Business

By Lauren Moore

Marketing Your Property to Cremation Families

Although cremation rates continue to rise in every part of the country, some cemeteries are still having a difficult time getting cremation families onto their grounds. Many families don't see the value of permanent memorialization when it comes to cremation, choosing instead to scatter a loved one's cremated remains or keep them in an urn somewhere in the home. So what can you, as a cemeterian, do to market your offerings to cremation families?

For starters, cemeterians should be among the first ones to dispel the notion that permanent memorialization isn't important for cremation families. "The number one thing cemeteries are doing wrong is not reaching people, assuming there's no need for memorialization," said Dan Isard, president of The Foresight Companies. "A cemetery is not just a point of interment, it's a point of memories. We don't go to a cemetery to visit our loved one who is buried there because we want to see their casket. We're looking at the ground, remembering their life, remembering the memories. The same is true whether the body is cremated or buried."

Rolf Gutknecht, vice president, director of account services with LA ads, points out that many cremation families don't have any idea what their options are within the cemetery. "The value of the property is not being communicated, that a cemetery is a logical place," he said. "We've done research in some markets where we went out and said, 'Are you interested in getting cremated?' If they said yes, we said, 'Would you look at a columbarium, or mausoleum, or scattering garden?' They go, 'What's a columbarium?'"

Despite those types of opportunities,

Photos of Curlew Hills Memory Gardens, Palm Harbor, Florida, clockwise from far left: The scattering lake, with a fountain beside the Whispering Pines Mausoleum; a custom-designed private estate; a solid granite butterfly-shaped garden pedestal; a solid granite firefighter garden bench; a solid granite dolphin-shaped garden pedestal; a cremation bench overlooking a lake and fountain; the interior of Whispering Pines Mausoleum.

Left: Elegant glass-front niches inside the Whispering Pines Mausoleum at Curlew Hills. Right: Companion niches for those wishing to be placed together for eternity at Curlew Hills.

some cemeterians fail to ask those types of questions – perhaps because they consider anything having to do with cremation as secondary, Gutknecht said. "While there are progressive cemeteries at the forefront, realizing there's a shift taking place, there are so many cemeteries that would just as soon pass on that option and only deal with burial customers," he said.

Glenn Gould, CEO of MKJ Marketing, believes one of the main obstacles cemeterians face is communicating the message that permanent memorialization is a valuable investment. "I think the cemetery industry has to create a message – a core message – and that's 'What is the value the family derives from having a personal memorial?' " he said. "The only message we have is that there's a place to visit, but people don't visit. It's not a lot of people's priority to visit Mom's grave or niche."

Gould brought up the topic of preneed, and why it's a successful business. "From the 1970s on just about every funeral home in the country was advertising the same message: Peace of mind, relieve the stress on your family, take the financial burden off your family," he said. "They've all been saying the same preneed message for 40 years, because consumers have learned the message and believe in the value of prearrangement." If cemeteries throughout the country could convey a unified message promoting permanent memorialization to cremation customers, Gould said, that could demonstrate value to consumers.

Robert Fells, executive director of the International Cemetery, Cremation and Funeral Association, has one suggestion for that marketing message: No one wants to be forgotten.

"You don't have to have a big ego to say, 'I'd like to be remembered.' Not just by people who knew you but by unborn generations," he said. He cited the fascination that many people have with genealogical research, and believes that interest will still be there in the future. "All these people saying 'cremate me and scatter me,' their families and descendants are going to be disappointed to find out that their great-grandfather doesn't have a grave," Fells said. "People are going to want to be remembered, and a grave does that. It's permanent. You can put on the marker things you feel are important – to be known as a good spouse, parent or grandparent – and if people can be remembered for that, they will be happy."

But the obstacle many cemeterians – and sometimes funeral directors – face is dealing with cremation customers whose mother or father didn't want a funeral or memorial service, or wanted to have their cremated remains scattered. "There's not much to say if someone says, 'I'm here to arrange for the cremation of my father; he told us he wanted his cremated remains scattered,' or something that does not involve interment or even scattering in the cemetery," Fells said. "I do think it's tough for our people to go against that and say, that's nice, but maybe you want to do something else, or that there are other things that might have more meaning."

Fells said that adult children or other family members may feel dutybound to follow the deceased's last wishes – even though funerals are meant for the living. "Throughout history, in every culture, you have funeral services. Then you get to the U.S. in the 1990s and all of a sudden it's, 'Cremate me and throw me out,' and everyone says OK," he said. "I've heard anecdotally, from consumers, that they did just that – direct disposition – and would later say, 'That didn't work for us. It's what Dad or Mom wanted, but it didn't work.'"

While no one wants to say, "Don't pay attention to what your dad told you," Fells said it doesn't hurt to let families simply know what their options are. "If you have any opening – like someone saying, 'Dad said he didn't care what we did,' you can say, OK, you have a number of options," Fells said. "At this point

you're not trying to sell anything, you're educating people – as long as you're not crass about it – and saying, these are the things you can do. If no one is committed to scattering or burying the cremated remains in the backyard, that's an opportunity for our folks."

