

# Looking Ahead

By Patti Martin Bartsche



## What's Ahead for Funeral Service?

As the new year dawns, few industries are more dynamic and challenging than the death care. All around we see experimentation and change in a time when the future of funeral service is evolving.

As we begin 2022, we asked some of death care's experts and innovators to share their predictions for the year ahead. They share their visions of the future of cremation, memorialization, technology, what a post-pandemic world looks like, and more.

### **Lindsay Bourgeois, director of communications and program development, Preneed Funeral Programs**

Nothing quite embodied what it means to change and adapt than the years 2020 and 2021. The past 22 months have been nothing short of extraordinary as business professionals across all industries were forced to



rewrite their business models to meet consumers' needs and meet them where they are. As we continue to ride through the pandemic and eventually enter into post-pandemic life, funeral service will be faced with trends shaped by the past 22 months that are here to stay.

Encouraging funeral professionals to embrace change and adapt to evolving digital trends as it pertains to preneed, at-need, and aftercare has been a common thread in funeral marketing for several years. Who would have thought that such abrupt and drastic adjustments would have been forced on everyone in the industry in such an unprecedented fashion? However, in the midst of the chaos and uncertainty, funeral professionals banded together and delivered unique solutions to families who have been arguably more interested in talking about their funeral plans than ever before. Proof of this was evident in preneed sales that exceeded preneed volume for the same period the previous year. And that's with alternate and virtual sales techniques in place.

In 2022, we'll continue to see these heightened levels of interest surrounding preneed due to the increased awareness of the fragility of life and the desire to make sure loved ones are taken care of both financially and emotionally.

Families realized over the course of the past two years and beyond, the convenience and safety that comes with planning and buying online, so this ever-growing online presence will continue to dictate how families choose to make their buying decisions. Funeral service representation in the digital space through social media, website information and communication, and digital presentations will be pivotal to helping families make preneed buying decisions as well as at-need arrangements.

While we have seen a return to in-home presentations and funeral service gatherings, we will also continue to see an interest in virtual presentations and funeral service planning that takes place completely online. Families want options, and more and more these days they want to be able to make all their decisions and purchases from the comfort and safety of their own homes.



**Chris Cruger, chief executive officer, The Foresight Companies**

I think we're going to see quite a bit of the same in 2022 that we saw in 2021. Consumer attitudes and behaviors have changed so dramatically through COVID that it has completely shaken the tree. We are going to continue to see a significant turnover in ownership into 2022 and beyond.

As consumer attitudes have shifted and the availability of information continues to expand, we are seeing owners who are embracing the opportunity and are experiencing incredible success. On the other hand, those who are resistant to change are finding things a little bit more difficult today than they once were. We are also seeing quite a few folks who are just tired. It's been a long couple years and people have simply had enough.

As we head into 2022, I think you will continue to see much of the same – more transactions than you can keep track of, more-and-more technology, and a much better educated consumer that knows what they are looking for.



**Luke Frieberg, president, eFuneral**

As we transition out of year two of the pandemic, I can only reflect on how remarkably the profession has adapted. From creative solutions to provide grief support, to managing the constant strain on our operations to incorporating technology to help connect with families from all over, the constant for the last two years has been the adaption and evolution of our businesses.

Looking ahead to another year, we will reflect on the new habits established or solutions implemented during the abnormal times of the pandemic and take inventory on ones to keep and ones to modify or remove.

On the technology front, many firms implemented solutions like DocuSign to facilitate signatures during the height of the pandemic and are now

beginning to question if that is the long-term solution or if there are other options. That is just one example of adaption out of necessity that will be weighed against alternatives in the year ahead.

On the human side, many firms operated under immense pressure to keep up during the past year and half as the challenge to recruit and retain quality team members met the increased need to serve more families. This trend is going to continue into the coming years, as finding and recruiting talent within our profession is more difficult than ever. This again is where taking inventory of the way things are done vs. the way things must be done will allow us to meet both our team members needs without sacrificing the needs of the families we serve.

In 2022 we will see business models and service providers focused on helping funeral homes combat the ongoing staffing challenges in a way that augments and amplifies the values of the profession. If there is one thing that the past 18 months have highlighted, it is how adaptive and resilient the funeral profession is at making sure those who need help are taken care of during their most difficult days. In the coming year, I hope that same care will be taken for those who are doing the serving.



**Rolf Gutknecht, president/chief executive officer, LA ads**

The cornerstone of marketing has always been creating connections with customers. The pandemic created a new world where relationships with both people and brands

became more important than ever. Additionally, there will be a lot of buying and selling of firms over the next few years which means that funeral homes, cemeteries, manufacturers and service providers alike will need to better define why they should be the brand of choice with their customers. Brands now have an opportunity to revise and rebuild their relationships with prospective and current consumers by better presenting their specialness.

Some forward thinking business-to-business and business-to-consumer firms have done a really good job in making sure that they stand out and continue to be the firm of choice. They're not timid marketers so they've embraced new technologies and approaches to push out their message. They may have used personalization of marketing communication, text messaging, strong online content and interesting storytelling as ways to stay ahead. While all wonderful things to implement, here's my top three marketing needs for 2022 that firms who want to have a brighter future will be putting into place:

**Video content.** It took off during COVID and has no plans on slowing down because customers prefer to watch videos. Using video for social media, digital, website and emails is a must. If you have a phone, you can do this. What are you waiting for?

