

By Daniel M. Isard

Step 12: Tying It All Together

Life is what happens when you're making other plans.

In September 2019, my publisher shared with me his idea for 2020's editorial theme: "20/20 Vision." Thus, we meticulously laid out the focus of each month's article and left my December column – the one you're reading right now – to arrange all of the pieces and tie the previous 11 months together.

WELL, GUESS WHAT? IT CAN NO LONGER BE DONE!

For the record, in 30 years of writing articles for *The Director*, I have never all-capped a sentence. Moreover, I've worked with my publisher for at least 25 years, but he did not take the novel coronavirus into consideration. The COVID-19 pandemic, which has killed more than 220,000 people and scarred the health of millions more, turned his plans and your business upside down! As a study my company conducted has shown, the coronavirus has taken key parts of what you do, and how you do it and accelerated changes to an industry that still relies on gravity to do much of its work.

Ready for these changes or not, there has been a bright side of sorts: We learned that consumers want and respect funeral homes and their staff more than ever. Throughout the pandemic, funeral service has shown brightly because of everything it does. I have read more than 100 articles in the mainstream media about funeral service since March 2020, and not one of them quoted Joshua Slocum or mentioned – even implied – that funeral directors overcharge. You are the last responder. You are the salt of the community. You are the keeper of the flame of empathy for the dying and their survivors. You are amazing, both collectively and individually.

While your community appreciates you more than ever, however, your business has changed. In the time it took people to go from "The Good Ol' Days" (pre-March 2020) to the "Days of Sequestration" (mid-March 2020 to mid-May 2020) to "COVID Fatigue" (mid-May 2020 to the present), funeral ser-

vice has changed. Because of the pandemic, what would have taken a decade or more to evolve did so in a matter of a few months.

So, I say again: There's no way I can tie together my last 11 articles, most written before we understood the effects of COVID-19. But, as your guide leading you through the perilous path of owning and managing your business, you have trusted me to get you to a safe place for as long as I'm around (and who knows how long that might be because of the virus). To do that, I therefore will risk life and limb to offer three things that tie together your business in light of the progress consumers are begging of you since the appearance of COVID-19.

COVID-19 CHANGE #1: PRICING

Please display absolute integrity in your pricing. Assume you are in a 100% cremation world. Assume only a minority of your cases will employ a casket. Assume even fewer of the cases using a casket will require embalming.

You cannot charge a lower price for comparable services for bodies that will be cremated than you would for bodies to be buried. For example, look at the following prices:

Service	Fee for Burial	Fee for Cremation
Basic Non-Declinable	\$1,000	\$1,000
Removal	\$500	\$500
Sanitation of the Body	\$200	\$200
Transfer to Site of Disposition	\$350	\$350
Cremation Fee	N/A	\$350
Direct Package Offer	\$2,050	\$1,250

In my exhaustive study, I find that 90% of all funeral homes price cremation packages lower than burial packages, as illustrated in the chart. This happens because 90% of those making up the pricing think cremation is about price!

Well, here's a shocker for you: Unless you can show how your ability to provide one service is different than another provider's ability, then price becomes the deciding point. If you do not market your differences, then you cannot complain about consumers asking about price.

The same silly conclusions apply to burial packages. Many of you display dramatic differences in your itemized pricing for direct burial versus a full service that ends with burial. Why give discounts to people choosing to use the lowest amount of your services? Shouldn't you give discounts to those spending the most?

COVID-19 CHANGE #2: TECHNOLOGY

The study I mentioned earlier showed clearly that technology, on all points of the service, must be technologically improved. Technology is the biggest failure in funeral service! I know funeral directors who still use rotary-dial telephones.

Whenever people can't or won't travel, be it near or far, they still want to participate in a funeral service. Therefore, you need to create solid and easy-to-use technology for the arrangement. You need to make the selection and ordering of merchandise as easy as it is on Amazon. You must make the funeral event an event of *inclusion*, regardless of where the participants sit.

You need to offer options for memorials that do not require someone getting dressed up and going to a cemetery. You must allow technology to better support the memorialization of those who choose to be cremated. Every life is a story, and you must promote, through technology, the telling and retelling of that story.

People will make technology-assisted arrangements either to communicate with the professional advisor or to help provide the many points of data the advisor needs to assemble. Consumers should be able to make cemetery and funeral decisions from the comfort and safety of their homes.

COVID-19 CHANGE #3: GENERAL AND ADVANCE MARKETING

While different, marketing your funeral home during a pandemic is not impossible. You must use the existing tools of communication and adapt them to your needs. Since March 2020, we have witnessed people transition from healthy to dead in just 14 days. Because of this, we know that the idea of prearranging is better accepted than ever before. Making disposition and service choices in advance is widely accepted across all adult age groups. This year should prove the biggest year in preneed insurance and trust deposits in the history of U.S. funeral service, but it won't because we are limited by the old ways of selling.

Everything about marketing your business and showing how you are different can be accomplished with the help of technology. You can (and should) put together a mailing, whether via paper and the U.S. post office or via email. Can you hold a vir-

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tual meeting to educate consumers about eldercare planning? Yes! In fact, you can capture this meeting and make it available for playback at any time online. No preneed salesperson will take phone calls 24 hours a day.

The biggest obstacle to implementing all this technology is owners and managers who do not think it's important. If you have said in your mind's voice while reading this, "That doesn't apply to my families," please realize you are *wrong*. Accept this and change. After all, if I'm right and you implement these concepts, the families you serve will be happier and safer. If I'm wrong and you implement these concepts, you will still have a service business that provides better service.

How can you lose? Just dump that voice in your head, which is probably the same voice saying that the tie from mortuary school graduation is still good enough.

So, dear publisher, who is so smart in making editorial calendars a year and a half in advance... There! I did it! I tied it all together! To my fabulous editor, thank you for another year of softening my sardonic wit so I am not cast out of this great profession like a plague-carrying rat. And to you, my dear reader, thanks for listening. Please survive. Please continue to serve the dead and the living as well as you can. Most of all, live long so you can tell the story of 2020 to the generations that follow because they just won't believe it.

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