

By Daniel M. Isard

## Community Service as Ministry and Marketing

Whether you call this effort aftercare, community service or outreach programming, there are many ways to market the value of your ministry.

Imagine you turn on your television and see a barker screaming, “I have a solution that will boost your business, increase average revenue per call, reduce bad debt, grow preneed and increase case count!” (If you’d change the channel, I wouldn’t blame you.)

In the 35 years I’ve been researching the topic of community service performed by funeral homes, however, I can tell you straight up that doing community service properly will indeed increase average revenue per call, decrease bad debt, grow preneed services and increase your case count! It will also increase facility utilization (prepandemic, at least).

Now, the question: “Why does community service create so many key benefits for my business?” There are three reasons. First, consumers pick a funeral home based on heritage or previous service. Therefore, providing care and outreach via multiple events, programs and social media channels is a defensive position. It keeps those families your firm has previously served close to you.

Second, community service demonstrates the power of your ministry. While your education focuses on service to the deceased, there should be no doubt that the modern-day funeral is about the living. The more a person feels good about your funeral home after the fact, the more likely he or she will feel an allegiance to you. Helping someone heal through your programs and events reinforces and furthers the very solution you are promoting.

Third, community service demonstrates value. Funerals are not about cost. Shoppers who call asking about cost are doing so because they don’t see or understand the value in your profession. The more chances they get to know you, however, the more they will trust you and see the value in what you do.

This month, I spoke to three people who experienced firsthand the rewards of giving back to their communities via community service programs.

Peg Jonkhoff is part of the fifth generation running Reynolds-Jonkhoff Funeral Home in Traverse City, Michigan. Justin Baxley, who previously owned a multiple-location funeral home/cemetery in Florida before going on to a career at Foundation Partners Group, is today on his own with Harrington Street Investments LLC. And Tom Anderson, who was owner of Anderson Funeral Home in Alexandria, Minnesota, descends from more than 140 years of family funeral home ownership and is publisher of the “Funeral Director Daily” blog.

Whether you call this effort community service, aftercare or outreach programming, there are many ways to market the value of your ministry. One such resource is participation in NFDA’s Pursuit of Excellence program. While association membership comprises about 11,000 member firms, fewer than 200 apply for review and inclusion in the program each year. One firm that does is Reynolds-Jonkhoff.

“We are always pursuing excellence!” stated Jonkhoff. “[Pursuit of Excellence] is one opportunity to document what we are doing every year. We have been doing this for 22 years with our team.”

The required Pursuit of Excellence documents are memorialized in albums, but the actual work takes place throughout the community. Because of its efforts, Reynolds-Jonkhoff has not only been recognized as a Pursuit of Excellence leader but has received NFDA’s “Best of the Best” award not once but twice. (See [nfda.org/pursuitofexcellence](http://nfda.org/pursuitofexcellence).)

Certainly, COVID has changed the way funeral providers serve families and their communities in general – something Jonkhoff referred to as the “pandemic pivot.” She explained the self-coined phrase as it pertains to community outreach: “We have one program in which we put people on buses and take them to lunch, but this year, we couldn’t get out for the group lunch. So, we had to pivot. We had to think out of the box and into a virtual

format.” The pivoted program worked well, shared Jonkhoff.

Justin Baxley didn't get involved in these outreach opportunities for peer recognition; he was looking for business prosperity in a crowded market. “Years ago, I was searching for ways to build our market share,” he said. “In that process of discovery, I read a book by Seth Godin titled *Tribes*. In the book, the author explained that people are looking for ways to connect.”

Baxley embodied this message by looking at ways to promote community connection with his brand, which opened the door to trying various promotional and educational events, as well as just creating joyous gatherings at his funeral homes and cemetery. Explained Baxley: “The concept of community outreach and relationship marketing is tied together. We found out the return on investment was much greater than the traditional marketing efforts.”

Aftercare can be defined as “service after the normal point of serving,” but there are other definitions. “It is important to remember that when I heard the word ‘aftercare,’ it was truly something that is an altruistic effort,” said Baxley. “You are trying to extend the relationship with the family and community, which goes beyond the funeral, cremation and burial. It provides help for the family as they try to adjust to a new normal in their lives.”

And good service via aftercare is rewarded, added Baxley. “As we put more into that aftercare effort and creating the healing events, we saw an increase in customer loyalty. We even saw families that had used a competitor come to our events, and over time, we were able to track preneed sales to us.”

Baxley is also very clear on the line between altruism and capitalism: “The aftercare program was not intended to drive preneed sales. Aftercare was about doing something meaningful for consumers. However, through the events, consumers learned about our brand.”

In other words, aftercare and preneed sales might be synergistic and might promote the discussion, but the altruism should not push the capitalism. “There are family follow-up methodologies that are more geared toward sales, but when I think about aftercare,” said Baxley, “I think about truly doing something to meet the needs of a grieving family.”

Tom Anderson wasn't thinking about building market share when he learned to promote his brand of community involvement thanks to the request of a widow. According to Anderson, “Our aftercare program began with the death of a high school teacher in his early 50s. His wife came in and made the arrangements. Six months later, she came to me and



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said, “Tom, this is something your funeral home should think of offering to people. We can educate people what they’re going to be going through in the future.”

Anderson took this advice to heart and, even better, hired that young widow to run the firm’s after-care program – for the next 30 years! The firm now has its second outreach leader, who was also widowed, but she “took the classes, participated in the programs,” he said. The new leader of his outreach programs was also a student of the originator.

Anderson is proud of his recurring six-session program “Growing Through Your Grief.” Each session is offered both during the day and in the evening. “We cover the physiology and psychology of human beings who suffer a loss. We send a letter to everyone who has a loss when the sessions start.

Some people attend right after they lose a loved one and [others] two or three years after they experience a loss,” he explained.

Based on my experience, having talked with many aftercare leaders, I recommend looking for someone who has experienced firsthand the loss of a loved one. A great example is Beverly Brown, who, after losing her child, took her personal ministry to help the Ocala, Florida, community. She ran many programs annually and even some that were held monthly. (Brown actually developed Baxley’s program and one for Foundation Partners Group before leaving that business for StoneMor.)

Anderson said he felt he was a better funeral director because he lost his father at an early age, as this experience of loss raises the ability to empathize with others who have had a loss. Jonkhoff, on the other hand, took football coach Al Davis’ approach of “just do it.” “It doesn’t have to be a funeral director,” she said.

The most important recommendation noted by all three guests this month was to start small – find the right person, start a program and build from there. Whether your firm’s program is on a large scale or small, you will be helping your community with the outreach and improving that all-important community connection.

*Daniel M. Isard, MSFS, is founder of The Foresight Companies, Phoenix, Arizona, which provides financial and management consulting to funeral homes, cemeteries and vendors within the space. He can be reached at 800-426-0165 or danisard@theforesightcompanies.com. Look for an accompanying video to this article at youtube.com/user/foresightcompanies.*

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