



**The Best Thing I'm
Doing Right Now!**

**Spreading
The Good
Word**



BY JOHN T. MCQUEEN

The best thing I'm doing right now is evangelizing the value of the funeral, and not just to the outside world but to those in our profession as well.

Granted, evangelism is typically used in terms of spreading the Christian Gospel, but it can also mean “a zealous advocacy for a cause” or “to talk about how good you think something is.” I believe now is a great time to be in funeral service. In fact, the services we provide are needed more today than ever before.

We often hear individuals in funeral service refer to their chosen profession as a calling, much like someone's calling into the ministry. In fact, many directors say they “minister” to the families they serve. Therefore, if the work of a funeral director is a calling, then I am proud to be a “funeral service missionary” spreading the news about the work we do for those in our communities.

Following are some of the forces at work against our profession. Each of these and more provide me with the necessary zeal to make it my mission to spread the good word of funeral service.

Finding Qualified Personnel

In July, NFDA released its 2022 Cremation and Burial Report, which shared projections for employment growth in our industry. From 2020-30, employment growth is expected to be just 4%. That is a staggering number. Finding qualified personnel will be one of our profession's greatest challenges.

Given that the total employment growth rate in the United States for the same period is expected to be 7.7%, it is important to see how we compare to other industries. According to employment projections by Projections Managing Partnership, the following growth rates apply for my varied sample: bartenders 32.5%, barbers 17.5%, dental hygienists 11.2%, emergency medical technicians and paramedics 10.9% and electricians 9.1%. Each of these professions is expecting at least twice the growth rate of ours, so how can funeral service attract more qualified individuals?

We can create work schedules that provide a better work/life balance for our team members, including the owner(s). We can focus on having our directors and embalmers *work* their licenses. The days of washing cars, mowing the lawn and other such tasks should become part of our past. Many of us performed such duties and it's still common to hear from our more senior team members, "I had to mow the lawn when I was coming up, so they should mow it, too."

But in today's environment, our professional team members should remain focused on doing the tasks they were trained and licensed to do. With the average salary for funeral directors in the United States around \$48,950, it makes more sense to have them focus on improving the customer funeral experience while the firm hires or contracts with someone else for much less to cut the grass or wash the cars.

Don't get me wrong. This doesn't mean we forgo the basics of funeral service and the principles upon which our companies were founded just to keep up with the latest workplace trends. Our profession places many demands on both our personal and professional lives, with only one opportunity to get it right, so processes and principles are imperative.

As the greatest basketball player of all time, Michael Jordan, said, "The minute you get away from fundamentals – whether it's proper technique, work ethic or mental preparation – the bottom can fall out of your game, your schoolwork, your job, whatever you're doing."

Throughout my career, I've experienced new team members, regardless of their roles, wanting to change the processes and procedures currently in place. New ideas should be welcomed, but they need to be implemented only after thoughtful consideration and planning. In the meantime, the new employee should learn to use the proven systems in place and the reasons why they are important before attempting to change them.

No One Wants a Funeral

As I travel to various state and national conventions, I continue to hear the message that "no one wants a funeral anymore." I find this interesting because The Foresight Companies' 2021 Funeral and Cemetery Consumer Behavior Study revealed that 63% of consumers still feel that having a big celebration is important. That alone should be cause for celebration within the profession. It proves that what we do as a profession in helping families heal by honoring their loved ones truly does matter.

Unfortunately, 49% of those who desire a celebration will consider having it outside a funeral home. Wait! What do you mean they want a celebration but don't want it with us? We are quick to judge others and say, 'No one wants a funeral nowadays.' But before we cast the stone at others and fall into the trap of disposition without services, we should first look within ourselves. As English comedian Ricky Gervais says, "I think it's important to hold a mirror up to society and yourself."

As a profession, it is important to understand the consumer, but it is also important to be honest with ourselves about the services, facilities, staff and equipment we offer to consumers. When was the last time you updated your building – from the carpeting to the draperies to the furniture and lighting? What image is your staff's appearance conveying to your customer? How do your team members converse with families; are they using language that builds value into the services you offer? Do families feel appreciated for selecting your firm over your competitor?

Ask yourself: "If I was looking for a nice facility with an amazing customer experience for my family – whether for a birthday, wedding or reunion – would I choose a facility that looks like mine?" Then answer that question honestly.

Training: Who Needs It?

It's surprising the number of licensees, particularly more seasoned ones, who still share with me that continuing education and staff training is unnecessary. Some even boast about how they have found ways to circumvent the required hours while still fulfilling state licensing requirements.

Training should be a continuous process. As the late Earl Weaver, manager of the Baltimore Orioles, shared, "It's what you learn after you know it all that counts."

In fact, those new staff members we are having difficulty recruiting are looking for companies that will invest in them and help them grow and improve. Millennials now represent the largest generation in the United States, making up almost one-quarter

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of the total population and growing. Sorry, fellow boomers, but the millennials are now changing the way the world operates.

