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MAGAZINE

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July/August 2021
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Casket & Shipping

The Casket's Role in Today's Funeral - Notes from the Associate Editor, Joe Weigel
The Benefits of Digital Merchandising and Why it Matters by Marketing Team at Matthews-Aurora
Generational Shifts & Changes in Funeral Consumer Purchasing by Danielle Thacker
"Looking Back" Unique and Antique Caskets by Mike Beardsley
A Peek Inside The Operation at Eagle's Wings Air
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Saved from Obscurity The Story of Pleasant Hill Cemetery by Mariah Gregory
Approaching the Rainbow Bridge By Yaunah Hairston
Five Types of Email Marketing by Welton Hong
South Carolina FDA Expo and Election of 2021-22 Officers & Directors + Photos
The Blessings and the Curses of Being a Funeral Director by Todd Van Beck

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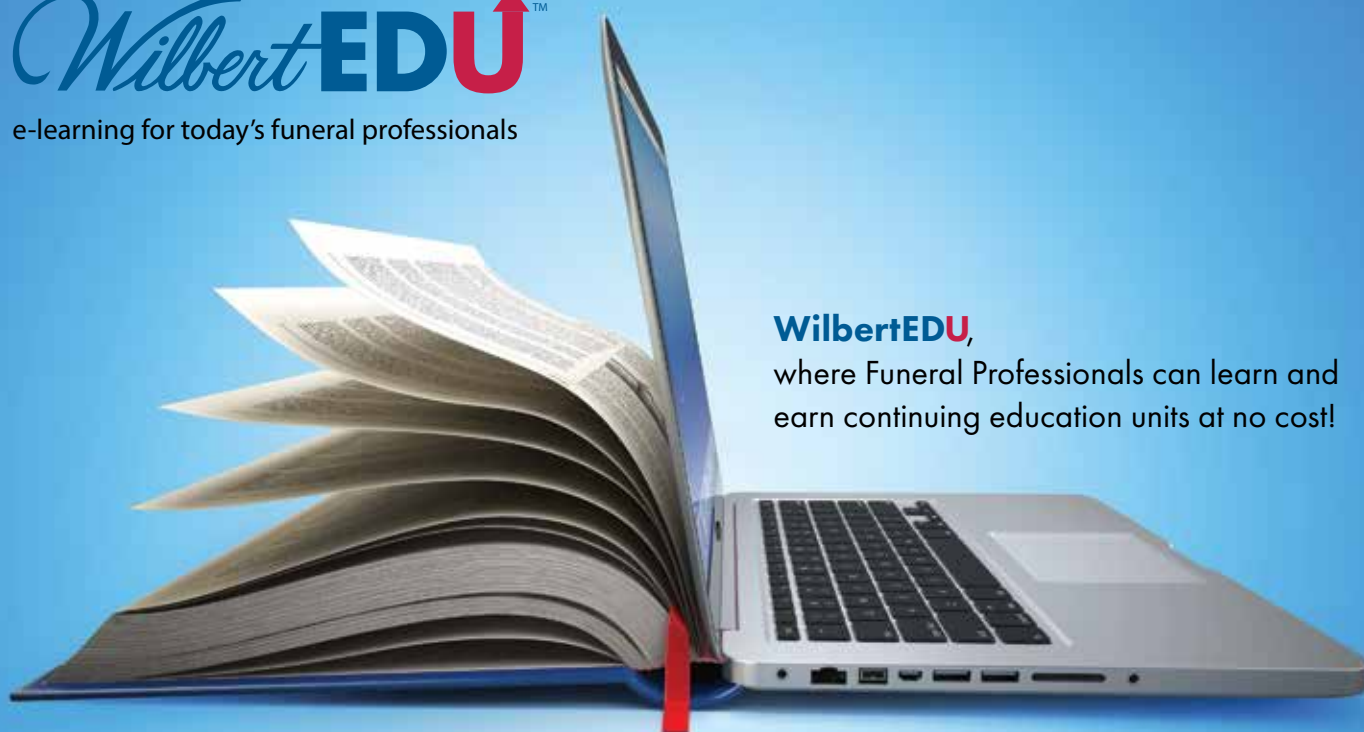
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"Success is the sum of small efforts repeated day in and day out." Robert Collier, Author



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notes from the editor

The Casket's Role in Today's Funeral

Notes from the Associate Editor by Joe Weigel

If you would have asked me 25+ years ago when I first started in funeral service what the purpose of the casket was for the funeral, my response in some fashion would have focused primarily on metal caskets and their ability – thanks to a rubber gasket – to resist the entrance of outside elements. Throughout my career, my thoughts on the role of the caskets have certainly changed as trends have changed.

There was a period in the '90s, where caskets were seen by some as the best way to personalized a funeral service. With interchangeable corners, special drawers, and embroidered panels, the casket helped tell the story about the family's loved one who had died. Over the years, casket merchandising – and the mantra “good-better-best – fell by the wayside as funeral homes began to take the revenue burden off the casket and place it on their professional services.

Family preferences continue to drive changes in funeral service, including the trend away from “traditional” funerals. Much has been written on this topic, including the move away from religious services towards more secular services. One of the byproducts of this movement has been less of an emphasis placed on casket selection by funeral directors, thereby reducing the inherent value of caskets in the eyes of families.

As a result, successful casket manufacturers and distributors have responded by 1) offering caskets at lower price points, 2) providing caskets for special needs (i.e. oversize) and manufacturing caskets that can also be used for cremation – and 3) ensuring caskets are readily available for prompt delivery to the funeral home.

Today's families are looking for the best combination of price, quality, and selection, which equals value. Regardless of trends, one thing that has not changed is the fact that for many families, the casket is still the

centerpiece of the funeral service at the funeral home. It is the last thing that a family buys for their loved one; it will frame their “memory picture” of their loved one for years to come.

Caskets fulfill both a practical and a symbolic role. The practical role is to provide a container for human remains. Symbolically, the style, beauty, and features of a casket represent the family's feelings for the deceased. In the end, caskets and their role remain central to the funeral process.

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The Benefits of Digital Merchandising and Why it Matters

By Marketing Team at Matthews-Aurora

Prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic, funeral homes wanted to incorporate technology into their business to simplify daily operations and to better assist families. However, at the height of the pandemic, technology became a necessity – a crucial asset to helping families at a time when many restrictions were in place. To this day, an increasing number of funeral homes are utilizing digital tools to present funeral merchandise and services to families because it is what the funeral home and the family both want – a streamlined approach to help families with pre-need and at-need decision making.



Technology does not necessarily mean “out with the old and in with the new.” Some funeral homes are leveraging these resources with their existing selection room, but many have even replaced the traditional selection room space completely with the help of comprehensive digital merchandising capabilities available through funeral industry providers.

Unsure about how digital merchandising can help funeral homes grow top-line revenue and adapt to families’ changing expectations? Here are several key ben-

efits to incorporating digital merchandising into your business:

Digital merchandising offers more selections for families whether selecting burial or cremation. Even the largest selection rooms can seem limiting. For example, a funeral home with 10-25 caskets and an assortment of urns showcased in a display not only takes up a fair amount of space in the showroom, but it is limiting the family to only that assortment when there is much more to offer. If families are interested in a maple casket, you

					
2308 Estate Midnight Blue Copper \$9,575	3851 Newport Brushed Stainless Steel \$6,775	Sanctuary Brushed Blue/Di Stainless Steel \$6,150	1556 Going Home Diamon... 18 Gauge \$4,625	Neopolitan Spruce Blue 18 Gauge \$4,600	1725 Blue Brushed 18 Gauge \$4,400
					
843 Midnight Blue 18 Gauge \$4,150	Springfield Brushed Natura... 18 Gauge \$4,100	887 Freedom Midnight Blue 18 Gauge \$3,675	Affinity London Blue 20 Gauge \$3,575	1382 Potomac Ocean Blue 18 Gauge \$3,450	Going Home Spruce Blue/S... 18 Gauge \$3,250

can offer all the maple caskets available to them. If a particular family is interested in the color pink, you can offer all the caskets available to them with a pink exterior or even a pink interior. If a family wants a bronze urn, they are not limited to the three in the showroom. Digital merchandising enables you to delight families and help them find the perfect memorial products for their loved one.

The Matthews Aurora™ Funeral Solutions' Solution Center is a free digital merchandising system that enables funeral homes to customize their product selections and retail pricing to show Matthews Aurora caskets, urns, keepsakes and more, with easy ordering. Funeral Directors can create custom showrooms for certain product groups and product lines and can work along with the family to browse caskets by material, color and interior, to give the family exactly what they are looking for.

