

A YEAR IN THE LIFE



The Push We Needed

The pandemic has presented overwhelming negatives, but there have also been some positives for the profession's future.

BY CHRIS CRUGER

I remember sitting down with our staff one last time for a team lunch before we sent everybody home to work remotely. We didn't know much about this crazy virus and certainly couldn't have imagined that we'd still be dealing with it one year later. I was one of the naysayers and thought it was being overblown, but I still told people to be prepared to be working remotely until after July 4. It sounded silly then (to all of us). Now, I would take July 4, 2021, as a target date for that return to normal. I imagine most of us would.

The past 12 months have been like none other in our lifetime. We have been stretched to limits we never knew possible. We have been divided socially, politically, philosophically and professionally. More than any of those things, the funeral profession has been thrust into the limelight as the final responders in this epic battle. I have never been prouder to be a small part of this profession than I am today. If there is a silver lining to the pandemic, it's that funeral directors are finally being recognized as essential workers. The challenge though, is teaching the old dogs new tricks.

In early May of last year, The Foresight Companies commissioned its 2020 Foresight Funeral and Cemetery Consumer Behavior Study to understand how the pandemic was changing consumer attitudes about funeral service. When we released the findings in June, we thought we were on the back side of the pandemic. Today, the most interesting thing from that data is that what the consumer was telling us then is only becoming more prevalent in the profession as the pandemic lingers.

The funeral profession has been pushed to its limits. What began in metropolitan New York in the first few months of the pandemic spread throughout the country. As I was writing this, I saw that Arizona had topped the nation, with 7,217 new cases in one week. There are headlines of funeral homes being over capacity and of cities lifting air quality restrictions for cremations.

Still, the funeral service professionals who represent pandemic final responders have never backed down from the responsibility. When firms were faced with the challenge of finding PPE for their staff, longtime competitors stepped in and helped those in need.

The demand for the services of the profession has never risen to the level at which it stands today. And with the national unemployment rate spiking into double digits in 2020, the demand for good people in funeral service has never been higher, as we face a shortage of talent like few other professions. And today, consumers are more clearly defining what they want and expect from our profession than they have in the past.

Historically, the funeral service industry has been slow to adapt to change, but now, firms were forced to adopt technology at a pace that has made many uncomfortable. Therefore, over the past 12 months, the separation between "winners" and "losers" has never been so profound. Over the year, I suspect that one-third of all funeral homes have thrived, one-third have adapted and been successful, and the last third have struggled in epic proportions. The simple



differentiator is the willingness and speed at which operators and their staff have embraced technology and change. Some suggest that there are local or geographic limitations, but look around and tell me what other aspect of your life was as technologically backward as the funeral industry was 12 months ago. In certain ways, the pandemic has been a blessing in disguise for the profession.

The Funeral and Cemetery Consumer Behavior Study outlined how COVID-19 has driven technology to forever alter the funeral and cemetery professions. These changes impacted not only how funeral homes present their offerings to the public but also how mourners actually participate in the grieving process.

Technology is changing the profession in three main ways. The first is the clear consumer preference for the availability of pricing information online. Seventy-five percent of consumers now state that they want access to pricing information online, and more than half (52%) say they will only do business in the future with companies that provide online pricing.

The second is the use of virtual communication, fundamentally changing both the preneed and at-need sales processes, which have traditionally taken place almost exclusively in person. Close to half (46%) of consumers say they plan to handle death-care arrangements virtually in the future (up from just 34% pre-pandemic).

The third technology is livestreaming and virtual services, which allow – for the first time in human history – mourners to “congregate,” memorialize and

pay their respects in real time from afar. In fact, 40% of consumers now expect memorial services to be livestreamed, and those consumers do not expect to pay for the additional service. I would even suggest that that number is far higher now.

Clearly, the use of technology is not new in the profession; many of these services have existed for quite some time, and they have permeated almost every other aspect of our lives. Given the circumstances, however, these things have quickly morphed from “nice to have” to “must have” features of the profession.

This rapid change also requires us to be more aware of who we hire, how we train them and the importance of their role in customer satisfaction. This is not a new concept altogether, but it is that much more important in the new “cancel culture.” My father always told me that “50 attaboys are worth one you know what.” With social media and technology a part of every aspect of our lives, it’s even more critical to be on top of your game so you can make sure you are matching your customers’ needs.

The new breed of funeral professionals needs to be comfortable with an educational and consultative approach to selling and present themselves as a partner helping you manage an event that most people will only intimately experience, on average, twice in their lifetime. Successful operators are positioning their staff for success by supporting this reimagined role, leading to higher rates of prearrangements and more satisfied families. In turn, this will cause a much higher level of customer satisfaction and positive referral-based business.

The past year was a challenge for everybody in ways nobody could have imagined. And while we have been stretched on the home front, worked harder than we ever have before and faced more trauma than most should experience in a lifetime, we in the funeral profession have been blessed more than most. We have lost loved ones and colleagues, we’ve faced hardships like everybody else, and I would never suggest it has been fun, but in long run, we’ve fared better than most. It may be unpopular to say, but I think we have grown as an industry more in the past 12 months than in the last 12 years. I am proud of this profession’s resolve and feel incredibly positive about the opportunities to come for each and every one of us. ☰

Chris Cruger is CEO of The Foresight Companies, a Phoenix-based business and management consulting firm specializing in mergers and acquisitions, valuations, accounting, financing, human resources and compliance services. He is seen as an innovator and thought leader in the funeral and cemetery industries. Cruger can be reached at 800-426-0165 or chriscruger@theforesightcompanies.com. Check out additional insights at theforesightcompanies.com/blog/category/articles. For copies of this article or other educational information, visit theforesightcompanies.com. Connect with Cruger and The Foresight Companies by following them on Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook.