

“From Wags to Riches”

*To Avoid Some ‘Ruff’ Times,
Follow the 4 Ps of Pet Loss*

by John T. McQueen, CFSP



We have all heard of the many inspiring rags to riches stories from Dolly Parton to Halle Berry, Ed Sheeran, Leonardo DiCaprio, Oprah Winfrey, and so many others. Of course, these are just the high-profile stories of the now rich and famous, but the world has so many others who have achieved great success from less than humble beginnings.

But this is a different kind of story. This is a “*Wags to Riches*” story and it’s just waiting for you to finish writing the ending. However, like rags to riches, the development of a pet cremation and/or pet burial business can see some “ruff” times, especially in the early years. Therefore, to be successful, it is crucial that you follow the “4 Ps” of pet loss: Purpose, Planning, Passion, and Persistence.

Define Your Purpose

By now, you all have probably heard, watched, or read the book *Start with Why* by Simon Sinek. Sinek explains that to be successful in today’s world, everyone on your team must know, understand, and be able to articulate the “why” for your business. He explains that customers buy based not on what we do, or on how we do it, but “why” we do it. Define your why by knowing your purpose or in the case of pet deathcare, I like to call it “purr-*pose*.”

If you are planning to enter the realm of pet deathcare, everyone on your team must be able to clearly articulate the purr-*pose* behind this new venture. More importantly, everyone’s actions need to demonstrate to the customer that you truly want to be in the pet deathcare business.

Your pet loss business needs to be an extension of your existing funeral/cemetery business, meaning you must treat pet families with the same dignity and care that you treat human families. During my 10+ years of caring for deceased pets and their pet parents, I conducted many job interviews where funeral professionals told me, “I didn’t get into funeral service to handle dead pets.” They didn’t make the cut, not because I didn’t respect their beliefs, but because pet loss was so deeply integrated in our business model that I knew such a belief would be detrimental to those we serve.

At Anderson-McQueen, our why/purpose was not about selling funerals but rather about “*where the healing begins*.” As such, everything we did was focused on helping families heal. We often hear about the “continuum of care” within funeral service that includes pre-need, at-need, and aftercare. We refined each of those



categories within the continuum to ensure they focused on helping families heal. This same concept can be extended to pet loss and caring for pet parents.

Our purpose was not solely to make money off pet loss, although we did quite well in that category. Our primary purpose was to find a new way to serve grieving families within our community so they could find healing on their journey. Our secondary goal was to build our funeral home brand within our community.

Develop Your Plan

Every journey, from a trip to the grocery store to a hike up Mount Everest, begins with a plan. Sure, some plans are very simple in nature, such as the trip to the grocery store. Other plans, such as conquering Mount Everest or sending a man to the moon and back, are quite detailed in nature and require careful consideration and decision-making. As Winston Churchill said, “He who fails to plan is planning to fail!”

Entering the pet end-of-life world should not be entered into haphazardly. Considerable research and planning are necessary for successful execution. Here are just a few questions you should explore when considering this venture:

- Are there other funeral providers in my market area who already offer pet cremation?
- How will my pet cremation operation differentiate itself from the competition?
- What market segment am I seeking to serve – veterinarians, consumers, or both?
- What can I offer veterinarians that they do not receive from their current providers?
- Should I charge a flat fee or use a sliding scale based on weight?
- What is the current pricing structure that local veterinarians and/or pet cremationists charge?
- Will I perform cremation in-house or sub-contract those pet cremations to another provider?

- Do I hire a dedicated pet staff or use my existing funeral home personnel?
- Can families bring their deceased pets to the funeral home or do we find another location?
- What are my hours of operation for the pet business? Do we only operate during the week? What about night and weekend pet deaths?
- Do we use the same vehicles for pet transfers that we use for humans?
- What about staff appearance – will their attire be the same as funeral home staff?
- Do we let the public know we own the pet operation? If so, do we cross-brand it?
- What should I do about my current funeral directors who don't want to handle pet deaths?
- How do we track the pets? Do we purchase an expensive software package?

These are just a few of the many aspects involved in preparing to launch a pet operation. There are many other aspects that must be evaluated. As the famous basketball coach at Indiana University, Bobby Knight, shares, *“The ability to prepare to win is as important as the will to win.”* Your will (desire) may be strong, but without proper preparation, your chances of success diminish greatly. Learn from those who have gone before you in the pet loss arena or reach out to our team at Foresight for our pet loss integration manual. The more you prepare, the closer you are to that championship ring!

Serve with Passion

According to *Merriam-Webster* dictionary, passion is defined as *“a strong feeling or emotion – he spoke with passion; an object of someone's love, liking, or desire – art is my passion; strong liking or desire: love – she has a passion for music.”*



We have all experienced service delivered by someone who has a passion for what they do, whether it is culinary arts, medicine, theatrical performance, or even funeral service. Likewise, we have also experienced service delivered by someone with no passion for their job—someone who exhibits an “I don't care” attitude. The outcome of both experiences is extremely different for the customer and the company.

Passion is important in every business, but a lack of compassion is easily read by customers through the verbal (both words and tone of voice) and physical cues (body language) emitted from your employees. Simply put, passion equals effort. If no passion exists, little effort will be expended. Does this mean you and your staff must be pet lovers? No, but it does mean you must truly care about pets and their parents, especially at a time of loss; otherwise, it is best to seek a different path on which to journey.

