

How COVID-19 Changed the Role of the Funeral and Cemetery Professional



Foresight Focus



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Introduction

One of the key findings in our recently published 2020 Foresight Funeral and Cemetery Consumer Behavior Study (FCCBS) centers around how the ongoing pandemic had generated an unforeseen impact on the role of the funeral and cemetery professional. More specifically, the pandemic has affected not only how funeral homes and cemeteries serve their families in the present reality but has also shaped a reimagined role for funeral and cemetery professionals both in perception and reality.

The outcome is an elevated position and profile as “**last responders**” in the eyes of the consumer.

24%

of consumers provided top ratings overall for honesty of the profession

Most families walk into our funeral and cemetery facilities uncertain about what to expect. Negative depictions in the media further cloud their opinion. It only takes one bad apple exposed by the news for improper practices to cast a dark shadow on the entire profession. High emotion and the need for quick decisions create additional stress. Is it any surprise that consumers feel a gap between the perception of our profession and the reality we all know to be true? Our recent research confirms this -- only 24% of consumers provided top ratings overall for honesty of the profession.

Previous publications of **Foresight Focus** highlighted some of the implications with consumer engagement around technology--virtual contact, communication, and services. We've also touched on growing consumer expectations around transparency. In light of the changing consumer demand accelerated by the pandemic, this provides all of us with the opportunity to further redefine the profile of funeral and cemetery professionals who can leverage available technology and continue building trust through greater transparency.



of consumers say they will handle funeral and cemetery arrangements virtually, an activity that has historically ONLY occurred in-person with a funeral director



now believe that attending a funeral via livestream “demonstrates how much I care,” an increase of **72%** vs. pre-pandemic levels

Our latest release of **Foresight Focus** examines the changes in our profession driven by the new realities we all face as a result of COVID-19. According to FCCBS, 67% of consumers say their attitudes have changed because they experienced new ways of doing things. As a result of dealing with the health crisis, death and our profession in less-than-ideal conditions, their appreciation for our professionals has improved, bringing consumer perception closer to the role the funeral and cemetery professionals have always played (or always WANTED to play) – that of a compassionate consultant and guide.

So, what does this all mean? The data tells us that we have an opportunity to redefine both the reality and perception of our profession. The obvious next question is, “how?”

In order to take advantage of the current trends, we have laid out four ways to adapt your business, and several tactical approaches to doing so. Some of these changes will be short-term solutions, others will require a longer runway. But all provide opportunities for you to operationalize these changes in a way that can benefit your business and the profession in the current environment and for the future.

Retrain...the funeral directors and cemetery counselors to operationalize their newly minted role

2020 has brought some new ways of doing things, and while many of us have now experienced the newest technologies and trends (Zoom meetings, online ordering, e-commerce), the inertia to do things the old way and resist change is still strong. Now is a great time to retrain current employees to respond to the new normal and to re-frame the future experience.

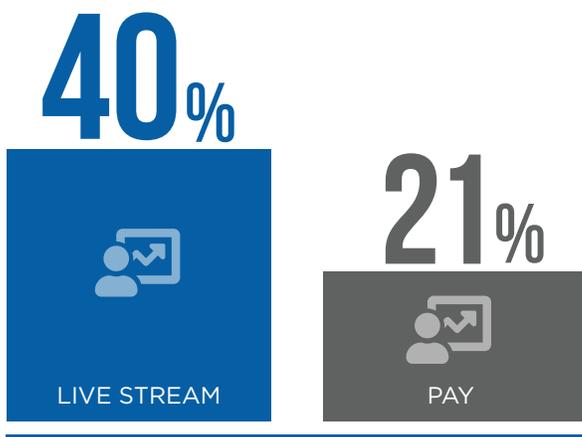
Train on technology adoption.

If there is one thing we learned from our inaugural FCCBS survey, it is that virtual participation is here to stay. This means becoming comfortable with facilitating online arrangement conferences and webcasted services. Shifts in attitudes about the nature of the grieving and memorial process - once limited to physical attendance at visitations, funeral services and at graveside - will mean for some that there are now new ways to demonstrate caring for the loved one or family, and participating in the grieving and memorial process, without being there in person.

Train your employees to put customer experience and customer satisfaction first

While there is absolutely still value in a funeral director being able to completely and accurately obtain first call information and vital statistics, ensuring all the timely and necessary paperwork, or guiding the family's selection of services and merchandise during the arrangement conference, the consumer's focus has shifted towards their experiences and satisfaction now more than ever.

How many Amazon packages showed up at your doorstep yesterday? If your house is anything like ours, it was a lot. Why? Because they make it easy – easy to buy, easy to return. Amazon leverages its technology to provide consumers with a hassle-free, easy, and convenient experience, driving their growth from an online book seller to a retail behemoth. This easy, convenient customer experience is what leads to customer satisfaction and continued repeat business for Amazon. While you don't need to be Amazon, ask yourself if your staff is trained and prepared to put customer experience and customer satisfaction first.



40% of consumers expect live streaming of services; only 21% expect to pay for it.