Digital merchandising also provides the opportunity for funeral homes to improve their overall sales and profitability on funeral merchandise. With more offerings in the funeral home's target price range thanks to an expanded selection of merchandise, families usually purchase better caskets and urns than in a traditional selection room. This circles back to the importance of being able to create a tailored assortment that does not feel limiting and still benefits the funeral home and the families they serve.

With programs such as the Arranger presentation system from Matthews Technology Solutions, families feel like they are custom designing their funeral choices leading to value-added sales and revenue. With

powerful selection guides, funeral arrangers can assist families as they navigate the myriad choices to find the perfect casket or urn for their loved one. The feature-driven selection guides can help simplify the sales of other products that funeral homes may offer, including flowers, keepsakes, bronze or granite memorials, or even reception menus.

Digital merchandising allows you to take your selection room with you on-the-go. The greater the technological capabilities, the less hard copy paperwork there is. No more lugging papers and lithograph binders when meeting with families in the comfort of their home. The digital merchandising solutions listed above can all be done from a laptop, tablet or smartphone.

Digital merchandising helps transform your space. Many funeral homes have reduced their casket and urn inventory to almost nothing, or just the bare minimum, by utilizing digital merchandising. They have recaptured significant space and created new possibilities for serving families with that space. Maybe it is a new reception area or re-designing an existing meeting space to make families feel a bit more at ease and comforted. Finally, digital merchandising supports the ability to connect with families remotely so that all family members, regardless of where they are in the world, can help participate in the service and merchandise selection process. Families can do just that with Family Connections from Matthews Technology Solutions.

The benefits of digital merchandising all boil down to this: funeral homes can simplify their showrooms, simplify their product offering and streamline the arrangement process. Families are given more choices than ever before for memorializing their loved one and can do so conveniently. Digital merchandising is here to stay, as it continues to appeal to both funeral professionals and the families they serve. It also helps funeral homes reach their fullest potential in assisting families when they need it most.



Generational Shifts & Changes in Funeral Consumer Purchasing

by Danielle Thacker, VP Sales and Marketing, Thacker Casket Company

The funeral world is spinning faster than it ever has. Rising cremation; consumers de-valuing funerals; internet sales – these are big topics yielding big impacts to every funeral home in the United States. Any funeral home owner who doesn't put serious thought into how it will tackle these topics, will be left with their business spinning right into the ground.

With that being said, most funeral home owners will say “Well, where do I start?”. You must start with the typical consumer – the family that the funeral home typically serves. Often funeral homes have defined their own “target market” within their community. The funeral home may be wanting to target those families needing a more affordable service; some funeral homes may want to target the elite families in town; some funeral homes may want to target a particular religious segment of consumers in a market. There are a variety of markets that a funeral home may choose to target within their community. Regardless of the market the funeral home is targeting, there are two constants: 1) a funeral home must align their service and product offerings with the preferences of the defined target market and 2) the funeral home must recognize similarities that exist within every target market – the changing generation of funeral consumers.

Once the funeral home has defined their target market, the funeral home needs to drive all service and product offerings to meet the needs of the consumers they are targeting. For example, when developing service packages, it is important that if, for example, the funeral home is targeting a segment of consumers that is the upper-class consumers within the community, then the funeral home needs to make sure that they build in value-add offerings within their service packages – the things that the funeral home does, but their competitor's don't and thus the higher price. On the contrary, if the funeral home is targeting a more budget conscious customer segment, then the funeral home will likely need to strip away any value-add features that the funeral home offering within a package in order to be

able to meet the pricing levels that this customer segment demands.

In addition to carefully selecting services to offer, it is equally important to have a product offering that is also reflective of the customer segment. Offering the wrong mix of products at the wrong price point can create an incongruent message to the families the funeral home serves. As an example, if the same funeral home who is targeting a more budget conscious consumer has a low service charge, but then high charges for merchandise, then the funeral home might end up in the “pricing middle” thus missing the boat on the consumers it is targeting. Aligning the product and service offerings and pricing can be very critical to both customer (family) satisfaction and also perception of the funeral home within the community.

As critically important as recognizing the market of consumers the funeral home is targeting is also the ability to recognize the radical shift in today's generations of funeral consumers. This applies to all funeral homes, no matter their target market. Fifteen to twenty years ago, funeral consumers were comprised of those from the silent/traditionalist and greatest generations. These generations were characterized by their high levels of patriotism and loyalty. In addition, they were also very trusting in purchasing decisions. They trusted the “subject matter expert” to lead them to exactly what they thought was appropriate for their needs.

Now let's contrast that with today's generation of funeral consumers: Baby Boomers, Generation X and Millennials. While each of these generations carries their own set of values, characteristics, etc. their purchasing psychology and behavior is similar. First and foremost, these generations question. These generations of consumers will question the value or benefit of a feature if they cannot clearly see it for themselves. They are nimble with their ability to navigate technology and quickly “fact check” from their mobile device while sitting across from the table. They value the opinions

of other consumers through online reviews over and above the opinion of a subject matter expert. To appeal to these consumers, transparency, honesty and clarity in communication is an absolute.

Now, translate this to merchandise sales, and more specifically drilling down to presenting caskets. Think of today's consumers when it comes to selecting a casket: Have they ever questioned why one casket costs so much more than the next casket? Have they ever sat on their phone while you are talking, looking up the cost of caskets on their phone? Have they ever ordered a casket online to avoid the higher price that the funeral home may charge? These are very real challenges that funeral home's today are facing and are exactly characteristic of today's generation of funeral consumers, but also of funeral consumers of the future. Instead of "wrestling" with the challenges of today's consumers, embrace their viewpoints and learn to swim with this changing tide.

To do this, we must first understand where we are at today. Caskets are still the largest merchandise revenue and profit generator for a funeral home. While there may not be a ton of focus by industry organizations and publications on this topic – it is still a topic that should remain at top of mind for a funeral home owner/manager as it can cost a funeral home its entire yearly profitability if not managed correctly and effectively.

With that being said, I have had funeral home owners openly say to me that, "Casket merchandising is dead" and guess, what – I have agreed with them! – albeit only partially. The way that we have marketed and merchandised caskets in the past is indeed dead. There are practically no funeral consumers left in the greatest generation and very few left in the traditionalist/silent generation. Yet, as an industry we continue to market to Baby Boomers, Generation X and Millennials as we did to these loyal, trusting and patriotic previous generations. We are expecting them to fall in line and accept the message as we have always said it. Guess what?!? – they won't accept it!

So, what will work is the question? First and foremost, ditch marketing off concepts such as gauge of metal, round ends, swing bars, etc. These were value features important to funeral directors, but have almost no importance to today's generation of funeral consumers. Here's an example: today's funeral consumer will look

at the detailing of the hardware and determine whether it meets their aesthetic preferences, but will not make a decision of which casket to buy due to the hardware being swing bar or stationary bar. Swing bar v. stationary bar is a value feature important to a funeral director, not a funeral consumer.

Next, embrace the concepts of value in a casket coming in the form of overall aesthetic appeal, colors, themes, fabrics, affordability, etc. Use these concepts in creating a product mix and retail pricing plan that aligns with the consumer's expectations in these areas. It is important to create "progressive visual value" – the ability for the family to clearly see with their eyes the reason that one casket costs more than the previous casket – it provides more value in terms of eye appeal.

Here's an example: if you know that the families served like the look of a tailored interior more than a shirred interior, than feature this look on caskets that will produce your target profitability point or higher – don't offer on caskets that are below that point. Another example is that if the funeral home's target market is highly religious and prefers religious themes on caskets – then again, provide this on caskets at or above target profitability.

Getting back to the purchasing habits of today's generation of consumers, it is important to make sure that your product mix and retail pricing aligns with not only the competitors down the street, but also the "unseen" competitor that is the Internet, Amazon, Walmart, Costco, etc. Center your focus on today's consumer and their ability to question. Here is a great example: offer caskets in the selection room that provide the family great eye appeal, but are affordable. Instead of offering the dinosaur 18 gauge round end product, offer a 20 gauge gasketed casket with similar eye appeal. This will keep the funeral home's profit in tact, while simultaneously allowing the funeral home to sell a similar product (as far as eye appeal) at a lesser price. This allows the funeral home to close the gap between the price that was seen online versus the price within the funeral home's selection room.

