



When

OPPORTUNITY



**Knocks,
Be Prepared**

by John T. McQueen, CFSP



Ask the Right Questions, Get the Right Answers



MOST OF US MIGHT BE FAMILIAR with this verse from the Bible: “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.” Matthew 7:7 (KJV). The passage suggests that God will give whatever is needed to those who have the faith to ask for it. The same often holds true when it comes to helping cremation families.

If you desire more than just a direct cremation, you must ask. The ask comes in the form of questions. You also must seek the answers you are looking for from your client. Only through exploration with conversation starters can you obtain the necessary knowledge to enlighten the family to additional offerings. Finally, you must knock if you want the door to be opened. In our case, the knock comes through professional recommendations to the client as well as asking for the business or acceptance of your solution. Without all three, the odds of receiving the outcome you desire will be minimal.

The A.S.K. Technique

Learning to ask questions, especially conversation starters, is instrumental to your success when dealing with all families, but especially those choosing cremation—whether face-to-face or over the phone. However, before discussing how to use questions effectively with phone shoppers, we must overcome the biggest fallacy in funeral service ... the price shopper. Most funeral professionals I speak to believe the price shopper call is all about price, but it is not. The price shopper is really all about help. The reason callers ask about price is because money is the universal language. When we don't know what questions to ask, we ask about price.

How do you change the narrative of the call from price to help? By using The A.S.K. technique. For nearly 35 years, my response when asked about price is to respond to the caller with a question. For example, the caller says, “How much does a cremation cost?” My response, “I'd be happy to answer that for you. To ensure the information I am giving you is the right information, may I ask you just a few questions first?”

Throughout my career, I have never had a caller tell me no. Why? Because who wants to be given

incorrect information. This same technique works in the arrangement conference and applies to other service types (e.g., burial, out-of-state transfers, and body donation).

But why is it important to ask questions? Because your goal is to build a relationship with the individual—hopefully a relationship based on trust, which occurs when the conversation you share is one of mutual giving and receiving in an informative or educational format. Remember, people buy from people they like and trust.

The Ask

As shared in the May 9, 2017, edition of *TravelUni's* article on consultative selling, “You assist the buyer in identifying, or clarifying, their needs, and then suggest products that satisfy those needs.” The article goes on to share, “Make them feel good and you increase your chances of making a sale. You start to make them feel good about you by getting into rapport. This means having a good understanding of them and their needs and being able to communicate well with them.”

The same holds true for selling services and products in the funeral and cemetery industry. Of course, you can't satisfy their needs if you don't truly know

what they are, and that comes through asking questions that start a conversation.

A great question is, *“Has anyone taken the time to fully explain all of your options with cremation?”* The typical response is either “No” or “I don’t know.” Your next response should be, *“Well please allow me to take just a few minutes to explain the various options to you.”* The client has just given you permission to share your services and the value they provide. Of course, you should have a well-prepared response that you can provide in a relatively short timeframe. You can always elaborate as more questions arise.

If your firm offers both flame and flameless (alkaline hydrolysis) cremation as ours did, another great kick-off question is: *“As far as the actual cremation is concerned, are you considering the traditional flame cremation or the new flameless cremation option?”* Typically, the customer responds with “Flameless, what’s that?” Bingo! You now have an open forum to share both options.

These are just a few of the questions that can be used in the Ask. Remember, the purpose of the ask is to allow you to begin building a rapport with the customer and to share the value you bring to the relationship.

The Seek

Gary O’Sullivan, world renowned for his pre-need sales training, bases his entire philosophy on service selling. Gary defines it as: *“Selling is the service, and the service is for us to professionally, ethically, and caringly explain how the advantages and benefits of the products and services we bring to the marketplace will be of value to those of whom we propose them.”*

But how can we explain to potential customers how our products or services will benefit them if we don’t know what they need—or more importantly, if they don’t know what they need?

If you do what’s right and take care of the customers, the customers will take care of you. This can be through the selection of your firm as their provider (*i.e.*, where they choose to spend their money), or it can be in the form of referrals post-sale. As Gary O’Sullivan says, *“Business is built on relationships.”*

By using a consultative, educational, and informative approach—whether pre-need or at-need—sales are made when solutions to problems are provided in a professional way that allows the clients to select the best choice to solve their needs.

