

# A Beacon of Hope

Position your firm like Lady Liberty and earn the trust of your community.

BY JOHN T. MCQUEEN

## THE YEAR WAS 1876 AND AMERICA WAS CELEBRATING

the 100th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence when the French government presented the United States with a gift to honor the celebration. The colossal neoclassical sculpture known as Liberty Enlightening the World (the Statue of Liberty) was created by French sculptor Frédéric-Auguste Bartholdi, who crafted it from sheets of hammered copper. Alexandre Gustave Eiffel, who designed and constructed the Eiffel Tower, created the steel framework that became her endoskeleton.

This gift of friendship between two nations was dedicated October 28, 1886, and became known fondly as Lady Liberty. It would become a beacon of hope for millions of immigrants arriving in America via Ellis Island. She also became the epitome of the American dream, one based on the ideals of freedom, both here and around the world.

## AS A SECOND-GENERATION FUNERAL DIRECTOR AND EMBALMER

who grew up in a family-owned funeral home, I witnessed firsthand the

tremendous positive impact our team made on families during their most difficult days. In fact, it was watching these professionals and the difference they made in the lives of grieving families that prompted me to make this my life's work, too.

I was fortunate to learn from individuals committed to excellence in every aspect of the business – from mowing lawns and washing cars to proper embalming care and what I refer to as “survivor care.” We did whatever needed to be done, and we did so to the best of our abilities regardless of whether anyone recognized the extra steps we took.

I share this because I was dumbfounded when I read the results of the 2020 Foresight Funeral and Cemetery Consumer Behavior Study and realized that just 24% of consumers provided top ratings overall for honesty in our profession. Is that a perception issue or is it reality?

Sure, there is much anxiety and uncertainty surrounding the funeral service profession from a consumer standpoint. Emotions run high among family members and friends when confronted with the reality of a death. Adding to this emotional and anxiety-ridden state of mind are the

numerous Google search results that depict funeral professionals as vultures preying on the bereaved. Unfortunately, many of those articles and ads are posted by funeral service colleagues attempting to gain growth for their end-of-life concepts over others in their marketplace. Finally, the cherries on top of the dessert are the actual licensees who truly are unethical, garnering the media's attention and giving our industry a bad name. Fortunately, those individuals are few and far between, but the ramifications of their behavior are far-reaching.

2020 was indeed a stressful year, and the pandemic further complicated the grieving process for many families by hindering





# TRUST

their ability to celebrate the life of their beloved; in some states, it continues to hamper this honoring of the dead.

As a profession, it forced us to look inward at the services and processes we provide and challenged us to find new ways to continue serving families in what quickly became a virtual world. It also shed light on growing consumer expectations around transparency in our industry.

“In the middle of adversity, there is great opportunity,” said Albert Einstein. Well, the last year has provided us all with plenty of challenges, but it has also given us great opportunities, one of which is to improve the perception of our profession in

the minds of consumers. Because of the pandemic, the momentum has already begun, with consumers viewing us more favorably as “last responders” providing a much needed service in times of crisis.

But that’s just the beginning. We must continue to shape our role in our communities if we truly want to be the trusted professionals we once were, even if it was only in our minds.

**THROUGHOUT 40 YEARS IN FUNERAL SERVICE,** I’ve discovered that one of the best ways to meet the needs of our clientele is to look at how other industries and professionals meet the needs of their customers.

Funeral service is a non-routine purchase, and as such, consumers have little to no knowledge based on experience by which to formulate what constitutes a good funeral home versus a bad one. But consumers do have a vast array of knowledge about other services they use routinely, such as restaurants, hotels, retailers, plumbers, bakers and candlestick makers. With some foresight, we can capitalize on the services, procedures and processes of such leaders, both small and large, to improve our own clients’ experience level.

My mother used to say that perception is reality. When I was a young man starting out in the world of business, my father en-

couraged me to start investing and introduced me to his “stock-broker.” Today, these professionals no longer go by stockbroker but rather financial advisor. Why? In part, it’s because they do more than just invest money in the stock market. They sell life insurance, consult on financial products of all sorts and help you design an overall wealth-building strategy.

I believe the name also changed to something that elevates their status to a more trusted position in the eyes of their clientele. Let’s face it: Are you more comfortable trusting your life’s savings to a stock “broker” or to a financial “advisor”?

We are not much different

from the financial advisor as many of us provide services to our clients that far exceed simply the disposition of a dead body and providing a funeral. Might there perhaps a better name for what we do that would evoke a stronger feeling of trust in people’s minds?