My father was a tank commander under General Patton in World War II. If Patton told him to have his men storm the hill with their tanks, they stormed the hill. There was no room for feedback, questioning or sharing opinions. They were hired to do a job and it was their responsibility to see it through.

After the war, my father founded a successful funeral home, and he ran his funeral home like Patton ran his war. I'm not saying his method was wrong, but the players have changed and the "command and control" form of leadership is not what millennials seek. Yet we often wonder why they leave our employment or the profession after only a short stint.

Millennials seek companies that will invest in them. They love working in teams, something that has been commonplace in their educational lives and allows for group input and feedback. I often hear senior leaders ask, "Where's the loyalty among the younger employees?" For millennials, loyalty is a two-way street. When employees see leaders creating a positive environment, one that is forward-moving, adaptive and willing to help them grow and improve, they are willing to invest in the company. When

they experience an environment that's focused on having them perform grunt work with little chance of advancement, they are looking for their next employer or career.

Beyond the multitude

of training areas in which many funeral directors and funeral home staff could benefit, there are two specific individuals who need training.

The new employee, especially of the millennial generation and beyond, needs training from those experienced in the profession. They require training on everything from attire to terminology to customer interaction and more. They need mentors. Consider pairing a new employee with an experienced employee and watch both learn from each other. Early in my career, I heard a speaker at an NFDA convention refer to new hires as sponges. He said they soak up as much information as possible and need constant feedback. That can be overwhelming for many owners, but a mentor is a great resource – and less intimidating than the boss.

The other individual is the leader. Yes, the leaders need training, too! Leaders need to continually enhance their leadership abilities and learn to give valuable and immediate feedback to employees. Good leaders also demonstrate the qualities they want their team members to follow. In other words, if you have a hill to charge, be sure to charge the hill with your team; don't leave them to live or die on their own.

During my career as a leader in funeral service, I tried to demonstrate to our young people that I was willing to roll up my sleeves and help out as needed. We need to share not only the task at hand but also the reasons why it's done a certain way. Leaders must learn to listen to their new hires – not just listen to respond but listen to understand. They need to be open to hearing ideas on other ways in which that task might be performed for the betterment of the customer and the company.

Some ideas may not work, some may work better, but for millennials, knowing they have a leader who listens and appreciates their input is invaluable. After all, together, we all grow better.

Beyond the Disposition

All too often, we focus on the smaller task at hand of disposing of the dead. Will it be a burial or cremation? Will the family choose a service or direct cremation? All these are important, but perhaps we should change our perspective. Many times, it's your mindset that determines your outcome, and too frequently, we limit our view of what we do as a profession. We see ourselves as being in "deathcare" or that our job is "selling a funeral, a casket or an urn." Expand your vision of what you do in your community and how it impacts lives far beyond your trade zone. To do this effectively, it sometimes takes someone with new or fresh ideas.

When I became the sole owner of Anderson-McQueen, my wife joined me in the day-to-day business operations. Although she had been 'around the business' for more than a decade as my spouse, she brought new insights into what we truly provided to our community. One day, she shared that she felt our company was not about funerals but about "where the healing begins." So began our trademarked tagline, but it also became our "why," as Simon Sinek talks about in his book, *Start With Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action*.

This simple tagline changed our perspective as owners, and it changed the perspective of our employees. We were no longer about selling funerals or determining type of disposition, but rather we were about helping families and our community heal after a loss. It allowed us to remain focused on our mission and it encapsulated all areas of our company – from preneed to at-need to aftercare, even pet loss.

The millennial generation and those that follow (as well as some of us boomers) are looking for a sense of purpose. According to Haillo, an employee communications, insights and advocacy platform, "Millennials are the generation that buys from and works for businesses that have a purpose at their core." In fact, 75% of millennials state that a job is no longer just about a paycheck; it's about purpose.

This is important to remember not just as an employer but also as a service company. Millennials are very involved in the lives of their parents and grand-

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parents, offering advice on where to shop and what to buy. As leaders, we need to ensure that our company's values extend beyond just caring for the dead if we want to attract millennials' attention and gain their support as a team member or customer.

With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility

Although this is an ancient adage, dating back to the first century B.C., I prefer to remember it as the sage advice given to Peter Parker (aka Spider Man) by his Uncle Ben before he was murdered.

As funeral professionals, our communities entrust the care of their most precious possessions to us at a time of profound confusion and significant loss. Most individuals have little or no knowledge or experience in making funeral arrangements, other than what they learn on Google. Our response to their call for help will impact not only their lives but

the future of our profession. Their lack of knowledge gives us great power in the arrangement process, one we must not abuse but use to educate families on their options and benefits. Their informed decisions are our ultimate responsibility. After all, the decisions made today are ones that will last a lifetime and perhaps beyond. Embrace your calling as our future depends on you!

Only through implementation are great results sure to come. In no time, you, too, will be saying, The Best Thing I'm Doing... If you have questions or need assistance with implementation, give me a call. Whether it's strategic planning, valuations, acquisition, representation, compliance or customer experience training, our team stands ready to help. ☰

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