To conclude, it's critically important to stay customer centric in developing the service and product offerings of a funeral home. Delivering a product and service mix that achieves the goals of the target market at an appropriate price is paramount in creating a cohesive

brand strategy. As the world of funerals continues to spin faster and faster, it is important to take some time to reflect on the strategy of the funeral home to make sure it is adequately addressing the needs of the customer segment served.



Danielle Thacker serves as VP of Sales & Marketing for Thacker Caskets. Danielle leads a team of sales representatives throughout the east coast and midwest. Visiting hundreds of funeral homes on an annual basis, Danielle enjoys learning the challenge that each individual firm faces and creating

solutions that help them be the strongest small business they can be!

About Thacker

Founded in 1939 by Carl C. Thacker on North Capitol Street in Washington, DC, Thacker Caskets, Inc. began as a relatively small and local funeral supply jobber serving customers in greater Washington, DC market. Originally called Old Dominion Casket Company, the name was changed to Thacker Caskets in the early 1970s. Thacker ingenuity was evident from the start as Carl pioneered a number of advertising and promotional strategies – he was the first to photograph his product line and transfer the photos to slides. In this way, he was able to display his caskets via projector in a vibrant slide show format.

Following Carl Thacker's untimely death, in 1981 his wife Audrey and son Carl J. ("CJ") assumed leadership of the company. While others might have been tempted to sell or close the business, Audrey and CJ were committed to perpetuating Carl's dream, and building upon his legacy. Under their direction, the company grew and prospered.

By 1989, the company had outgrown their original location. They relocated to their headquarters and distribution center to their current home in Clinton, MD, adjacent to Joint Base Andrews – home to the United States Air Force and Navy. In 1991 the company's first satellite distribution center was established in Pittsburgh, PA and in 1995, Thacker purchased Spencer Casket Company in Richmond, VA in its first acquisition.

A major step forward was taken in January 1999 when Thacker Caskets announced the acquisition of the Loretto Casket Company. After the change in management, immediate improvements were made to the Loretto buildings including new conveyor lines and drying ovens. The production grew from approximately 22 caskets per day to over 160 caskets per day, truly an incredible accomplishment and testimonial to the skills and dedication of the management and employees of Loretto Casket Company.

Continuing on the growth path, in June of 2001, Thacker purchased majority ownership in Balanced Line Casket Company of Cambridge City, IN. Long one of the most revered names in the Midwest, the Balanced Line acquisition enabled Thacker to enter the important Indiana, Michigan, and Ohio markets.

Yet another milestone was reached in June of 2005 when the Thacker family purchased a 210,000 square foot facility in Florence, Alabama – now home to Thacker Casket Manufacturing. The company's rapid growth had put great pressure on the older Loretto facilities. The new plant provides a wonderful working environment for our employees and the opportunity to take advantage of manufacturing efficiencies simply not available in the former environment.

In 2010, Thacker made yet another investment back into the company by purchasing the assets of Ampcor II, a leading casket handle and hardware maker. This purchase has supplemented Thacker's efforts to vertically integrate, yet again, into casket handle and hardware manufacturing.

Today, a third generation of Thacker's is already involved in the company looking forward to continuing the legacy for generations to come. It has been quite a journey from the streets of Washington, DC to presently being the largest family owned casket company in the United States. The Thacker commitment to providing exceptional value and exemplary service has never wavered. It is this dedication and commitment to their customers that has been the guiding spirit at Thacker Caskets, Inc.



Growing Success Together.

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“Looking Back” Special thanks to Mike Beardsley for sharing these unique and antique casket photos from decades past



Mike Beardsley started his career in the funeral supply industry with the Marsellus Casket Company of Syracuse, N.Y., in 1973. Mike served as Field Sales Manager, and later as Director of Sales and Marketing, until the closure of Marsellus in August, 2003. Mike joined Thacker Caskets, Inc. in 2004 as their VP of Sales & Marketing.

Throughout his career, Mike has been a frequent speaker at numerous state funeral director association meetings and conventions, and has been a presenter for the National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA). Presently, Mike serves on the Board of Directors of the Casket and Funeral Supply Association, and was Chairman of CFSA'S 2013 Centennial Celebration Committee. Mike also serves CFSA on several additional committees.



1940's Northwestern 20ga non-gasketed...pretty fancy, art deco style is very cool



1924 Bellville electrically lighted casket



1961 Aurora Transition “space capsule”



1920 Boyertown 2200 Bronze sitting on a Maxwell Steel Vault (Oneida, NY)



1877 Typical Ice Coffin/Corpse Preserver (likely a Disbrow & VanCleve)



1928 Boyertown "all lace finish" casket for metal or wood



Guy's Patent cement casket (this may have been the only one they ever made!) likely 1875 ish



1896 Crane & Breed Mummiform sarcophagus disinterment



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A Peek Inside The Operations At Eagles Wings Air

Dave McComb and Frank Kaiser, co-owners of Eagle's Wings Air (EWA), have both seen and experienced a lot over the course of their long and successful careers in the profession. And their unique backgrounds – McComb as a fourth-generation independent funeral home owner and Kaiser as an expert in logistics and transportation management – have combined to create a unified vision for a better way to manage air transportation of human remains in the funeral service community.

In addition to the combined strength of their respective backgrounds, their ability to adapt to changes and evolve with the industry has played no small part in the continued success of EWA. Today, the company has firmly established itself as the nation's leading logistics provider of air transportation management services to funeral homes and shipping services. Through a centralized customer service center, EWA leverages proprietary software and their knowledge of airline operations to find the best flight itinerary, secure space on the aircraft, and proactively monitor status of transfer from start to finish, delivering time-savings and peace-of-mind to its funeral service clients. To date, EWA has proactively managed more than 180,000 transfers of loved ones home for ceremony.

Even with their extensive experience, however, neither McComb or Kaiser (or the rest of their EWA team, for that matter) were prepared for how the funeral service profession would be turned upside down by the COVID-19 pandemic beginning last year. Now, more than a year later, we felt it was a good time to touch base with McComb and Kaiser to see how their team dealt with the pandemic's profound impact on their business – and how they see logistics and transportation management of getting loved ones home for ceremony continuing to evolve moving forward.

Lucky 13

For those of us that may be a bit superstitious, the number 13 needs no explanation. The number has long been believed to be an omen of bad luck or impending doom



– again, leading those more superstitiously inclined to avoid it however they can.

You could forgive the team at EWA, then, if they felt like they were experiencing an epic and extended dose of bad luck just as their 13th year in business was getting under way in April 2020. Even as the full scale and scope of the COVID-19 pandemic was still not fully known at that time, the team at EWA recognized that certain industries were being particularly hard hit because of the pandemic – like the airline industry.

Few industries were harder hit than airlines, with capacity reductions of more than 90 percent at times during 2020. This, in turn, forced airlines to reduce flights and furlough staff to reflect this drop in demand – all of which combined to make the air transportation of human remains more difficult than ever.

On top of all this, McComb and Kaiser had to look out for the safety of their team and how the pandemic was impacting their ability to do their jobs.

“First and foremost for us was ensuring the health and safety of our team,” McComb said. “We are fortunate that, as the realities of the pandemic came into view for us in March 2020, we were able to transition our entire team to work-from-home in less than 10 days with no interruptions to service or availability. It was a true team effort – and an example of the service mentality of EWA.”

Indeed, and as they've done since the company's founding, the EWA team adapted and evolved to meet these unique challenges head-on. While they've always prided themselves – and credited some of their success – to their strong relationships with the major airlines' cargo

operations, they leveraged and strengthened those relationships even more during COVID to ensure loved ones were still making it to their destinations on time despite severely reduced flight frequency.

“We can’t do our job without the cargo teams for all the major airlines – they are our true partners,” Kaiser explained. “So we had to work closely and consistently with them as they were dealing with the impact to their industry, which was obviously one of the industries hardest hit. It wasn’t easy, but it’s reflective of the relationships and mutual trust we’ve built over the past 13-plus years with them.”

And so, a year later, McComb and Kaiser and the EWA team officially marked their 13th anniversary this past April. It was an opportunity to take a quick step back and truly marvel at how much the team had accomplished in the face of such adversity and uncertainty.


“It’s hard to put into words how incredibly proud Dave and I are of our team and the dedication and effort they showed in the face of unprecedented challenges over the past 15-plus months,” said Kaiser. “It’s certainly been the most challenging period of my career, and I’m excited how we’ve emerged as a team stronger and better positioned than ever. We’ve added staff and invested in new technology – all to enhance the service we provide to our funeral service clients.”

Indeed, where many industries and companies – including their airline partners – were laying off or furloughing staff, EWA continued to add to its team throughout 2020. (He likes to point out that EWA’s customer care team of 21 people is now larger than those of the cargo-reservation teams at the major airlines.)

They’ve also made continued investments in technology to ensure that growing team is equipped with the right tools to maintain and strengthen the care and service they provide each client. And they’ve continued to do so while maintaining an entirely remote work force.

As for where they see logistics and transportation management within funeral service going, Kaiser sees the value of partnerships and people only growing – and the “proactive” part of their approach only becoming more important. With an airline industry that seems as though it will be in flux for the foreseeable future, providing truly proactive management of ship-outs – and, as a result, peace of mind – to funeral service professionals through a strong team and strong partnerships will continue to be the name of the game. And the foundation of EWA’s success.





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Why We All Need Funeral Homes to be Profitable

by Mark Evans, VP Sales, Wilbert Funeral Services

The most obvious things seem to resonate more when they hit home...

I have either directly been affiliated with or indirectly following funeral service since the year 2000. Granted, my principal interest historically has been from the perspective of selling caskets and selection room support services to funeral home owners. Straight forward, it's a fairly simple proposition, or at least it used to be more so... But today, owners have a greater challenge of sustaining their profitability than ever before. On Saturday, July 10th, 2021, I wound up having to drive over ten hours one-way to attend the funeral of one of my dearest relatives who died at 81 years of age. My uncle will always be one of the people who I have loved most in this world, and for many reasons that only a slow cigar and a good bourbon might ever get out of me. Needless to say, Hurricane Elsa's torrential impact on air travel last weekend would never have kept me from traveling from Dayton to Little Rock overnight to be there for the 9 AM visitation and 10 AM services. Nothing on earth would have.

As I sat there in the chapel grasping with the same emotions most do in such times, I became so aware of how truly thankful I was for funeral home owners. Although I have literally been inside of hundreds and hundreds of funeral homes all over North America, this time especially, it hit me just how much I appreciated having such a place to be with family and to grieve. But this time, rather than getting the standard facilities tour around the premises, I was sitting front and center in a pew reserved for mourners. Sitting there listening to the minister and the selected hymns, I couldn't help but think that I was so relieved to make my way to Little Rock and be with my family and see my uncle once last time on this earth.

I looked around the chapel and took it all in. Just how well maintained it was, how tasteful it was, and how the owners and the staff had given care of every single detail. In that moment, I developed a deeper and lasting appreciation of just how invaluable funeral home owners are and why we all need them to be there for us.

Even if we are in the business, when the time comes for us to be in the front pew, we need what funeral professionals have always and still provide to families every day.

After the services and visiting with family I rarely ever see these days, and as I drove back northward, I thought long and hard about just how much our industry has changed in just the last decade and how funeral home owners are constantly challenged with the ever-increasing onslaught of rising cremation and inflationary impacts on their business. And, how both are so closely tied because of continued rising prices, especially for caskets, and how that contributes to consumers' overall interest in cremation. I thought about my travels around the country often hearing owners talk about how their business is struggling, even despite the pandemic in some cases, and that it's increasingly harder to take peace and comfort in their business's own long-term financial solvency because of rising product costs and cremation impacts.

Having recently rejoined the casket industry after a few years away, it has been incredible to see just how the landscape has changed. Not just with funeral home and supplier consolidation, but also with some manufacturers protecting their profitability by moving manufacturing operations out of the United States, although continuing to over-inflate casket prices year after year, after year...after year.

There is no escaping the fact that the practice of inflationary pricing has become almost blasé. So much in fact, it requires little effort or analysis to demonstrate how some casket makers over-inflate prices each year like it's an automatic rite of passage. More amazingly is how so many funeral home owners, at least seemingly, have come to accept the annual escalations as expected and normal. As if their own business' profitability is secondary to that of the supplier. Of course, to keep their funeral business afloat for the current generation, much less the next, their local family consumers will just have to pay more and more in order for them to make payroll, provide good benefits, attract

and retain quality employees, etc.... Never mind that, the price of caskets **MUST** go up again this year, they hear, and which will be assuredly repeated the following fiscal year.

What's occurring more and more today is how select casket makers have become savvy at raising their discounts to the point where funeral home owners, the bread-and-butter Mom & Pop ones, are "convinced" that they are finally getting a fair shake at comparable discounts like much larger operators. However, that is just not true. Today, the email landscape is flooded with 40% to 50% off deals, which have far too many owners disillusioned that they are getting a great deal. Again, however, that is just not true either!

The cold, hard fact is that some casket makers have been raising their wholesale prices 2-3 times that of real inflation for decades now. Meaning that they could begin a "Buy 1, Get 1 Free" campaign and **STILL** make money! That is the result of what's called "Over-Inflation"... meaning charging way more than what you need to cover real cost increases to run the business at normal margins. This decades-old approach has prov-

en to be a tremendous disservice to funeral home owners and the consuming families they serve.

The odds are that if you're reading this article and believe you are getting a so-called "great discount" on your caskets, even better than ever before, then you're most likely way overpaying for caskets, especially compared to what some other quality providers could offer. The bottom-line is this: How is it working for **YOUR** Firm? Do you feel great about where your firm's profitability is today? Is it improving or shrinking? If shrinking, then perhaps you should explore just how other full line providers could possibly help you sustain your business' short and long-term financial viability while still providing high quality, full line casket offerings. Regardless, whatever your discount is, the bottom-line is that you will never deposit a discount!

What matters most is your funeral home brand, your firm's long-term success, and just how well your families like how your firm takes care of their needs. And if another casket provider can add 10%, 20%, 30%, 40%, or even 50% more bottom-line profitability,



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then you are well within your “rights” to explore your options. What is most important for the families you serve, is that you, your staff, and your firm remains in a financially viable position to be there for them when they need you. I know my family needed that to the be case last weekend. Further, I know that countless other families will this weekend, the next weekend, and the next one after that!

But when I recently visited the extreme southeast corner of the Kentucky and heard about a cremation rate approaching 50% on a regular basis, from the owner of a firm that has been in business for over fifty years, then he and I both knew that his business (and especially financials) was taking a huge painful hit. Which, in and of itself, was incredible to hear about since only a few short years ago the local cremation rate was down in the teens. I could see it on his face. That is where our discussion turned to how we could possibly help. While we cannot stop a growing consumer interest in cremation, we could cut his casket bill almost in half and still allow him to proudly serve his client families and even bring on an extra funeral director.

The question is: How can funeral home owners best ensure they are in business for decades to come to serve families in need. From my perspective, I will tell you this... It is not by continuing to succumb to the age-old practice of over-inflated price increases and smoke and mirror discount games that has become the norm. There is a better, fairer way to do business.

If you are in funeral service, then you probably know just how well our industry serves grieving families. But if you are one of those families, then you probably never think about it until you’re sitting in that front center pew. Then it absolutely means all the difference in the world. I know it did for me.

At the end of the day, we need funeral homes to not just survive, but to be profitable and thrive, so that they are able to be there for us all when it’s our own time to sit in the front, center pew.

Mark Evans is currently Vice President of Sales for Wilbert Funeral Services’ Casket Division.



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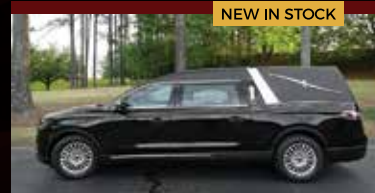
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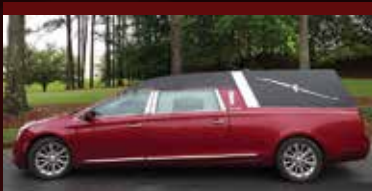
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Staying on the Forefront with New Products and Innovations

By: Paul Holzman,
Director of Marketing, Batesville

Like many of you, I have spent most of my adult life – more than 3 decades – in the funeral industry. There have been tremendous changes over that time, and I have learned a few lessons, especially about the importance of understanding shifts in market dynamics and consumer trends. This knowledge has been invaluable in helping us shape the direction of new products and drive innovations that deliver greater value for funeral directors and families.

Change can be hard, but at Batesville, we view it as a new opportunity to improve on what came before. To combine experience-based learning with demographic data, consumer research and market trends to build new solutions that align with current requirements.

Here are three of the latest trends impacting funerals and some of the new products Batesville provides to meet the increased demand.

Honoring a life of service – NO1 military collection

Our industry is built on honoring lives – and none are more honorable than veterans who served our country. In the United States, almost 300,000 active or former members of the Armed Forces die each year, making this one of the larger groups funeral directors have the

privilege of serving.