Now, you’re probably thinking, “Wait a minute. My families all trust me. They’ve even told me so.” While I am confident they do, your current or previous clients are not the issue; rather, it’s your newly acquired and potential future clients. The newly acquired may have selected your firm for any number of reasons, but they have yet to experience you and your company, so they are com-

ing to you lacking in trust. For the future client, as they research potential firms, they are finding more information online about the industry, many of which are the stories I mentioned previously, so they are even less trusting of you and the profession.

In fact, consumer trust has been waning in recent years for many industries, including funeral service. According to the 2019 Edelman Brand Trust Survey as reported in *Forbes*, 81% of respondents said that trust does impact their buying decisions, yet just one-third of consumers said that they trust the brands they buy.

Also, 41% said they do not trust a brand’s marketing communications to be accurate or truthful. Additionally, the survey revealed that once trust is lost, it’s hard to get back. In fact, 45% of consumers said they would never trust a brand again after it displayed unethical behavior, and 40% say they would stop buying from that brand altogether.



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### HOW CAN WE BUILD UP TRUST WITH CLIENTS AND COMMUNITY?

Here are some techniques from our book, *Lessons From the Dead: Breathing Life Into Customer Service* (co-written with his wife, Nikki), for providing your customers with exceptional service that will drive both profitability and brand loyalty, and allow your firm to soar to new heights through the application of proven techniques that bolster customer service.

### Sincere Greetings and Goodbyes

A warm, friendly smile and a pleasant handshake go a long way in elevating you and your company in the eyes of consumers. According to research by neuroscientist Andrew Newberg, the smile is “the symbol that was

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rated with the highest positive emotional content.” And as Dale Carnegie simply stated, “The expression one wears on one’s face is far more important than the clothes one wears on one’s back.”

People like to do business with people they “like” and “trust,” and a smile will help you get there quicker.

Like the smile, a handshake goes a long way in building trust

in a relationship. Many young people find them to be a bit stuffy, preferring to high-five, fist bump or even hug. Yet when it comes to trust, the traditional handshake remains one of the most powerful symbols – from the schoolyard among friends to world leaders trying to avert war.

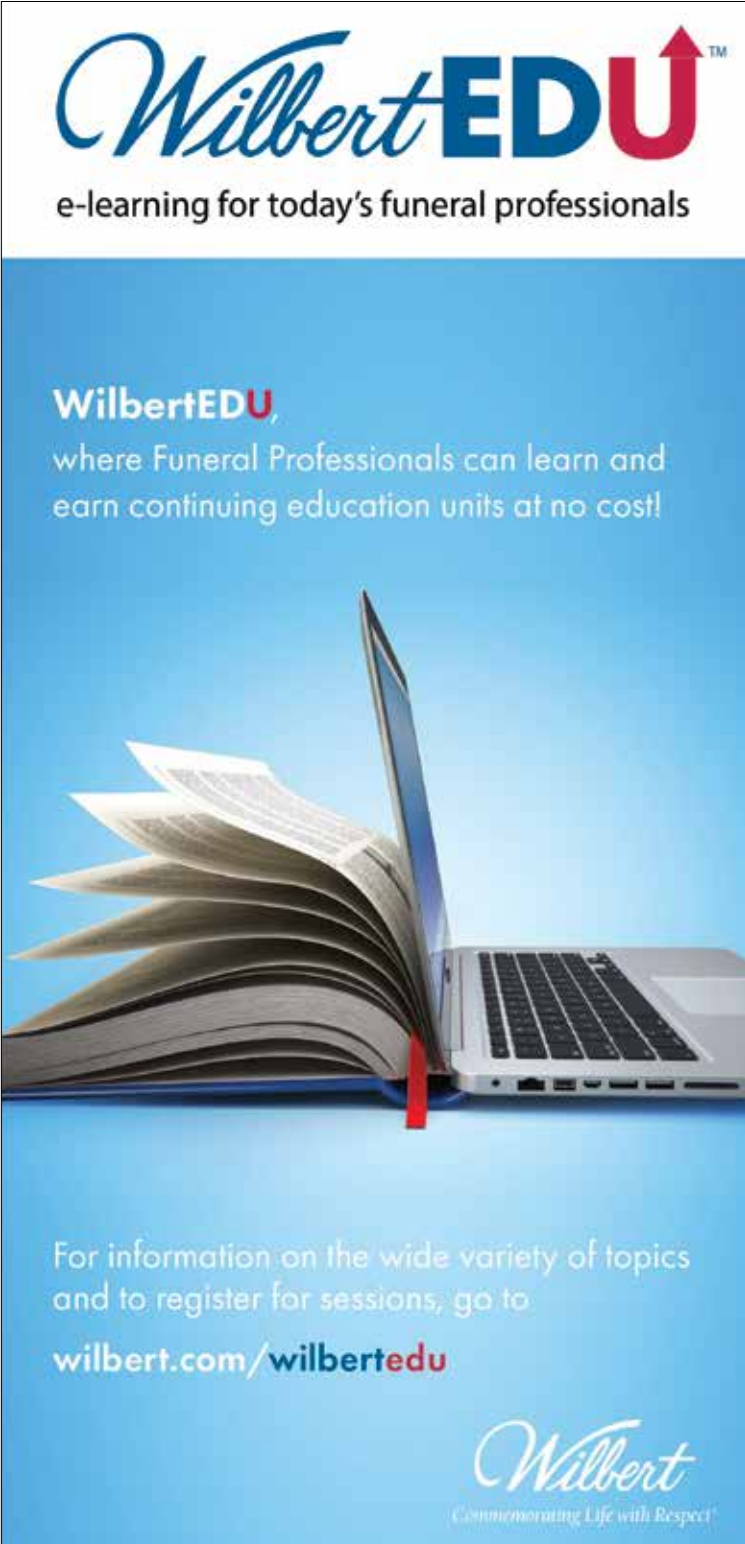
As psychologist Dr. David Holmes of Manchester Metropolitan University says, “In our evolutionary past, touch was the foundation of families and civilized coexistence, helping to reduce stress, violence and dissent. As a type of ritualized touch, the handshake is one of the few forms of public physical contact that still survives today.”