As my wife, Nikki, always told our children and our staff, *“You must visualize your victory!”* In other words, the more passionate the image you have with regard to anything, the more prevalent your opportunity for success. Our daughter, Bailee, is a professional performer and whenever she is hired for a job, she becomes that character. The passion she exhibits on-stage is what brings her role to life and allows the audience to connect with her character.

The same holds true for serving pet parents. If you or your staff are not committed to providing the same care and compassion to a pet owner and their deceased pet as you do any family that walks through your front door, then pet deathcare is not for you.

In fact, based on years of firsthand experience, pet parents experience a profound sense of loss and mourning early on in their grief journey. Whereas many family members who lose a human loved one seem to experience a greater sense of loss after the funeral when their friends and relatives have gone home, or return to their sense of normalcy and the loved one is alone. Therefore, this heightened emotional state early in the process makes a lack of passion for serving pets even more obvious to the customer.

To elevate your passion in caring for pet parents, institute our **S.O.A.R.** standard of excellence in customer service. Although this standard was used throughout our company, I'm focusing on pet families only for the purpose of this article.

If you or your staff are not committed to providing the same care and compassion to a pet owner and their deceased pet as you do any family that walks through your front door, then pet deathcare is not for you.

S—Sincere Greetings & Goodbye

Welcome pet families to your facilities like you would welcome any other family or visitor. Don't send pet families to the "back door" or to the garage. If the pet parent calls ahead, let the person know you have some paperwork to complete, so please come through the front door and your staff will assist, while another caring member of your team can transfer Fluffy into your care.

If they arrive unannounced, don't be surprised if their pet cat, Snickers, is wrapped in a towel or blanket cradled in their arms. Showing them the same love and respect as you would any grieving parent will jump start your journey to success in a positive way.

O—Own the Guest Experience

This is an area that requires constant monitoring and reinforcement and praise. As I said previously, pet parents usually show profound signs of grief in the early hours and days following the loss of their beloved companion and friend. This grief can be exhibited in a variety of ways, sometimes it manifests in anger or emotional confrontation. Don't let their misplaced anger hinder the relationship. After all, it's not up to the customer to own the experience, it is up to you to own it and make it a positive one.



A—Appearance Matters

There are a variety of ways in which appearance matter—from facilities to attire, and more. I remember a family sharing a story about their previous pet provider who came to their home in an old pickup truck, put their dog in a black plastic bag, and then slid the dog into the back of the truck before slamming the tailgate and driving off. The elderly couple remarked that their next thought was "what have we done?" Always ensure that the appearance you provide with pets, one of caring & respect, is no different than what you would provide for someone's mother or father.

R - Remember the WOW!

Always give the customer more than what is expected. We would provide our pet families with a certificate depicting a beautiful green pasture and rainbow that included the Rainbow Bridge poem, the pet's name, and the pet's paw print. This was a "surprise" for families, and it always brought tears of love and joy. We also provided our trademarked "Paws to Remember" wristband. Quite often when grocery shopping or just out and about in public, we would see people proudly wearing their wristbands, even months after the death of their pet.

Be Persistent

Persistence has been described as "the quality of stubbornly or resolutely continuing something in spite of opposition." I prefer resolutely over stubbornly. To me, stubbornly is charging forward headstrong despite the facts because it is my way or the highway. Resolutely is advancing in a determined and purposeful way, knowing you may need to adjust your course, but forward movement is your only option.

In other words, persistence requires having a "burn the boats" philosophy. When the Spanish arrived in the new world of Mexico, Captain Cortes ordered his men to 'burn the boats'. He knew their journey on land was going to be difficult and by destroying their ships he sent the message that turning back, or retreating, was not an option. Their only way was forward. The same holds true in pet deathcare. If you choose to offer this rewarding experience to your community, you must continue to push forward, advancing the cause.

In sales, most people fail one phone call before success. It is important to remember that "defeat is temporary" and there will be many defeats along the way, especially early on. As the noted sales trainer and motivational speaker, Jim Rohn, shares, "We all must suffer one of two pains – the pain of discipline or the pain of regret. One weighs ounces and the other weighs tons."

Persistence builds courage and stamina.

When our son, Josh, was an undergraduate, he swam Division 1 for Florida Atlantic University. On average, Josh would swim 15,000 yards per day or 45,000,000 yards per year—that's the equivalent of 45,000 football fields. Josh was recruited to swim the 200 Free, 200 Fly, and 500 Free. These three events equaled 900 yards of swimming in competition and his combined time for all events was eight minutes, 12 seconds. Josh would practice six days a week, swimming 45,000,000 yards to perform for eight minutes and 12 seconds. That's persistence ... to resolutely push forward despite opposition (sore muscles, mental fatigue, or a faster swimmer).

In business, you will face stiff competition. In fact, as your pet business begins to gain traction and you start to see the upward momentum, competition will become even fiercer. Those wholesale cremationists will turn up the pressure to prevent losing additional veterinarians to your brand. Other retail pet cremationists will market against your brand—whether on price, service, quality, or in some cases false claims. It is in these times that your persistence—the stamina and courage you developed—will pay huge dividends.

In conclusion, as you write the ending to this "Wags to Riches" story, I leave you to ponder this quote by an anonymous track coach:

"The race does not always go to the swift, but to the ones who keep running." 📧

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