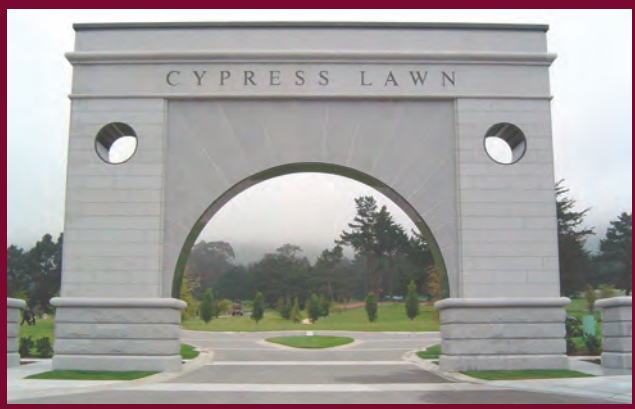
These undecided families – those holding onto urns filled with cremated remains that are sitting in closets, on shelves or tucked away in attics – also make up an audience that's worth exploring.

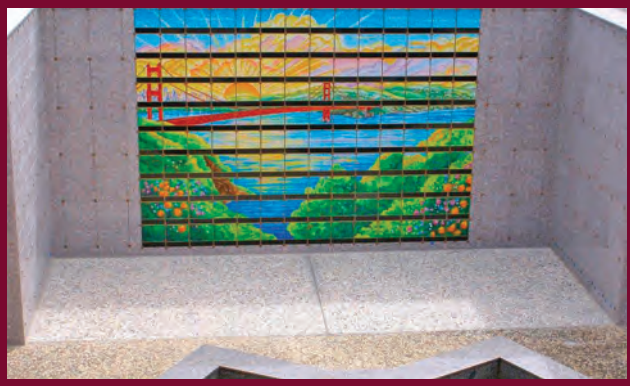
"The thing about marketing to cremation consumers is that we need to be employing not just advance sales and at-need sales but post-need sales," Isard said. "You could identify one thousand families that have cremated a loved one. A large percentage of those are still retaining cremated remains. Those cremated remains at the time of a person's death were a point of honor and highly valuable assets. But six, seven, eight years after, as the surviving spouse gets older, they're going to look at those remains and say, 'What's going to happen to me, and what's going to happen to the cremated remains of my spouse?' They go from being a valued asset to a liability." If cemeteries were to reach out to these people and let them know about options like columbaria, niches and scattering gardens, Isard estimates about 20 to 30 percent of them would look favorably on those options. "If you do the math, there's a heck of a lot more post-need consumers than there are preneed consumers," he said. "Everyone stops marketing after the body has been cremated, and the reality is that's when opportunities continue to remain open."

One way for cemeteries – particularly those that are not part of a combination operation – to reach out to post-need families is to partner with a funeral home or crematory. "The easiest way is for cemeteries that are not affiliated with a funeral home is to affiliate with a funeral home, and to go to that funeral home and say, 'Tell me everyone you've cremated over the last 10 years and those that were not specifically allocated to a point of disposition'," Isard said. Once you have your list, Isard said, it's a matter of creating simple retail marketing concepts. "You reach out to people through email, websites or letters, direct them to your website, and let them see what their cremation options are. Let them understand the 'good/better/best' options they have."

Although there might be something of a "grudge" between funeral directors and cemeterians, Gould believes that if they were to overcome those hard feelings, there are lots of opportunities for them to cooperate. "There are cemeteries out there that do pay funeral homes commission when they send a family over to them and they're able to sell them a grave or cremation niche," Gould said. "I think that's a very intelligent thing to

Photos of Cypress Lawn Memorial Park, Colma, California, clockwise from top left: The Archway at the main entrance; the Hillside Gardens Fountain and Columbarium, interior and exterior; the niche wall mural in The Garden of Light.





do … It makes sense to me that funeral homes and cemeteries should find kind of a middle ground where they cooperate with each other, because the consumer looks at them as the total package. The consumer doesn't understand where the funeral home services end and where the cemetery services begin. Why not make it that way?" Funeral directors could also include a grave or niche in a burial or cremation package, he suggests. "Almost every mausoleum has a bunch of niches built in – there are big walls of niches, and many are unsellable because they're either really high or kind of low, so why not just include a niche in the cremation package?" he asked.

Gutknecht also believes that having a partnership with a funeral home or crematory can be beneficial for reaching cremation customers. "I think if you let these people know you've got a scattering garden, mausoleums, columbaria, and glass-front niches, and you're going out and making presentations to funeral homes, I think there are ways of letting those people who are on the front lines with the customer know that there are options," he said.

For families that remain undecided about what to do with cremated remains, Gould shared one suggestion he's seen firms use successfully: "People think they're going to scatter cremated remains. Fifty-five percent of consumers say they're going to scatter, but in reality only 20 percent actually ever do it. One firm will go to the cremation family and ask if they have plans for the cremated remains. If the family says they plan on scattering, but have to wait until the next time they go to that place, they tell them, 'This is our deal: If you'd like, you can purchase a cremation niche, place the cremated remains inside the niche, and you have two years to change your mind. Any time you want to come back and get them, that's fine, we'll refund you the purchase price,'" Gould explained. "The idea is once they're in the niche, theoretically, the family will not come back to move them."

Reaching cremation consumers and conveying the value of permanent memorialization isn't an easy task – but it's one, Fells believes, that can be accomplished. "I think scattering, or doing something other than permanent interment is no longer viewed as highly as it used to be. I've gotten too many calls from people who did this because they were someone's wishes, but after all was said and done, they were not very happy with the arrangement," he said. "There's no question it's a challenge, but the good news is I think you can let people know all the options they have, and why they might want to do something more." •