Veteran's funerals occur in all parts of the country but are especially prevalent in the South. Texas, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, and Virginia are among the top ten states with the largest number of veterans. Not surprisingly, the makeup of the overall population is correlated to the recency of conflicts in our history.

- Gulf War veterans (51%)
- Vietnam veterans (40%)
- Korean War veterans (7%)
- World War II veterans (2%)



NO1 Sydney (Air Force)



NO1 Sydney

The pomp and circumstance – and the respect our nation has for its military – is profound. And while the numbers of veterans may be declining, the importance of honoring them remains a top priority for funeral professionals and suppliers.

Military traditions run deep and often make their way into a veteran's final ceremony, the funeral. In its most formal expression, a military funeral can require tremendous precision with strict protocols that must be carried out. There is a majesty to these services that allows family members and friends to feel the sacrifice

and commitment of their loved one.

In other cases, an individual's military service is just one aspect of a richer tapestry of their life that is reflected in the casket or other elements of the funeral, such as the obituary, service programs or a personalized video tribute.

Chances are, you will conduct many veterans' funerals and the majority will include some recognition of the service they rendered to our country. Batesville is proud to offer a variety of products that have been designed and built with that noble purpose in mind. One of those is the NO1 collection, a group of four distinguished 18-gauge steel caskets – two in formal black and two in shades of blue that reflect the uniforms of the branches of the U.S. military.

Sophisticated paint colors are complemented by simple, yet striking hardware and interiors made of the finest velvets that are piped with cordage to honor the uniforms of the U.S. Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, and Coast Guard. Families can choose an embroidered military insignia at no additional cost as a finishing touch and tribute to their loved one. Formal, elegant and meaningful, this group of products truly honors a life of service.

More flexibility for all families

Response to the NO1 collection has been tremendous, but funeral directors had one request – to make these same sophisticated caskets available for all families. We did that and added even more value by taking advantage of our Family Choices® personalization platform. Each unit received an upgraded interior panel that accepts any of our nearly 100 LifeStories® or LifeSymbol® designs.

With so many choices, there is almost limitless flexibility to tell a loved one's life story. Families can choose the embroidered military insignia for the cap panel as shown in the image here or choose a spiritual medallion, a golfer design or dozens of other options. The choice is completely theirs, based on how they wish to remember their loved one.

Batesville's patented panel and magnetic attachment system make it easier than ever to design a personal and meaningful final resting place.

The NO1 is available in Batesville customer service

centers now.

The Clifton 27" Select – a larger version of a best-selling design

As a funeral director, you work hard to make sure every detail is perfect, so families can honor their loved ones with dignity and respect. That includes making sure the body rests comfortably in the casket for the viewing and visitation. As a general rule, the average casket sold in the U.S. has an internal width of 24 inches; however, with the rapid rise in obesity rates in our country – and especially in the South – this no longer accommodates a growing percentage of Americans.

There was a time, not that long ago, when options were limited for larger individuals, but casket manufacturers have responded to the growing need and today, there is a wide range of offerings available in a variety of materials, colors and price points.

We introduced our Dimensions® by Batesville oversized caskets more than 20 years ago, and today, the company offers a complete line of oversized products in 18 and 20-gauge steel as well as several hardwoods and veneers.

A lot has changed since the early days when "function" took priority over aesthetics and features. As the demand for oversize products grew and larger sizes became more mainstream, families expected the same features that are available in regular-size caskets to be offered in oversize products.

To our product team, that meant creating oversize ver-



Clifton 27

sions of some of our best-selling designs, including our latest offering, the Clifton 27 Select. Its popular design, which features a satin Cherry finish and Rosetan crepe interior, is utilized in this new “bigger sister.” In addition to its good looks and the extra 3” of width, the Clifton 27 is loaded with flexible Family Choices features to help share a loved one’s story.

- The proprietary cap panel combines the elegance of a LifeStories medallion with pleated side sections for personal photos or mementos
- Dual overlays, with tailored and lace fabric options, make this casket perfect for men or women
- As part of Batesville’s dual disposition line, the product is suitable for burial or cremation

The Clifton 27 Select will be available in customer service centers in October. Early trials have shown that instead of placing an oversize unit on the floor, funeral homes can display the regular size Clifton in their physical and digital assortments and then provide the larger version to a family as needed.

Providing dignified alternatives for cremation

Although cremation rates across much of the South still lag the national average of 56%,* the demand for cremation products is higher than ever – and will only continue to increase. According to the Cremation Association of North America (CANA), rapid growth is forecasted in many southern states over the next four years, in part because of the relatively low base of cremations that historically have taken place there.

In an industry that was built around burials, cremation has presented many challenges. One of the most frequent questions funeral directors ask today is how to help the families they serve and still sustain their business as more and more people veer away from burial. There is no single answer, but part of the solution is having an assortment of products and price points to appeal to all segments of the population, including those who are looking for affordable, dignified alternatives.

Over the last decade, Batesville has built an expansive line of value-oriented burial caskets under its New-Pointe® brand. In response to the increasing demand, the company recently added four new cremation models: the Hadley, Hamal, Novato, and Andura.

With expanded widths, adjustable beds and more contemporary finishes and interiors, these products are aligned with both the functional needs of today’s consumers as well as the aesthetics they value.

All four models are being manufactured at the company’s operation in Batesville, Indiana and will be available throughout the South in late summer.

Cremation Association of North America

As Director of Marketing for Batesville, Paul has responsibility for leading the development of new burial, cremation and merchandising products that deliver value to funeral directors and help families honor their loved ones. A 35-year veteran, he has served in a variety of positions across the company, including marketing, logistics, manufacturing, and sales.



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Saved from Obscurity

The Story of Pleasant Hill Cemetery

by Mariah Gregory, Eickhof Columbaria, Graphic Designer

IN THE BEGINNING

Nestled in the southwest corner of Eden Prairie, MN is a heritage site known as the Pleasant Hill Cemetery. This small patch of land just off the Pioneer Trail overlooks the valley of Purgatory Creek and forms a natural terrace. It was originally purchased in 1885 and shortly thereafter it was platted as a pioneer cemetery with a total of 96 lots.

At that time, the Rural Cemetery Movement was gaining popularity across the nation. Isolated family farmstead burials and crowded church graveyards were being cast aside in favor of new, thoughtfully regulated cemeteries with ample walkways, charming nature scenes, and embellished landscapes. While this cultural shift bloomed, Eden Prairie grew.

ENDURING THE CHANGES

As time wore on and methodology evolved, so did Pleasant Hill Cemetery. Like other cemeteries in the area, they faced under-capitalization. The status and stability of their community would be apparent in how well-appointed and maintained their cemetery was. In the 1920s upkeep suffered due to families dying out or moving away. As the 1930s approached, local cemetery boards took over maintenance of their grounds and set up perpetual care trust funds to cover the increasing costs.

This change to Lawn Cemetery methodology is evident at Pleasant Hill Cemetery. Most older cemeteries will have an old and a new section due to this modern approach. New sections were platted with efficiency and capacity in mind. Meanwhile, the remnants of the Rural Cemetery Movement were discarded. In 1966 the Eden Prairie Presbyterian Church, on the south end of the property, was removed and Section II of the cemetery was added. Five years later, land on the east side of the cemetery was purchased for Section III, yet another expansion. Then in 1987, the administration of the cemetery was handed over to the city of Eden

Prairie at the request of the Pleasant Hill Cemetery Association.

A NEW BEGINNING

Fast forward to the present day. Overcrowding and land scarcity are clouds looming over many cemeteries. The historical Pleasant Hill Cemetery was no exception. In 2018, the threat of closing it to further burials was imminent for the city of Eden Prairie. Without new revenue to help cover the rising costs of maintenance and operation, the cemetery was at risk of becoming obsolete. With over 125 years of operation, this turn of events would be devastating to the local community.

Fortunately, a plan was made to carry Pleasant Hill Cemetery through its next metamorphosis. To meet the new tradition of cremation and sustain the livelihood of the cemetery, the decision was made to install an Ossuarium® from Eickhof Columbaria. Plans were promptly laid for this memorial, a combination of a columbarium and ossuary, on the last large available space. Although the existing landscape presented elevation and drainage challenges the team at Eickhof was not deterred.

Chip Cheney, a Client Guide at Eickhof Columbaria, recommended the cemetery partner with WSB Engineering to prepare the site and tackle any landscape challenges before their Ossuarium was installed. This proved to be a great pairing thanks to their vast experience working with government entities and in-house landscaping division. In conjunction with WSB, the stage was set for an inviting and attractive memorial space to take shape.

