

What Makes a Salesperson Successful? Empathy, Experience, and Leads!

by Daniel M. Isard, MSFS

FOR MOST CEMETERIES THAT ARE RELIANT ON CASH FLOW, there is no bigger issue than hiring a salesperson. This is a constant and recurring problem. Salespeople turn over constantly. It seems the only ones who don't turnover are the bad ones. Hiring, training, compensating, and keeping them productive is a most difficult part of the job for any owner or general manager.

While much of this article will be the same for funeral home advance sales sellers, I do not want to try and cover the two different fields of funeral and cemetery. The DNA of the sale itself is different. In a funeral home you are selling a service (albeit there may be some merchandise, but the service of the funeral is what you are selling). In a cemetery you are selling a product (albeit the service is getting the grave opened, closed, and maintaining the property—it is the interment you are selling).

Therefore, the language, timing, and style of the sale is different. So please assume there is some transfer of the ideas between the two professions the magazine caters to, but I am focused on the cemetery reader.

Categories of Salespeople

There are two categories of potential hires for a cemetery salesperson. First, there are those who have cemetery experience. This group has all the promise of a baseball player who has worn seven uniforms in eight years. The journeyman looks good, knows the job, and gives you confidence up until the day you want to fire them, or they quit. Burnout is a big part of the reason for the turnover, but that is endemic with the lack of quality lead production.

The second category of potential hires for a cemetery salesperson is “the newbie.” This is a person who has never worked in a cemetery before. The newbie needs to learn everything from the ground up. Most general managers don't like to hire newbies because they have to invest a lot of time to get them ready for their first sale.

Taking the time to create my own list from personal interaction with people who have come onsite, onto my website and other contact points, the mailing result is 300% or greater than if I just buy a list from a list broker.

When looking at a newbie you will have those with sales experience and those with none. The sales experienced newbie might have been selling something that is somewhat linearly related, but not in the deathcare space. A cemetery salesperson sells trust. They must be able to communicate and make good eye contact. They have to be able to listen to the qualified advance purchase lead.

There are salespeople who are accustomed to telling a story and asking for a check in the range that the cemetery expenses will be. I have found that time-share salespeople have good face to face experience and are accustomed to establishing rapport quickly. Life insurance salespeople have a strong character and establish the trusting bond usually in one interview.

For the newbie who lacks industry experience, I like those who have empathy.

Unfortunately, this empathy can be gained by being a buyer of cemetery services. Widows and widowers, and children who have recently helped their parents make a purchase all have that empathy. They know what the prospect must be thinking as they shared those thoughts themselves. Their ability to tell the story of the cemetery from a firsthand experience is powerful. The newbie doesn't have to be a natural salesperson. They just have to learn the roadmap of a sales process. That can be taught.

Leads, Leads, Leads

When hiring an experienced cemetery salesperson or a newbie, the number one key to the success of this person is the leads. Lead generation has certain basics. First, it must be constant. You don't generate leads in January and then wait six months to turn the lead machine on again. This is creating a lead pipeline that is ongoing and year-round.

A good lead for advance sales has three qualities:

1. They realize they have a need (for themselves and those they make decisions for).
2. They have the financial ability to make a commitment for this need.
3. They have either no allegiance to a competitor -or- they have an allegiance to your property.

Just having one or two of the above doesn't help. A qualified lead must have all three qualities.

A lead-generating machine is not just running some ads and waiting for the phone to ring. It must be a constantly operating perpetual motion machine. It is better to generate 10 leads a month for 12 months than 50 leads in one month and nothing for the next six months. Understand what a typical salesperson's lead pipeline looks like for a month:

- Leads: 10. Assume this comes in from whatever sources of lead generation you use and are given to one salesperson to follow-up.
- Appointments set: 8. Yes, you can call people who say, "please call me" but some just flake out when you call them.
- Appointments kept: 6. How many times are appointments canceled after being set or you show up and only one of the couple is present? So, there is some loss.
- Qualified leads appointments kept: 4. Now you have all the responsible parties in front of you, but some are not qualified candidates (see the three criteria above that constitute a "qualified lead").
- Sales made: 2. No one sells 100%! Be happy with a 50% success rate.
- Interment rights sold off of those sales: 3. Since in some cases you are selling one person and some cases a couple, the average number of sales generated from a sale in a household is 1.5 interment rights. Two sales equals 3 interment rights.

This is a very productive week for the average cemetery salesperson. This is about \$24,000 to \$30,000 in sales production. That is a million-dollar or more producer. That producer will be very happy.

Use the 80/20 Rule

Your job as a general manager is to find the tools that can generate 10 leads per week per producer. There is no one "silver bullet" for lead generation but there are some matters that have proven to be effective over time.

First, you must take advantage of the leads you have in your cemetery. Do you know that studies show 80% of all sales made are to people with friends and family already interred within your cemetery? Yet, so many lead machines I see focus on the 20% that are not already associated with your cemetery. If there is a cost to each lead, I think I can spend less money generating leads from possible consumers who are familiar with your property than I can with those who are not familiar with it! I have confidence that an outreach to

100 people familiar with your property will generate more leads than that same effort to strangers. The adage of working smarter not harder comes to mind.

I have seen results of mail campaigns sent to 10,000 addresses that result in 1 or 2% of the recipients sending back a reply card. I have seen those results as high as 6%. The difference is the list! Taking the time to create my own list from personal interaction with people who have come onsite, onto my website and other contact points, the mailing result is 300% or greater than if I just buy a list from a list broker. The sales pipeline shown above has a much greater sales result for the same 10 leads when the list is created rather than brokered.

Balance Leads with Good People

Hiring a good salesperson is critical. Don't

just look to recycle! However, regardless of your system of recruiting, the single greatest key is the lead-generating machine. Most salespeople cannot generate their own leads, so it is your duty to get them the leads and they can then lead the way to the cemetery's success! 



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