Train your employees on consultative selling

For both funeral and cemetery staff with client-facing responsibilities, our FCCBS study confirms that the consumer expects that both a funeral director and a cemetery sales counselor take on more of an educational, consultative, planning role than ever before. The fear our business reacts to is the fear of price – that consumers would rather buy a casket, urn, or flowers at Costco because they're cheaper. The reality is, consumers do not necessarily always need or want the lowest price – they simply want to know they're paying a reasonable price – the value is in being well-informed and being well taken care of by a trusted advisor.

Training will help shift your employees' perspectives and their behaviors towards being more educational, transparent, and consultative with client families. This shift in perspective and behavior will present more effectively to your client families and also serves to improve your families' experience with your firm.



Rethink...your staffing plan with the right kind of people.

If there is a silver lining to the pandemic, it's that media and news outlets are recognizing the sacrifices of front-line workers, including funeral and cemetery professionals, reframing them as essential last responders. That's the good news.

The challenge is teaching an old dog new tricks, a problem for many owner/operators. Finding qualified employees has never been more difficult, especially when one considers licensing requirements in many states. However, with many people looking for new employment opportunities, it could be a great time to find people who may have never considered our profession previously. Ask yourself:

1. Are you hiring people who put customer experience and satisfaction first?
2. Are you hiring for culture fit? Hire for the skill set, train them on the profession.
3. Do you have an "internet or e-commerce specialist" to respond to online and email contact?
4. Focus on stability, caring, helpful, nurturing – "last responders" when selling the profession during the employee recruitment process.

Funeral and cemetery professionals have a chance to bridge the gap between perception and the reality we all know – that of a trusted advisor.

Reimagine...your facilities

Consumers have less concern for "where" services ultimately take place - 64% of respondents now would be more likely to consider an end-of-life event that takes place outside of a funeral home or cemetery setting. This is a shift in thinking, but one that only reinforces our role as a consultant, facilitator, coordinator.

For your existing space, consider temporary modifications of the space to align with short-term changes in your market (many of you have already started this). Monitor your market to understand whether changes are short-lived or permanent.

Additionally, we have seen a rise in celebrations taking place outside of our facilities, a trend the profession has identified over several years. Now COVID has repositioned the funeral director to reassert their role as a consultative partner. That means, your role does not end at the edge of the facility's parking lot – it extends into the community, where we can still play a leading role in helping the client manage through the event, even if it does not necessarily need to take place in our building. The funeral director and cemetery professional can play a significant role in helping craft the look and feel of these services, further enhancing the customer experience, regardless of where they occur.

Renew... your dedication to pre-need opportunities

A tsunami of opportunity is coming, with more people than ever seeing a new way forward to plan. During a public health crisis, consumers are thinking about their financial health as well as their physical health.

If you haven't already seen an increase in Pre-Need, you will. Just as the community demands insurance professionals and financial advisors, consumers are clamoring for end-of-life planning tools, with 73% saying it's important to have pre-plan funeral arrangements, up from 58%. There's never been a more appropriate time to be visible in your community.

Accepting the role of a guide for the clients of tomorrow builds on the service-oriented approach of the past and recognizes the needs for service providers to address the changing tastes and attitudes of the post-pandemic consumer. The tools we use for planning may evolve from here, but the promise of protection through pre-planning remains the same.



73% say it's important to pre-plan funeral arrangements, up from 58%.

Concluding Thoughts

The pandemic has thrust funeral and cemetery professionals into a role that we have long played but are only now being recognized for – that of the “last responder” and compassionate care giver. The biggest challenge our profession faces is being able to quickly adapt to this new expectation. It is not often that an entire profession has an opportunity to redefine itself and continue to positively change how they are perceived, so putting short and long-term plans in place quickly is critical.

The new breed of funeral and cemetery professionals needs to be comfortable with an educational and consultative approach to selling and present themselves as a partner helping you manage an event most people will only intimately experience on average, twice in their lifetime. Successful owner/operators will position their funeral and cemetery professionals for success by supporting this reimagined role, leading to higher rates of pre-arrangements and more satisfied families, who are in turn more likely to return to you for repeat business as well as recommend your services to others based on their own positive experience.

The role of the funeral and cemetery professional has forever changed, and the winners will play a critical role as a trusted advisor and guide with their families--working to shape a new American funeral and cemetery service, and will be rewarded with more profitable businesses.

Reach out to The Foresight Companies to speak to one of our experts today.



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About The Foresight Companies

We have one mission: create successful business solutions for our clients. Our formula includes the knowledge gained from our Partners who have over 100 years of combined funeral and cemetery industry experience. No other consulting firm in funeral service comes close. We have the insight and experience to make a difference for you.

Since our company was founded in 1987, we have provided transactional, financial and management consulting to over 3,000 funeral homes and 1,000 cemeteries. The Foresight Companies has performed appraisals for more than 2,500 funeral homes, 800 cemeteries and originated more than \$750M in financing and assisted more than 500 private business owners to buy or sell businesses representing a billion dollars in value.

For more information,
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