

# The Reimagined Funeral and Cemetery Professional—Post Pandemic

by Chris Cruger

**A**s WE WERE ALL LEARNING TO WORK THE ‘NEW NORMAL’ into our lexicon The Foresight Companies conducted a study focused on consumer attitudes toward the funeral and cemetery profession in the post-pandemic era. The findings around the role of our profession were simply astonishing. The pandemic has altered not only how funeral homes and cemeteries serve their families today, but it also has produced a reimagined role for funeral and cemetery professionals both in perception and reality. The result is an elevated view as “last responders” in the eyes of the consumer.

When a death occurs, most families arrive at funeral and cemetery facilities with unsure expectations. Emotions are high and the need for quick decisions can cause even more stress. Is it that much of a surprise that consumers feel a disconnection between the opinion of our profession and the reality of it?

We are seeing that the shifts in our profession are due to the new realities we deal with due to the pandemic. Our study confirmed that only 24% of consumers gave top ratings for truthfulness of the profession. We now know that 67% of consumers say that the new ways of doing things have changed their attitudes.

Their gratitude for our professionals has increased, bringing consumer perception closer to the role the funeral and cemetery professionals have always played—a guiding light and resource in times of need.

With the rapidly changing times, there are four ways to adapt your business to address consumer needs moving forward.

## **Business Adaptation #1**

*Retrain your funeral directors and cemetery counselors to operationalize their reimagined role.*

For over a year, technology has become part of our professional and personal lives like never before. But still, there is a resistance by some to accept this reality. Does anybody really think we’re ever going back to the way things were? It is absolutely critical that we provide the training and support around these new technologies and ways of

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serving our clients. It is vital to provide and support the right tools for our professionals to meet the demands of the consumers we serve today. Let’s face it—the consumer we are serving today has different expectations than those of 12 and 24 months ago.

The training process must include teaching your staff to view customer experience and customer satisfaction as top priorities. Consumer focus has totally shifted toward experience, satisfaction, and value. We must meet that consumer expectation or be prepared to become obsolete. Giving professionals the right tools (training) to succeed is the minimal standard here.

The consumer expects funeral and cemetery professionals to play the role of an educator, consultant, and planner. This is simply the concept of consultative selling. There is incredible value in consumers being educated and well-served by a trusted advisor. The standard is to always be that

trusted advisor. Each and every professional who serves a family must be given the tools to be transparent, to meet the needs of the client, and to succeed.

## **Business Adaptation #2**

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

One of the blessings of this pandemic has been the positive public recognition of the funeral and cemetery profession. The sacrifices of our profession have not gone unnoticed. The “last responders” have now been recognized as the essential workers they have always been.

With this blessing, there does still come a challenge. The profession is steeped in tradition and very slow to change. If we are to succeed in this brave new world, we must evolve now. This does not mean that the old ways of doing things are no longer relevant; nor does it mean that we should be putting people out to pasture.

While finding qualified employees has never been more difficult, there are more people looking for new opportunities today than at almost any time in most of our lifetimes. We have an opportunity to reinvent ourselves with each new professional we bring into the business.

We don’t need each employee to have all the skills, but we do need a team to meet all the needs of the consumer. Each new professional who joins the team should be adding to the skill set and quality of the team. It isn’t easy, and you shouldn’t settle.

## **Business Adaptation #3**

*Reimagine your facilities.*

In a world where more than half of all consumers would consider having a service outside of the funeral home or cemetery setting, we must adapt to address that consumer sentiment. We can try to fight the shift, or adapt. I’d suggest that the most

likely pathway to success is to adapt to the attitudes of the consumer.

When looking at your location, think about small changes to the space to support the demands of the consumer. It doesn't need to be a wholesale change to the facilities. Sometimes, all it takes is a little refresh and/or change to breathe new life into your staff and the community. Try new things and be willing to change if it doesn't work. We must constantly be evolving and improving our situation.

The need for open-air and social

distancing has seen an increase in celebrations taking place outside of our facilities. The differentiator today is our people, service levels, and the value proposition we provide. As the model shifts, we must continue to evolve all aspects of our business and approach.

#### Business Adaptation #4

***Renew your dedication to pre-need opportunities.***

An abundance of opportunity is coming with more people seeing an increased need

to plan. Consumers are thinking about their financial health and their physical health. There also has been a significant increase in the demand to pre-arrange.

We don't have to look any further than the public information provided by the industry consolidators and our associations to see the direction of pre-need. With almost 75% of all consumers wishing to pre-plan their funeral or cemetery arrangements, now is the time to double-down on your pre-planning efforts. Your community is asking for it.

#### Get Comfortable with the New Normal

The pandemic has propelled funeral and cemetery professionals into a role that we have always played but are only now being recognized for—that of the “last responder.” We must swiftly adapt our approach and meet the demands of the consumer.

The new breed of funeral and cemetery professionals needs to be comfortable with an educational and consultative approach to serving families and present themselves as a partner—a partner who is helping manage an event most people might only intimately experience twice in their lifetime.

Successful owner/operators will position their funeral and cemetery professionals for success by supporting this reimagined role. It will lead to higher rates of pre-arrangements and more satisfied families who are more likely to return for repeat business and provide recommendations to others based on their positive experience.

The role of the funeral and cemetery professional has forever changed, and the winners will play a critical role as trusted advisors and guides to their families—working to shape a new American funeral and cemetery profession—and will be rewarded for those efforts. ■



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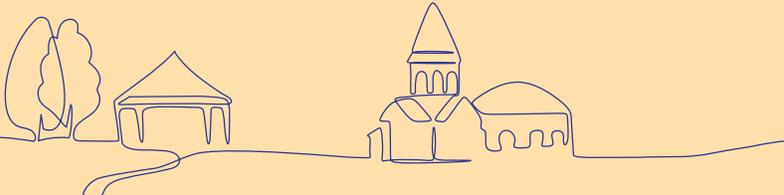
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