.-based Business for Diplomatic Action, for example, trains volunteers from the business sector to combat growing anti-Americanism abroad. But in a world where a mastery of media spin is a recognized commodity, Navon's greatest challenge may lie elsewhere

— in hunting and capturing that most elusive of beasts: the Israeli consensus.

"In televised debates, you'll often hear more arguments between the Israeli panelists than between the Israelis and the Palestinians," says Navon. "But if you take away the extremes on the right and left, you'll find that there's a unified agenda, that 80 percent of the public can agree upon." According to Navon, the Israeli common denominator boils down to two issues — that Israel has a right to exist as a Jewish and democratic state, and that there is a need for some sort of a security fence. And, he says, when BNIC members — who represent a wide range of political viewpoints — travel abroad, controversial issues, like the upcoming pullout from Gaza and the northern West Bank, are better left at home.

If this sounds simplistic, or even deceptive, to the average Israeli, says Navon, that's just the problem. "Most Europeans don't care about the details of disengagement. They want to know whether Israel is a warmongering state, or a state that wants peace," adding that in what he calls the three guiding principles of effective PR — "keep it simple, be repetitive, and be credible" — BNIC members have a credibility advantage because they are businessmen, not professional politicians. "But we also have to stop being reactive. We have to be willing to stay on the offensive and set the agenda ourselves," he says.

Career diplomat Amir Griffin, director of the Foreign Ministry's Public Affairs Department, endorses the approach. "People tend to see Israel only through the conflict with the Palestinians," he says. "We'd like the world to recognize that Israel is a center of commerce and innovation, a place worth doing business with. Businessmen don't have to be trained diplomats to get this message across, and when they do, it's very helpful."

Navon recently brought his message to Bitband, a Netanyahu-based company specializing in streaming technology for on-demand video. Bitband's CEO Ervin Leibovici is a BNIC member who arranged for his staff of 50 to stop work at 3 p.m. to attend what Navon refers to as BNIC's "basic training" lecture. By hosting the hour-long presentation, Leibovici lost many more work hours. But, he says, not everything is measured in dollars and cents.

"We have a major problem with the media," he contends, "and as BNIC has helped me deal with foreign associates, I feel it's

right to share this information in a larger forum."

In his Bitband presentation, Navon demonstrated effective advocacy with the help of an unlikely assistant: Diana Buttu, legal adviser to the Palestinian Authority. Featured in a clip from a 2003 NBC News broadcast that Navon projected on the wall of the boardroom, Buttu elegantly sidestepped repeated questions about whether suicide bombings were detrimental to the Palestinian cause. Then she concisely laid out her own talking points: first, that the Israeli occupation is the root cause of the violence, and second, that the Israeli government is not interested in peace.

For Navon, Buttu's is exactly the type of performance that Israeli spokespeople should be emulating. "Buttu doesn't ignore the question, but she quickly reframes it, changes the agenda, then reinforces her core message. The Palestinians are extremely disciplined about this. In discussions about Israel with our colleagues abroad, Israelis should be disciplined too."

But can Israel's famously fractious democracy come up with a core message that will play in Paris? Emphatically, says Navon, the answer is yes. Political moderation is the key to successful international business, he maintains. "Israel's economy has been hurt by all the focus on divisive issues. And it's in the interest of Israeli businesspeople working in Europe to present a moderate front," he adds, because extreme political views — to the left or right — could alienate potential business partners. Rather than arguing about the separation fence, which the European media portrays as a crime anyway, we should reframe the argument to talk about where that fence should be and why."

The end result of such a united front, maintains Navon, will be greater sympathy for Israeli interests within the business community, and eventually, closer and more profitable business ties. But while BNIC founder Yehuda Zisapel agrees that his organization plays up the business angle when they approach potential members, he admits that the real value of BNIC can't be found in the bottom line. "Our members are all top-level professionals," he says, caught in a rare quiet moment between meetings and business trips. "Whatever their personal views, they believe that Israel must be represented in the most professional way possible."

And while the BNIC mission statement speaks of a two-part goal of improving both Israel's image and its business presence, for Zisapel, the real priority couldn't be clearer. "For me, it's Zionism," he says. "One hundred percent Zionism." ●



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