### Appearance Matters

The way you, your facilities and your staff look has a direct impact on the customer’s perception of your professionalism, and professionalism, in turn, builds trust. My father always preached, “You never get a second chance to make a great first impression.”

Numerous research studies have shown that first impressions are formed within seconds of meeting someone or entering a facility. When your staff is on a transfer, are they dressed in a coat and tie (even at 2 a.m.)? Do they dress that way only in front of families or anywhere a transfer is made? Remember, nurses, orderlies and others are watching, too, and forming impressions.

What message are your facilities conveying? Are you a premium-price, high-service operator or a bare-bones, low-cost provider? Whichever you’ve chosen to be, do your services, staff and facilities convey that level of service to customers through appearance? Often, we create disconnects for clients and the community by sending mixed messages that can weaken their trust and confidence levels, e.g., premium facilities and discount prices, or



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### Own the Guest Experience

A leading fallacy in business today is that the customer is the most important person in the room, when in fact, the most important person during any transaction is you. Why? Because providing a great experience should not be left to the customer to achieve; it's up to you. Trust is one of the most important aspects of the customer experience because consumers don't want to do business with a company they don't trust.

As Blake Morgan, customer experience futurist and author, states, "Trust is the cornerstone of all customer experience. It can't be built in a day, but it can be destroyed quickly." Unfortunately, consumer trust in many industries, including funeral service, is at an all-time low as outlined in the 2020 Foresight Funeral and Cemetery Consumer Behavior Study. There isn't a single item at which we can point our finger for a solution, but every time a customer must repeat themselves, remain on hold too long, complete piles of paperwork, be confronted by a lack of responsiveness and so on, a little more trust is eroded.

And for many companies and industries stuck in their old ways, startups are popping up by focusing on the customer experience. They address the pain points customers experience with other companies and then turn those negatives into positives. Are you

exploring all the points of interaction with your customers and turning them into positives?

Like American Express' famous tagline, "Ownership has its privileges," the same is true for the customer experience. You own the experience – good or bad – and it is your responsibility to build trust at the funeral home, in the community and online.

### Remember the WOW!

It is a simple yet powerful tool for elevating the customer experience and building brand loyalty, yet it is so often overlooked within our profession and others. Simply put, it means "give customers more than they expect."

In their book, *The Intuitive Customer: 7 Imperatives for Moving Your Customer Experience to the Next Level*, authors Colin Shaw and Ryan Hamilton share that "consumers are unreasonable, but they're not stupid." Their research reveals that we believe we make rational choices, but we actually make instinctive, "gut" choices and then justify them through a set of rational criteria to convince ourselves that we made the right decision. This is important because most marketing is based on the consumer making a logical, cognitive choice.

What really mat-

ters to consumers and drives their buying decisions and their loyalty to a brand is how they *feel*. The WOW! makes the customer feel special and creates a positive mental image for future recall. It does not have to be expensive, or even tangible, but it does need to be positive and memorable. To build strong brand loyalty with customers, make sure your last interaction is one that creates a positive memory picture for the consumer.

In the end, you want to position your firm like Lady Liberty. You want to be that beacon of hope in your community. By implementing many of the steps outlined here, you will be well on your way to being the trusted advisor on all death-related activities in your area. You will be the one who watches over your community, shining your torch on the dark waters of grief and despair, shedding light for others in times of darkness. ☸

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