**Online and hybrid events.** These are events that will either only take place online or where some people attend in person and others through digital channels (hybrid events). Online events are fantastic for drawing attention and attracting new customers. However, since the internet is filled with various content, you'll need to say or offer something special and useful to your clients so they participate. Look at webinars, livestreaming, training, AMA ("ask me anything") events, etc.

**Having the right messaging.** Nothing is more important. Nothing. This is the single most critical thing that makes marketing work for your business. The reason is that a company can do everything

right in placing their message in the correct online and offline channels, and spend good money in the process, but if people don't care what's being said, because it sounds like something they've heard before or it's boring and lacks any "WOW" power, then you're wasting precious time and dollars. You see, in marketing it boils down to this one undeniable truth: In a competitive environment (like the one you're in) the most fascinating option ALWAYS wins. Always! Start being fascinating ... please.



### **Jake Johnson, president and CEO, Johnson Consulting Group**

If we have learned anything from the last few years, the future is unpredictable. With a pandemic that swept the world, supply chain disasters and labor shortages, it's hard to truly feel comfortable or fully prepared to take on 2022's prophecy. But we can try. Here are the key things business owners within the funeral profession should be prepared for in the new year:

**1. Death rate slowdown.** Businesses need to plan for when there will be a death rate slowdown, if it's going to happen, and when it will happen. Many funeral homes and cemetery businesses were dealing with increased case counts. Business owners need to ask themselves if they are keeping excess cash reserves with the possibility of a slowdown in case counts. How have they planned, or planning, on reinvesting in their companies? Did they experience any internal service defects that they aim to

improve upon in 2022? The next year is an optimal time to reinvest in their company.

**2. Case count monitoring.** The pandemic was especially difficult for small, family-owned funeral service businesses as they were typically understaffed and overwhelmed with a rise in case counts. As we step into 2022, it will be important for businesses to continue to monitor case counts. With projections of case counts to continue to rise through 2023, can we begin to assume this could be the start of the baby boomer generation turnover? It will be especially important to continue to monitor your business case counts and reinvest in your company accordingly.

**3. Online and unique funeral solutions.** A few things are moving within the online space within the death care profession. COVID-19 continues to impact the way families mourn their loved ones. Less people are able to attend funerals and the continual move to cremation services due to cost, and we can say it, generational norms that preceded the pandemic. There's a new wave of funeral directors and funeral service employees among us. While some may be feeling the "Great Resignation," many millennials in the funeral profession are continuously trying new ways to solve the problem of losing a loved one. They understand families are more inclined to opt for non-traditional ways to remember their loved ones: spreading their ashes in favorite locations, donating to charities instead of flowers, turning the dead to diamonds, price shopping, and online funeral arrangements.

It will be important to take a look at how your business has been running things, along with being open to suggestions from the new wave of funeral service employees to make some decisions on if the old ways of running a funeral business is the best way to continue to run and operate your funeral home or cemetery.

Remember to stay informed not only with death rates but also with local and national situations which may not seem like it now but could

affect your business in the future. Also, track your case counts and trends and finally, trust in innovation and your ability to connect with families both digitally and in person.



### **Wes Johnson, president/CEO, Continental Computers**

Wow, when looking back at 2020 and 2021, what could 2022 possibly bring? If one could simply read a crystal ball and see the future, then it may also be possible to rub a magic lamp and make three wishes.

What would death-care professionals wish for? A difficult question without knowledge of what the future brings. Recognizing what we do know is different than the old cliché, “If I had only known then, what I know now.”

What we do know is if in fact history does repeat itself, we can expect with no doubt COVID-19 will continue to plague our society at the global level. The market will continue to grow. I can speculate this trend will continue until the balance of “boomers” begin to decline and become a less significant portion of the general population.

What is happening now, what variables are affecting the industry? The highest inflation rate in more than three decades. The supply chain is broken in all markets generating shortages and outages that are forcing up prices. Economics 101 teaches supply and demand dictates price. Material and supply issues in the death-care market are not immune to everyday economic conditions.

This is new and unexplored territory that we as a country are attempting to navigate through successfully. I personally find it difficult to remember a time when millions of Americans “quit” their jobs. It seems to me it has always been the reverse; millions of Americans could not find a job. This phenomenon is directly contributing to the economic challenges thus creating supply and demand price positioning. I ask myself, “Are we creating our own problems?”

What can we expect combining the past and present social and economic issues within the death-care industry? Is it as simple as 1+1=2? Not quite, but also not that difficult. It is unusual to have something like COVID-19 suddenly appear and have such a profound effect on the industry. Not since the Spanish flu of 1918 has the world experienced such a pandemic. Increasing inflation combined with millions of jobless people with little or no disposable income does not make one in the industry feel confident.