A CEMETERY REVITALIZED

On June 8th, 2020, the highly anticipated 80-niche Winchester Ossuarium arrived. It was set into place by a crane at the center of a beautifully curated memorial garden accented with a winding sidewalk path and attractive plantings that radiate outward. The monument itself was built in Crookston, MN by the expert fabri-

cators at Eickhof Columbaria and delivered by their installation team. Finished in Mahogany granite quarried in Millbank, SD, it is a product of the USA with the craftsmanship and materials to stand the test of time.

The Winchester Ossuary at Pleasant Hill Cemetery captures the at-need, pre-need, and larger post-need cremation markets while boosting revenue and modern-day relevancy to an important historical site. On a section of land originally destined to hold only 64 traditional burial plots, the installation of this memorial created 160 traditional urn spaces and approximately 100 ossuary spaces. Their new Ossuary provides four times as many interment spaces in the same space, thus ensuring the historic cemetery remains relevant well into the future.

Since then, Pleasant Hill Cemetery's newly established memorial space for cremated remains has garnered great interest from the community and surrounding areas. They are offering inurnment in their new Winchester Ossuary to both residents and non-residents at a variety of price points. A resident can be inurned in the Ossuary for only \$700 and a non-resident can be inurned in an upper niche for \$3,000. These prices are decided annually by the Eden Prairie City Council and

are based on desirability. Soon, the amount generated through niche sales will surpass the cost of the project – leaving the balance of niche sales to provide Pleasant Hill Cemetery with pure profit.

THE OSSUARIUM® EXPLAINED

The Ossuary, a patented product from Eickhof Columbaria, is making a big impact in the Eden Prairie community and many others – but what exactly is an Ossuary? The term was coined by Brent Thorson, a Client Guide at Eickhof Columbaria, to literally describe the relatively new concept. Simply stated, it is a columbarium combined with an ossuary. It is an all-in-one memorial, delivered in one piece, that includes traditional columbarium niches along with the advantage of additional urn spaces within the center ossuary vault.

The ossuary vault is a secure chamber in the center of the memorial that is accessed through an upper columbarium niche. Although the ossuary is a shared space, an individual's cremated remains are held safely in their own Soft Urn™ so there is no commingling. A range of Soft Urns is available through Eickhof Columbaria to work in conjunction with the Ossuary to accom-



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moderate any budget or style. Individuals at rest in the ossuary have their name, birth year, and death year inscribed on the Memorial Band® panels which are typically highlighted by a contrasting granite color.

Most importantly, it accommodates many more urns than a typical columbarium within the same footprint. This unique feature gives the cemetery flexibility to offer inurnment at a range of price points based on desirability. The ossuary spaces can be sold at a more modest price point when a companion niche is too expensive – giving the community a range of inurnment options that are equally dignified.

The Ossuary is taking root across the United States, and it is easy to see why. As more and more folks choose cremation over traditional burial the desire for permanent inurnment grows. In addition, families are seeking more economical memorialization options for their loved ones – especially those at need and post-need – that don't compromise on quality or beauty. You can provide that while financially ensuring the longevity of your cemetery through an Ossuary.

LOOKING AHEAD

By embracing the cultural and economic shift from burial to cremation, cemeterians and cities like Eden Prairie are proactively setting their cemetery up for success by installing an Ossuary or two on their grounds. You can make the leap, too. Transform your cemetery and create sustainability for the future with an Ossuary from Eickhof Columbaria.

Mariah Gregory is a Graphic Designer with Eickhof Columbaria - a company whose sole passion is manufacturing the highest quality cremation memorials on the market. Their patented concealed locking hardware for niche fronts is a simple, secure fastening system that provides a smooth, perfectly flush surface unencumbered by exterior hardware or rosettes. Mariah specializes in expressing ideas clearly through striking visuals and refined typography. She joined the Eickhof Columbaria team in 2018 and brings experience in graphic design, photography, and copywriting.



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Approaching the Rainbow Bridge

By Yaunah Hairston, Marketing Director, Trigard

Recently and without warning, I was faced with the reality that my beloved, long-haired chihuahua, Wile E., was facing the end of his long and wonderful life with me. Mind you, I have served as pet-parent to many species since I was a child, including seven hamsters all named Matthew and a black Dachshund named Tuffy—God rest their souls. However, serving as pet mom to Wile E. the rescued chihuahua has been the most special pet relationship of my life thus far, and I was thrown into a tizzy thinking about what I would do to fill the gaping hole in my life that his passing would leave.

Research studies show that 67% of households or 85 million families in the United States have at least one pet, so it is true that for most of us, our pets are dinner dates, snuggle, and yoga buddies, our best friends, psychiatrists and so much more. They love us and depend on us as we do them, and they deserve the same respect as anyone who has imprinted on our lives.

During last year's global pandemic the Washington Post reports that "...what began in mid-March (2020) as a sudden surge in demand had, as of mid-July, become a bona fide sales boom. Shelters, nonprofit rescues, private-breeders, pet stores — all reported more consumer demand than there were dogs and puppies to fill it. Some rescues were reporting dozens of applications for individual dogs. Some breeders were reporting waiting lists well into 2021. Americans kept trying to fill voids with canine companions, either because they were stuck working from home with children who needed something to do, or had no work and lots of free time, or felt lonely with no way to socialize."(Kavin)

As members of the memorialization and funeral profession, we understand the importance of preplanning our own final wishes because we know how important it is to give the gift of peace of mind to the families we serve, knowing their loved one's final wishes are squared away. We understand that by planning ahead, these families won't be burdened with making important decisions during an incredibly difficult time.

When we talk about family, who do we mean? It can mean our human family for certain, a husband and wife, mother or father, sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles, close friends, and so on. But, many people forget that our furry, feathered and scaly friends are integral parts of many families, and thinking about how their lives will be honored is important, too

If a family's final wishes have already been preplanned, then preplanning their pet's final needs shouldn't be a difficult conversation to begin. What does a pet prearrangement include? If the family is more apt to choose a traditional burial for their human family, then maybe they will be more willing to be a bit more creative with their family pet's arrangements. Help them decide if they will choose burial or cremation. Maybe there's a short graveside- or backyard service with a balloon release. Or maybe they want a more intimate ceremony with just immediate family. If they want to bury their cherished companion, help them pick a pet casket and vault. There are beautiful bronze ground memorials with full-color or memorial rocks that hold cremated remains and niche towers that nestle into the landscape of mostly any cemetery. And, if they choose cremation, offer families a selection of wooden and bronze urns, and cremation jewelry.

At our own cemetery, Sunset Memorial Park in Dan-

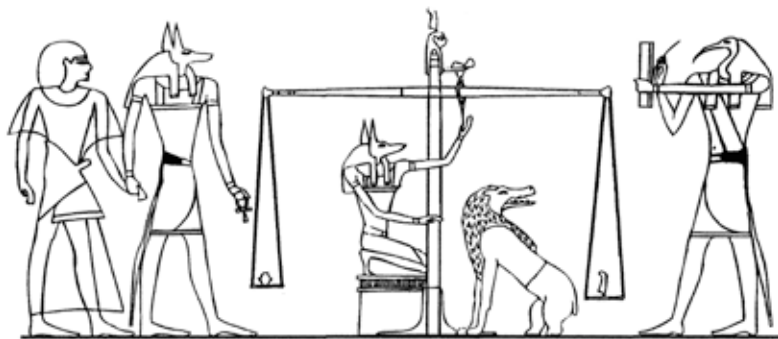


ville, Illinois we offer a serene, dedicated burial section for pets, which is called Cherished Companions. This allows the community to have a special place to honor faithful companions, within the area's well-loved memorial park. With its iconic swan pond and beautiful landscaping, the park was designed to be unlike any cemetery you've ever seen; it's truly a one-of-a-kind special place to lay your own cherished pet companion to rest.

Preplanning also presents a time to discuss memorialization. Families have nearly countless options to tell the story of their pet's life through memorialization. For pets, families might think they are restricted to choosing from the same small selection of memorial borders and styles for their loved ones, but there is a whole world of customized pet memorial markers to introduce. From simple medallions to detailed renderings of favorite photographs, we are proud to provide pet owners an opportunity to memorialize these treasured loved ones. Families can transform photographs and collages of their pets into loving tributes on full-color or oxide bronze memorial plaques, medallions, bronze garden stakes, or bronze urns in various

sizes and shapes.

