


PUTTING THE
VALUE
BACK IN FUNERAL
SERVICE

**YOUR CLIENTS
WILL THANK YOU**

by John McQueen



IN THE 1609 WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE PLAY, HAMLET, THE MAIN CHARACTER IS TORN BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH. His famous line, “To be or not to be, that is the question,” is most appropriate when discussing Celebration of Life ceremonies. And although the question is different, the conundrum remains the same: Do families want a celebration of life or not? I’m here to tell you that the answer is yes, but will it be held with you, the funeral professional, is the real question.

As identified in The Foresight Companies’ 2021 Consumer Survey, 63% percent of consumers feel a big celebration is important in honoring the life of the deceased. In fact, this number has increased in the post-pandemic world in which we now live. On the surface, that number looks to be good news for the funeral profession, one we should all celebrate.

However, upon deeper evaluation, we also see that nearly one-half (49%) of consumers are planning their celebrations of life outside the funeral home. Although not unforeseen for those who have been exposed to funeral service for any significant period, it is a startling statistic and one we must address as a profession if we want to remain relevant in the life remembrance business. If we leave this issue unaddressed, our industry—one steeped in traditional and legacy—will be morphed into nothing more than a disposal business.

Some in our profession see this trend strictly as a problem and want to fall victim to the misguided belief that *“no one values funeral service, and everyone just wants cheap.”* Others see the Celebration of Life solely as an opportunity to rebrand what has traditionally been known as a funeral into something more worldly and fun-sounding, in hopes of increasing market share.

Personally, I prefer to call this a “Proportunity.” We must recognize that we have a problem and honestly evaluate our role in creating that problem. Once we acknowledge our part and the need for change, we can implement the use of tools and techniques that create great opportunities for the customers, our companies, and the profession.

Celebration of Life Defined

Before we address some of the bigger issues, let’s pick the low-hanging fruit first. The belief that “no one values funeral service” is unfounded. As previously stated, 63% of consumers surveyed want to celebrate the life of someone they loved. The hard reality for many funeral professionals is that almost one-half of consumers don’t see the value in what many in the profession are offering.

If you want consumers to value funerals, and more importantly value your role in providing those services, it takes more effort on the part of the funeral professional than simply changing the name from a memorial service or funeral service to a celebration of life. As the old saying goes, “You can put lipstick on a pig, but it’s still a pig.” Ask yourself honestly if you are willing to make the necessary changes to give consumers what they desire. If your answer is yes, read on.

A Celebration of Life requires active listening and open-ended questions by the funeral professional so he or she can truly understand and appreciate the decedent's life story. It can be difficult to cut the strings that tie us to our "order-taker" training. Consumers today want to be heard, understood, and offered recommendations that allow them to choose what feels right to them. I like to use the acronym "A-C-T" as a reminder when helping families.

A—**Actively listen to the customer.** This means we listen to understand, not simply to respond. Ask follow-up questions to what the family is saying. A great follow-up question is, "Can you tell me more about that?" This demonstrates that you care about the deceased and the family. More importantly, it demonstrates that you hear what they are saying.

C—**Connect the decedent's life with appropriate ways to honor them.** For example, if the individual served two or four years in the military 60 years prior, a full-blown military tribute may not be the most appropriate suggestion to honor them. It can play a part in the overall celebration, but most likely there are other aspects of the decedent's life that are more relevant for the central theme of the event. It's those other things that connect family and friends to the one they love.

T—**Tell the family why you are making these recommendations and how they will benefit.** As a professional, it is our job to make recommendations (*i.e.*, telling the family why certain services or products may be appropriate). But, when you simply stop at telling or recommending, you become that "salesman" trying to upsell.

As the professional, part of our job is to offer enough options to have something that our customers value. If we don't, and we stick to one size fits all, their focus will be on price.

If you educate the family on why you are recommending certain items or services, you now become the "trusted adviser," and families welcome your input and knowledge. As Simon Sinek reminds us, people buy because of the why. They justify their purchase because of the how and what. Keep in mind, they may not use it or select it, but you've done your part in educating them about it.

Innovative Ideas

Another great way to bring value to the services you offer, from the transfer of the deceased throughout the final disposition and beyond, is to look at the process through your customer's eyes. Throughout my career, most of the best ideas our R&D (Rip-off & Duplicate) Department came up with were borrowed from outside our industry.

Our Legacy Cafés were modeled after Starbucks. Our vernacular was borrowed from Chick-fil-a, The Ritz Carlton, and Disney, because it's not just what you say but how you say it that matters. We chose carpet like the fine hotels, tasteful in easy-to-replace

squares. These are just a few examples, but each played an important role in creating an experience for the family.

Keep in mind that our families are consumers first. In other words, they spend much more time in grocery stores, restaurants, hotels, amusement parks, theatres—more than they spend hanging out at the local mortuary. By creating an atmosphere that puts your clientele at ease and creates a surrounding that is familiar to them, families become more engaged in using your facilities and services for their Celebration of Life services.

Let's face it—the roadside motel is no longer the most popular vacation spot for travelers. If your facilities aren't up to date, it's time to reinvest in your property. The good news is if you do create an environment that customers seek, you'll soon be able to turn on your "No Vacancy" sign because you'll be so busy.

Spruce Up the Facility

Not sure where to begin? As my good friend, the late Dr. Vanderlyn Pine, taught me many years ago, a great way to trick your brain into seeing what your customer sees is by walking backwards through your facility. This process fully engages the brain as a defense/protection mechanism, but it also allows you to see the many things your mind typically disregards—such as the peeling paint, dead flowers, cobwebs, and more.

These are all things the customer sees because they are usually in an unfamiliar and uncomfortable situation when they come to make funeral arrangements, so their minds are fully engaged. Try it, it does make a difference.

Add Celebrant Training

Up your game and improve your customer satisfaction scores by offering celebrant training to your staff and others. The resources and techniques that team members will learn are invaluable to your success in the Celebration of Life business. There are several celebrant companies available today, we used Doug Manning and Glenda Stansbury with Insight Books.


In addition to training our staff, we selected several retired individuals, male and female, to become certified celebrants. Our funeral directors became Masters of Ceremony, while our retired professionals were the Celebrants that led the services. Families and attendees find great value in receiving these services because celebrant services "connect" them to the many stories and memories of those they loved.

Rent Your Space

When addressing these subjects, I am often confronted by a colleague who says "they used a different provider for the cremation and now they want to use my facilities!" My response is "that's great news for you!"

Don't look at chapel rentals as a negative, look at it as an opportunity. You have been given the opportunity to showcase your facilities and services to 25, 50, 100 or more guests who may be attending this Celebration of Life.

Only you and the family know you didn't handle the disposition of the deceased. Those in attendance will remember where the services were held and their experience, so make it a positive and memorable one. It is your opportunity to shine, so don't cut corners just because someone else cared for the dead.



Let's accept our part of the problem, address it, and create opportunities to move our industry forward. In the end, everyone will prosper.

It's Not About Money

My final point goes back to the original fallacy that “no one values funerals and everyone wants cheap!” We've already overcome the part of the fallacy that no one wants a service; so let's address cheap.

During your next funeral or visitation, walk out to your parking lot. I bet you won't see a lot full of KIAs. Why? Because some people want economy, some want luxury, some want sporty, and some want the big SUV. We are all different. We come in different shapes and sizes. We value different things. As the professional, part of our job is to offer enough options to have something that our customers value. If we don't, and we stick to one size fits all, their focus will be on price.

That said, our Foresight Consumer Study revealed that consumers seek convenience. Part of convenience is the idea of ease and simplicity. So, one easy fix is to stop calling your basic cremations direct or simple as it conveys convenience. Change the wording to “Non-Ceremonial” and watch consumers' desires change, too. After all, 63% believe a Celebration of Life is important.

We all know that funerals or celebrations of life can provide significant benefits to those left behind. To borrow a quote from the book, *The Undertaking*, by fellow funeral director Thomas Lynch, “Funerals are the way we close the gap between the death that happens and the death that matters.” The difficulty lies within us, not within the customer.

Clean Up Your Assets

We're back to the problem part of the “proppportunity.” It's both a global and a local issue. As a profession (globally) and as a professional (locally), we need to learn how to explain the value of funerals to those we serve. We also need to show our customers that we are as committed to the process and we believe they should be committed to it.

A Wharton Baker Consumer Loyalty study by the University of Pennsylvania shows the types of things that are driving consumers away from businesses, including ours. The number one deterrent, 88%, is our facility atmosphere. Many consumers are choosing other locations to celebrate, ones that are more inviting and welcoming in appearance.

Next in line is our website, 75% describe our sites as difficult to navigate and not transparent with pricing. Close behind in third place at 73% percent is a lack of appreciation for the customer.

Customers said they felt the business did not appreciate them or their business. Seventy percent stated they also felt the business was messy or disorganized.


Although the list goes on, these top four responses should be tell-tale signs as to why many consumers are choosing to go elsewhere to celebrate their loved ones' lives. It's time we focus on reimagining our facilities, training our staff on customer experience, learning how to explain the value of various services and products to our customers, and most importantly, listening to customers and then giving them a little something more than expected.

The Impression You Leave

In the book, *The Intuitive Customer*, Colin Shaw and Ryan Hamilton share that customer loyalty is built on memory pictures. If you leave the customers with a positive memory picture, their loyalty to your brand increases exponentially. It reminds me of Daniel Buchanan's embalming class at Gupton-Jones College where he taught us, through proper embalming, the importance of creating a positive memory picture of the deceased for the family to hold onto.

Well, it's now time for us to create a positive memory picture of the importance of funeral service if we want families to remain loyal to our brand for celebrating the life of their loved ones. If we're not committed to doing so, families will continue to use us for the disposition—and the celebrations will go to someone else.

I'm committed, are you? Let's accept our part of the problem, address it, and create opportunities to move our industry forward. In the end, everyone will prosper. After all, as Thomas Lynch has clearly stated many times, “A good funeral (celebration of life) gets the dead where they need to go and the living where they need to be.”

Let us be the ones who do both! 

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