Not all is lost. We have three wishes. One, I think in 2022 the industry will continue to wish for preneed sales as a combatant over the ever-increasing cremation rate. Two, intuitive professionals will embrace the changing industry and adapt to the increasing cremation rate. Attending the International Cemetery, Cremation & Funeral Association University and participating in the “College of Hospitality & Customer Experience” program could prove extremely helpful. The third wish is to be prepared, to have a plan. A plan flexible enough to recognize opportunities and capitalize on them quickly before the opportunity is missed.

### **Barbara Kemmis, executive director, Cremation Association of North America**

Looking ahead to 2022, I hope we have more opportunities to gather to enjoy each other’s company, learn together and have some fun.

CANA is back to offering a full complement of in-person and online education offerings – Cremation Symposium, annual convention, operator

certification and some new topics are in the works.

But the hard lessons we have learned during the ongoing pandemic will not be ignored. Gathering in person requires calculating risks and benefits in new ways. We all need to make gatherings worthwhile, whether a trade show or a funeral. And virtual is here to stay, at least in some contexts and for some of you. CANA's online training expanded over the past two years and will continue to grow to meet the demonstrated needs of death-care workers.



One of the biggest lessons we learned is to pay attention to our mental health and provide support in tangible and intangible ways to our coworkers and friends. Heading into a new year, let's all resolve to acknowledge that mental, emotional and physical health are all priorities. You may have your own self-care plans in place, but also know that CANA will continue to partner with Funeral Professionals Peer Support to offer monthly online peer support conversations and we are excited to see in person groups forming in several states.

We are in a period of transition and rebuilding and I hope we, as a profession, seize this opportunity to make 2022 a great year.

### **Kent Robertson, president, Foundation Partners Group**

The past two years have been nothing short of transformational across a broad range of U.S. industries and the

death-care space is no exception. The age of virtual deathcare has arrived as more and more families are beginning their deathcare journey searching online for information and services. But how have consumer expectations changed and what additional information and services are they looking for? And most importantly, how do we engage families and build trust throughout the online experience?



Because the answers to these and other questions will guide our profession in 2022 and beyond, earlier this year the Foundation Partners digital team embarked on a three-pronged research project to better understand the post-COVID consumer. The results were both predictable and insightful. After hundreds of conversations and surveys, we found five key trends that will impact the death-care consumer journey in the years ahead.

- **Wellness.** Wellness culture has been a growing trend across all age groups for the past 10 years and has expanded to include not just physical wellness but also emotional, mental, spiritual and environmental considerations. As a result, younger consumers want to engage in a different, more positive conversation about death and deathcare.

- **Individuality.** As reported in the National Funeral Directors Association's 2021 Cremation and Burial report, Americans are more comfortable than ever blending tradition with modern preferences. As religion in people's lives continues to

decline in the U.S., families are opting for services that celebrate the life and uniqueness of the individual. This is especially true for families that choose cremation. Nearly a third of cremation consumers in our 2021 study said that religion did not factor meaningfully into how they considered making funeral arrangements.

- **Transparency.** During our in-person interviews with both at-need and preneed consumers, 95% cited transparency as one of the major reasons for their choice of a company to handle their death-care services. They're not just looking for pricing transparency but also process transparency, including things like up-to-the-minute notifications of exactly when loved ones will be cremated and when those remains will be ready for delivery or pick-up.

- **Omnichannel service.** Consumers want an integrated, seamless journey across digital and physical experiences – online, by phone and in person. While recent consumers of death-care services report that in-person arrangements remain their preferred method of arranging, we see a greater willingness among those who have not yet purchased to turn to online options.

- **Time starvation.** Time – and the lack of it – was a primary concern among consumers we interviewed, particularly among cremation consumers. At a time of high stress, especially during COVID, our job is to make a very difficult time easier and more efficient, allowing the families we serve time to focus on celebrating the decedent.

These tech-savvy, questioning consumers will put pressure on all of us to do better in 2022. It's a challenge that presents unlimited opportunities to unleash our creativity and to reimagine funeral services in a way that reinforces our value to grieving families.

### **Jason Troyer, founder, JasonTroyer.com**

I see three big challenges (and corresponding opportunities) for funeral home owners and professionals over the next year. First, staffing challenges will continue as part of the national wave of re-evaluating work/life

goals. More and more recent employees, long-time employees, and next-generation family members will take a hard look at their professional identity, compensation and work schedule. I predict a higher percentage of each of these professionals will be leaving the industry. Funeral homes that hire from within and nurture professionals within their ranks will have an advantage. Funeral home owners that have not adjusted their benefits or work schedule and lag the behind in salary will have trouble attracting new employees to their firm and their location.

Second, there will continue to be a high rate of funeral businesses transitioning to the next generation or being sold to outside entities. Related to the increasing turnover in the field, I predict a higher rate of next generation funeral professionals will forgo taking over the family business and this will surprise some current owners. Families that have taken a long-term transition strategy and have openly discussed transition will have a significant advantage over those families who wait to make decisions and have not discussed this process thoroughly.

Finally, it will continue to be a challenge for funeral professionals to educate families about the advantages of funeral rituals. The trend toward no services or minimal services will continue to grow, but firms that provide new options that resonate with families will have a distinct advantage. •