Pre-planning for humans is a scary step for many and potentially an even larger hurdle when discussing a pet's end of life. What happens when a family doesn't feel comfortable talking or thinking about pre-planning final wishes for their pet? Funeral professionals will need to educate families so that they understand that the pet's arrangements will most likely need to be made at the time of their cherished companion's death. And as with our human counterparts, it will be a very difficult and overwhelming process, just like any at-need arrangement. However, educating them in advance so that they understand there are compassionate options available when they need them can be comforting. How horrible would it be for the average family to not understand pet memorialization and think that their only option is to have a veterinarian's office cremate their dear pet in a purely transactional manner? This could sadly lead to the family taking home their pet's cremated remains, which could sit on a shelf or get lost in the back of a closet without any kind of permanent marker or memorial.



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With a pet's life, the story of that legacy is no less important. As a longtime animal lover, I understand the grief families suffer when they lose a beloved pet, and saying goodbye is never easy, it is heartbreaking. And, that is why we must educate pet owners about the options available to celebrate the end of their pets' lives, the options are almost limitless.

If you've ever lost a beloved pet, you might have heard of the fabled rainbow bridge, a colorful afterlife where pets happily, healthily frolic until their humans join them. There is also a poem called The Rainbow Bridge by Paul C. Dahm which has resonated with, inspired, and consoled many pet owners from all walks of life over time. Thankfully, the time hasn't come yet for me to usher my little fellow over the rainbow bridge, but this approach was close enough to remind me of what matters and what I should think about so that when my very good boy's time has come to an end, I am comforted by the many compassionate pet memorialization options that will allow me to memorialize his life in as grand of a way as he has blessed mine.

Yaunah Hairston is Marketing Director for Greenwood Plastics Inc, Trigard, Trigard Memorials, Sunset Memorial Park and Cremation Center, and Sunset Funeral Homes, with 8 locations across Illinois, Indiana, and Arizona. A total newbie to the funeral industry, she is a long-time pet parent and fierce advocate for pet adoption. Learn more about pet memorialization options at Pet Grave Markers.



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Five Types of Email Marketing for Funeral Service

By Welton Hong

RING RING
MARKETING

You might have heard that email marketing drives impressive returns, and that's true. But, as a consumer yourself, you're probably most familiar with promotional emails that offer discounts, free shipping if you buy today, or 20% off if you refer your friends.

That's not the best type of email campaign for a funeral home. "Flash sale on caskets ends tomorrow!" and "BOGO headstones" aren't the type of offers likely to endear your firm to most people.

Just because traditionally promotional emails are off the table doesn't mean you can't use email marketing to drive leads and conversions. Here are five other types of campaigns deathcare firms might engage in.

1. Welcome Email Campaigns

Welcome emails thank someone for signing up or making a purchase. But it's more than good manners: That sign-up or first contact opens the door for you to further engage with potential clientele.

Welcome email campaigns are usually a series of 3-5 emails triggered by a sign-up. The first arrives immediately upon sign up (or at least within the first 24 hours). It thanks the consumer for their action and provides one or two bits of helpful information.

Other emails in a welcome series carry on a sort of one-sided conversation, providing the consumer with additional information in an attempt to prompt continued contact or a purchase.

Funeral homes can use welcome email campaigns when someone signs up for a newsletter, requests preplanning information, signs up for a webinar, or requests a brochure. Simply put an opt-in box on any of those forms that gives you permission to send

marketing emails; if the consumer doesn't uncheck the box, the welcome campaign can launch automatically.

You can customize these campaigns to meet the needs of your business and target audience, but here's an example of how one might run if someone requested preplanning information:

- **Email 1:** Thanking the prospective client for reaching out and attaching information about preplanning
- **Email 2:** Following up to see if there are any questions and providing a link to a blog post with statistics about preplanning
- **Email 3:** An invitation to download a workbook on preplanning to help them get started
- **Email 4:** Letting them know you're available whenever they're ready and giving them a specific name and number if they want to reach out

2. Seasonal Campaigns

In the retail world, seasonal email campaigns are created around times such as holidays or back-to-school months. Deathcare businesses may want to avoid being overt—yes, death rates tend to rise in December and January, but launching a midwinter email campaign based on that premise is unlikely to bear much fruit and might scare off your audience.

Instead, create seasonal email campaigns meant to provide existing subscribers with value and position your funeral home as a caring part of the local community. Reach out with fun summer recipes or tips for beating the heat in the neighborhood, for example, and use soft, subtle CTAs that remind people you're there if they have a need.

3. Campaigns Connected to Social

Funeral homes that want to build a better presence on social might start with email campaigns meant to bring subscribers to Facebook or Instagram.

Begin with a compelling social media post that includes an image. Include the image and part of the caption in an email along with an obvious link to the post in question. Then ask your subscribers to act with CTAs such as:

- We'd love to hear your feedback on...
- Come share your story about...
- How do you use an urn to honor your loved one? Share your picture with others.

Make sure the CTA is relevant to the social post and what you want people to do with that post.

If you want to drive more participation, couple your CTA with a giveaway. Purchase a gift card to a local shop or restaurant and say you'll pick a winner from everyone who responds or shares your post on social.

The goal of these types of emails is to engage people across multiple channels and build rapport with members of your target audience. That helps increase future activity on your social media pages and the likelihood people might call on you when they have a need.

4. Reengagement Email Campaigns

Reengagement campaigns remind people that they were interested in your service at one point and may help persuade them to take action now.

This is a great option for reengaging people who previously showed interest in your preplanning

services. Again, you can customize your campaigns to fit your brand and audience, but an example preplanning email reengagement campaign might look like this:

- **Email 1:** Remind potential clientele they requested information, acknowledge that life gets busy, and provide a link to download a quick guide or infographic on preplanning.
- **Email 2:** Provide three ways your firm makes preplanning easy.
- **Email 3:** Dispel a common myth about preplanning and let the prospect know how they can reach out to find out more or start preplanning.

5. Educational Series Emails

Educational emails are a common form of triggered email campaign for deathcare firms. This means they're automatically triggered by the action of potential clientele. For example, if someone indicates on your site that they're interested in preplanning, a series of five emails with tips on preplanning, links to preplanning information or step-by-step guidance on how to begin the preplanning process might kick off.

You can also send educational email series to your existing subscriber list without a trigger. Instead of a monthly newsletter, you might send a short series of emails explaining green burial options or what people can do with cremated remains to honor loved ones.

Email marketing can drive impressive return on investment—the average is \$42 for every dollar you spend. If you're not sure where to start with this lucrative marketing tactic, pick one of the email campaign ideas above and test it out for your deathcare firm this month.



Welton Hong

Founder of Ring Ring Marketing®

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Welton is a leading expert in helping funeral homes convert leads from online directly to the phone line. He's the author of the book *Making Your Phone Ring with Internet Marketing for Funeral Homes*. Learn more at FuneralHomeProfits.com.

South Carolina Funeral Directors Association Expo and Election of 2021-2022 Officers & Directors

The South Carolina FDA held their annual Expo at the Columbia Convention Center and more recently, their Summer convention in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina.

The association also held their annual election of officers for 2021-2022 and elected for President, Jason Pierce, Florence, SC succeeding out going President, Brad Evans, Abbeville, SC. Other officers elected included Dwayne Josey, Vice-President, Saluda, SC; Barry Watson, Treasurer, Conway, SC and Shannon Dotson, Secretary, Spartanburg, SC. Central Coast Group - William Lynch, Chairman and Michael Ford, Secretary/Treasurer; Pee Dee Group - Deborah Cooper Cromartie, Chairman and Randall Calcutt, Jr., Secretary/Treasurer; Piedmont Group - Clyde Rampey, Chairman and Carol Harley, Secretary/Treasurer and Doug McDougald, III, NFDA Policy Board Chairman.

Attendance for both Mid Year Expo and Summer Convention were well attended and special thanks to all sponsors for their continued support of SCFDA.

Save The Date for 2022 Mid-Winter Expo in Columbia, SC and Columbia Hilton Hotel January 31- February 2, 2022



L-R) John Yopp, Mark Lanford, Nathan Hurst, Melvin Thompson and Jerry Small



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The Blessings and the Curses of Being a Funeral Director

Part I of a IV Part Series

By Todd W. Van Beck

One of the great blessings in my life is that by guess or by golly, by accident and certainly not by design, and to my own amazement and surprise I have been fortunate to work with thousands of funeral directors across the globe in my career, which is now long, and has not been totally uneventful.