Whereas the Ask allowed you to gather some information but was primarily designed to build rapport and provide you an opportunity to share your value, the Seek is a deeper dive into the client’s relationship with the deceased, their beliefs, shared memories, and family. Often, the Seek focuses more on the emotional aspects of the clients, their family, and the deceased.

Understanding these aspects of your clients’ background will allow you to provide solutions for the desires they have and the needs they have yet to realize must be met for healthy healing to occur.

Don’t get me wrong, that does not mean we are not selling. In fact, everyone in your organization, from the groundskeeper to the receptionist to the CEO, is in sales. The impressions we make upon potential clients—from the appearance of our facilities to the way we answer/speak on the phone to the presentation skills we use with clients during an arrangement conference and beyond—influence their buying decisions and brand loyalty.

As consultative salespeople, we need to look beyond just the symptoms and find the underlying cause(s) if we truly want to help the client family heal. Simply accepting the fact that they ask for a simple, direct, or basic cremation does not mean it is the right prescription for what ails them. Does your doctor simply remove your limb when you tell him it is hurting? Does your lawyer simply accept the opposing counsel’s proposal without understanding the dynamics of your case? They do not, and neither should we.

The first step for every professional is to remove the words “simple,” “direct,” or “basic” from your cremation offering. As identified in The Foresight Companies 2021 Consumer Survey, convenience is the new currency. In fact, the study revealed that 21% of consumers will pay more for convenience. Therefore, when we name our cremation service offering simple, direct, or basic,

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consumers will gravitate to it thinking it will be easier. When in fact, they often don’t need easier, rather they need better. Consider changing such offerings to a “non-ceremonial” cremation. After all, “non-ceremonial” is a better description of what they are purchasing.

Next, as you explore and learn more about your customers’ attitudes and beliefs, you will find many ways to suggest other options that will benefit them. Perhaps the adult children were present at the hospital when mom died, but the grandchildren were not. Providing them the opportunity to say goodbye, with or without embalming, can be therapeutic for the entire family as



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they travel the grief journey. It also provides an opportunity to share the benefits of ancillary products like cremation jewelry or items such as a memory blanket.

Another great question you can use in either the Ask or the Seek stage when the family says they want cremation is a simple, yet effective one: *“Do you want the cremation before or after the service?”* This question often elicits a response such as, “I didn’t know we could have a service with cremation” or “we hadn’t considered it.” This opens the door for you to share more information with a response such as *“Most of our families have a service, some do it before the cremation, but many do it after the cremation.”*

The Knock

The Knock is where you prescribe your “treatment plan” for your client family. This final step in the A.S.K. system is where many funeral directors, cemeterians, and pre-need counselors fail. The Knock is where you truly become the professional in your field, yet it is the area so many in our profession fear. The door to success for all—client, community, and you—cannot be opened if you don’t do the Knock.

The Knock is simply your professional recommendation(s) for the type of services and/or merchandise the family should select based on your analysis of their “symptoms” (*i.e.*, The Seek). For the Knock to be loud

enough to be heard throughout the house, it must be presented with confidence and with clarity. You must be able to articulate the “why” behind your recommendations. As Simon Sinek has shared many times, people don’t buy what you do or how you do it, they buy why you do it. The same holds true for your services and merchandise.

So why is it so difficult for funeral professionals to make recommendations to the families they serve? After years of studying staff and training funeral professionals, the answer is simple—rejection. No one wants their idea, belief, or self to be rejected by someone else. Thus, the fear of rejection overrides the ability to make recommendations.

Overcoming this fear is accomplished with two things—knowledge and practice. As the old saying goes, “knowledge is power.” In this case, you are not trying to overpower the customer, but you do need a complete understanding of all the features, benefits, and practical applications for the services and merchandise you offer. Using information gleaned from the client in The Seek stage, you must clearly articulate what you are recommending and why you feel it would be the best solution for their situation. A simple statement such as, “Mrs. Jones, based on all of the information you have shared with me thus far, I would recommend the following cremation package and here’s why...”