I have to confess that I have not found a more wonderful group of people to work with than funeral directors. Oh, yes, there have been moments when I could have pulled my hair out, and yes I left several meetings wondering why people did not agree with everything that I said, but overall, over a perspective of 40 plus years I have concluded that funeral directors are really nice, caring, and very concerned people – no matter what the anti-funeral people say, and in the end how many people are going to listen to them?

Clearly every career has its blessings and its curses. I can't think of one job where some time, some place a person goes home walking on a cloud of happiness and success, or goes home in the depth of despair and laments the day they decided to get involved with "this job!" Even the eternal optimists and Pollyanna's of the world have the bad day.

I suspect the only people that really are plotting and scheming to ruin the day of the funeral director are the few anti-funeral people who continue to rant and rave about the long held lessons taught by their guru and inspirational leader, the now long dead Jessica Mitford. I have held the opinion that everything I have read from the anti-funeral people when dissected is in reality just a turn, a spin on the contents of Jessica Mitford's book "The American Way of Death" which was written over 45 years ago. Mitford's thinking today is ancient history, and the anti-funeral people have not come up with much new "stuff" save for their eternal war cry that "Funerals (and now burials, cremation, body donations, everything else in life) costs too much" and "Funeral directors are crooks." The anti-funeral muckrakers dearly love to tell other people what to do and to give firm and self-righteous instructions and advice on how people ought to be spending their money. I have

put this thought in print many times but it is worth repeating here; the anti-funeral people frighten me, I am very wary of them, and I do most anything I can to avoid them and for one simple reason; they are a vexation to my funeral spirit – to my genuine love and devotion to funeral service. It is wise for TVB to stay my distance from them and never ever under any conditions trust them. I will have more to say on this topic at the conclusion of this article. Anti –funeral people are not blessings.

BLESSINGS

Blessings – what a wonderful word. In fact it is such a powerful word that the church has been teaching and preaching about the subject of blessings for two thousand years, and the church shows no signs of slowing down in addressing, interpreting, and reminding thousands, millions, billions of people what blessings truly are, and that a simple life lesson needs to be learned and learn well by everyone on earth concerning blessings just – COUNT THEM.

I have thought about the blessings of being a funeral director long and hard, and feel the need to share these simple thoughts. Remember folks this is TVB writing so don't expect too much.

I have concluded that funeral directors are just different from most everybody else on the earth – and thank God we are different. I used to see this type of difference, this type of being separate from the crowd in the medical profession, and I still see it at times in the clergy, but the medical profession has clearly succumbed to big business, and the clergy – I will leave that subject alone in this article, for now.

Funeral directors are different. I don't know of many vocations where its members are so willing to invest their emotions in the lives of the people they serve than funeral directors. I actually cannot think of another profession where the professional gets as emotionally and hence personally involved in such an intense way with the people who pay them for their services than funeral directors. Yes, every profession will claim

this intense relationship but when the subject of death is involved I think many other professionals prefer to make a hasty retreat and let funeral directors pick up the ball and create the relationship, and THAT IS A GOOD THING. This is a real blessing for us and for the community we serve. Funeral directors do not run away from death.

I have certainly seen the medical profession simply evaporate when someone dies. Until I see the day when a hospital once again allows a funeral director to walk into the front door with the cot to remove a dead human being instead of us being directed to the door next to the garbage dumpster to remove a dead human body I will hold onto my long held view that the medical profession does not have much interest in dead bodies or in death. There are some exceptions to this observation but not many.

I have often times asked myself “Todd why does this preacher give a well thought out funeral oration that lasts for a while and the name of the deceased is mentioned, as compared to this other preacher chap who gives a five minute funeral oration and then can’t get out of the mortuary fast enough?” Yes I have seen the church leadership evaporate when somebody dies. There are some exceptions to this observation, but funeral directors do not evaporate when confronted with death.

Few if any career choices require the ability and perspective to deeply deal compassionately yet at the same time professionally and financially with people who are experiencing the death of somebody significant to them. To be sure there are callous, burned out funeral directors – but honestly folks, not many. Nurses deal personally and professionally with people but I have not ever encountered a nurse who also is involved with the financial payment agreements between the patient and the hospital, nor have I ever seen a nurse really worried about who and how the towel they just used is going to get laundered and how much that laundry is going to cost and who pays the laundry bill. I also don’t know of an instance when the chief hospital administrator asks the orderlies on the floor how much brain surgery ought to cost, and then takes the advice.

When I was operating mortuary colleges and dealt with the future of this great profession I found I ended up evaluating student’s not based just on their grade point average or even their ability to pay the tuition

(a position got which me into a peck of trouble with my higher ups and betters) I privately evaluated them on this one factor: did they possess that extraordinary capacity for emotional involvement that is needed in crisis management to help friends, and strangers alike when death entered the picture. Honestly I had students with a perfect 4.0 GPA who were the most self-ish, self-centered, narcissistic human beings I had ever encountered, and I would not under any conditions had called them when I needed a funeral director. However I had students who had a 1.999999999 GPA, but they were blessings, they had the funeral director spark, and because of my belief in them I would end up giving them the 100th of a point, and I never regretted doing this although I was not popular with not just a few of the regulatory agencies that I was compelled to deal with. Yes, I was too easy – guilty as charged – however I have never once buried a copy of somebody’s GPA with them in their casket.

The capacity to build a trusting relationship with a stranger in say less than ten minutes which is usually the time a funeral director has to accomplish this simply means that people who become funeral professionals are different from the average person, and this difference should be celebrated, shouted from the roof tops, and never ever discouraged or minimized. It is a true blessing.

The human attitude that most funeral directors possess of universal compassion for the least of these is certainly an admirable trait and I want to suggest it is admirable in the extreme, and also a trait that drives the anti-funeral people nuts because they can’t control what is in a funeral directors heart and if funeral service is anything it is a matter of our hearts.

The anti-funeral people have attempted for years to create the profile that funeral directors are creepy, weird, and strange beings. Their efforts are always doomed simply because of our ability to help grieving families with not only their business arrangements but also in handling and understanding their grief and no matter what that ability is impressive to say the least. The anti-funeral people not only can’t do this, they don’t want to do this. Too much work, too much of a personal investment, much easier to sit at a computer and blast away than to jump into the deep end of the funeral directors swimming pool. I personally believe that hundreds of thousands of human being are living their

lives more fully concerning overall mental health because somebody in funeral service had this blessing of talent, knowledge and skill in their very being. I also want to suggest that the world desperately needs more people like funeral directors that can combine kindness and compassion even in the light of some of the most distasteful circumstances that can happen in any community. Let me further make my point. When was the last time you went to Wal-Mart or a café, or the dentist or Hospital and the clerk or waiter, or hygienists or physician referred to you as their “family?”

What a superb service idea and concept we in funeral service arrived at years ago – our customers are our “families”. Would you prefer it when you bought your shoes, groceries, car insurance or video games or got your teeth cleaned that the people serving you, or supposed to be serving you, would view you and treat you like you were part of their own family? There is a reason why people like funeral directors.

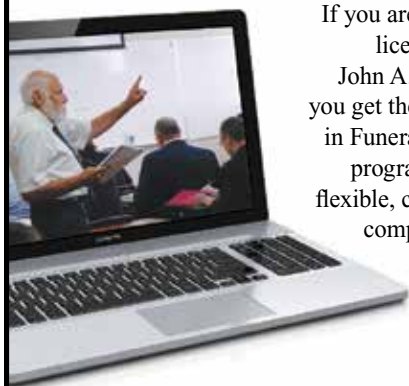
I believe that funeral service is probably the only career where total strangers to the funeral director can consistently expect such treatment. This is a blessing to our communities. Another blessing which is seldom

talked about in our great profession is the funeral home itself. In reality, no matter if the funeral director owns the building or pays the rent, in reality the funeral home belongs to the families that are being served.

To be sure the funeral home is only a substitute for the family’s real home, but in the end when somebody is dead it ends up being no less their own home, for a while. I believe this is one of the real blessings of being a funeral director. I remember a veteran funeral director telling me once that when I opened the front door I was in reality welcoming our client families into THEIR home. The funeral home is a place maintained for the families so that they feel not just comfortable, but that they may hopefully feel right at home. I have always liked the old home concept in funeral home buildings.

Every city I have ever visited I have noticed that overall the funeral homes are the most beautiful buildings in the town. Funeral homes, overall, are not only marvelous they are also homey. I personally always liked the old funeral homes with a front porch and the new ones that have a good old-fashioned front porch. Good stuff!

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