With regard to practice, the second component of overcoming fear is mindset. Below is a quote from Billie Jean King. For those who don't know, Ms. King is an American former champion tennis player regarded by many as one of the greatest tennis players of all time.

“Champions keep playing until they get it right.”

Although I comprehend what Billie is saying, I do not agree completely with her statement. I believe the correct message should be: *“Champions keep practicing even after they get it right.”* Perhaps some would say it's just semantics. Yet, true champions never stop reaching farther, honing skills, and learning from failures. Champions have a mindset, a belief, that they can attain whatever they aim to achieve. When they fall short, they don't quit! Instead, they evaluate their mistakes, but rely on their habits (honed through practice), attitudes, beliefs, and emotions to push forward.

Michael Jordan is the greatest basketball player of all time, and yet he admits:

“I've missed over 9,000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. Twenty-six times I've been trusted to take the game-winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. That is why I succeed.”

Are some families going to reject your recommendations? Absolutely! But don't let those failed attempts prevent you from taking that game-winning shot.

Here is a Knock I have used a thousand times and have been successful hundreds of times. However, prior to my using it, I was trained by others to tell the family a different response that was in no way a knock but rather a nail. Hopefully, it can be used by you to provide greater value to your client and additional revenues to your business. I'll start with the nail and finish with the knock.

- **Background:** The family has elected a non-ceremonial cremation in a cardboard alternative container. They have said they are going to take the ashes out and scatter them in the Gulf of Mexico on their boat next month.

- **The Nail:** *“In that case, you won't need an urn. We'll just return the ashes in the cardboard box that's provided by the crematory.”* This is not the response you want to give, yet many funeral professionals still use it today. Perhaps they feel they're helping the family or saving them money.

- **The Knock:** *“Have you ever scattered cremated remains before in the Gulf?”* Client responds, “No.” You respond, *“As you can imagine, when you are three nautical miles offshore and the wind is blowing and the*

boat is rocking, scattering cremated remains is not as easy as it might seem. Therefore, I highly recommend one of our water-soluble urns. These bio-degradable urns allow safe handling of your mother's cremated remains; then when you are ready, simply place it in the water. Within minutes, it will begin to dissolve and slowly descend to the bottom. Within 24 hours, the entire urn will have dissolved, and your mom's remains will rest gently on the ocean floor.”

What if the client responds yes to the question about previous experience scattering cremated remains? That's simple, just change your opening from “as you can imagine ...” to “I'm sure you would agree ...” You will be amazed at the results; and I've never had a family contact me later unhappy about their choice in using the water-soluble urn.

As I mentioned in the beginning, another knock comes in the form of asking for the business. I have listened to many funeral directors share the benefits and values of using their services with phone shoppers. They often do a great job ... until the end of the call. Often, they conclude the call by saying, *“If you have any additional questions, or if we can be of assistance, please feel free to call us back.”* In my experience, 8 out of 10 times, you never hear from them again.

Instead, try using a knock at the door to solicit a positive response. One of my favorite ones is: *“Mrs. Smith, it would be our honor to care for your husband and assist you and your family throughout your grief journey. With your permission, I would be happy to contact the hospital and have our team transfer him into our care.”*

Another simple knock is *“Mrs. Smith, I have some time later today or in the morning for us to meet, which would be better for you?”*

In closing, my wife has always told our kids, *“If you don't ask, the answer is always no.”* For all of us in funeral service, if you don't A.S.K., your results won't improve. Need help crafting your questions and solutions? Give me a call or shoot me an email, I'm happy to help! ☑

John T. McQueen, CFSP, is the Director of Client Experience at The Foresight Companies, a Phoenix-based business and management consulting firm specializing in mergers and acquisitions, valuations, strategic planning, financing, human resources, customer experience, and compliance services. He is co-author, with Nikki McQueen, of *Lessons From the Dead: Breathing Life Into Customer Service*. John has an MBA with specialization in hospitality management from Florida Atlantic University. He can be reached at 800-426-0165 or john@theforesightcompanies.com. Check out additional insights and educational information at www.theforesightcompanies.com. Connect with John and Foresight by following them on Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook.