

Planning for Your Future Starts Today

by Chris Cruger

SO 2023 IS HERE. The question is what do we do now? The last few years have seen changes in our profession like never before. What used to take years to change, now takes months or weeks. The process of planning for the future is more important now than ever. We have seen incredible challenges in staffing, rising costs, and rapidly changing consumer attitudes.

If there is anything to be learned over the past few years, it's that the business is different today than it was three years ago. You all have seen it; the way we conduct business has simply changed. The pandemic ushered in a new era of funeral service that requires us to plan and adjust quicker than ever before.

Some leaders in our profession have been resistant to change; but operating “the way it's always been” just isn't an option. The bar is being raised each day. For those willing to plan and embrace change, there has never been a better time to be in our profession. For those who are not, I suggest you accelerate your succession plan. If you are not changing with the times, you are being left behind.

A Solid Plan Is Required

One of the ultimate mistakes that management and owners in our profession make when putting together their strategic plan is confusing it with other types of planning. A strategic plan provides the framework to accomplish your company mission with expertise and influence. Your strategic plan is not something done overnight. It takes work and dedication to implement and will encompass a timeframe of three to five years.

Probably the most important part of that plan in the short-term is your operating plan. This is where you will define the who, what, when, and how of your daily operations. It is meant to define how human, financial, and physical resources will be used to accomplish the short-term objectives so that you may accomplish your longer-term strategy.

When designing your operating plan, here are questions to ask yourself:

Are you planning to adapt and evolve your business or plan your succession because of it? If you are planning to continue to operate in 2023, you must embrace and implement the new changes that are vital to your future business success.

- What are the lessons learned from our operating and financial history?
- Who from the team will be responsible for certain tasks?
- How do we assign financial resources within the business to achieve our goals?
- What are the potential risks?
- What can we do to reduce these risks from coming to fruition?

Think of your business as your football team and think of your operating plan as your playbook. Both are needed to win games. In our case, those games are business successes.

Many of us fall into the trap of thinking everybody within our organization knows what they need to do. I hate to be the one to break the news, but they rarely do. Most people are so wrapped up in their daily routine that they rarely think of much else. As the business leader or coach, you need to set the direction or call the plays.

An organized operating plan is a simple, yet critical step in your success. When crafting your operating plan, take these factors into consideration:

- Include the key stakeholders in the process from the beginning.
- Set all egos aside and be unbiased to what is going on in your business.
- Conduct a S.W.O.T. analysis before the planning session (think of this as the pre-workouts that occur before training camp starts).
- Define your Goals and establish KPIs that will be used as measurements throughout the year. These should focus on areas that impact your business (customer satisfaction, calls, etc.)
- Create a realistic, achievable budget that is broken down by months.
- Hold yourself accountable.
- Communicate at every level of the process.
- Don't be afraid to ask for help!

Consumer Behavior's Impact

Consumers have new views on funeral service, and let's face it, they are not going back to their old ways. The question is, are you planning to adapt and evolve your business or plan your succession because of it? If you are planning to continue to operate in 2023, you must embrace and implement the new changes that are vital to your future business success.

Here's what consumers expect:

- A hassle-free website loaded with clear, transparent information (83% of consumers demand this).
- Ability to purchase (and pay for) products and services online—70% of all consumers are expecting to see pricing online for casket and services. The consumer is desperate to understand the value proposition. They want to see and understand more than they did previously.
- 42% expect livestreaming of funeral services as part of your standard offering.

Transparency is at the forefront of every customer expectation. Because of the abundance of online information, consumers are now more educated than ever about end-of-life matters. They know what they are looking for and will not stop until they get it. Sometimes for good and sometimes not so much.

Consumers will expect the following from your organization:

- Transparency in your in-person and online communication.
- Integrity and honesty in all you do and say.
- Informative and helpful content on your website to assist consumers with pre-need planning.
- Facilities that provide a space for families to gather in a comfortable, relaxed environment.

Picking Up the Pace

One of the biggest questions we get is, “Will the transactions continue at this pace?” We will continue to see a significant turnover in ownership into 2023, as we have seen in 2022. Owners are exhausted from these past three years and are looking to retire earlier than expected. The struggles of staffing, technology, and rising prices are simply too much, and interest rates aren’t helping.

Roughly one quarter of today’s owners have said the pandemic has impacted their succession plans. Within this mix, over half are rethinking their entire plan and about 20% have accelerated their succession plan.

If you don’t have these plans, ask for help or start the conversation with your loved ones. If you don’t want to plan for your own benefit, do it for the ones you love and for the benefit of your community and employees.

The ultimate objective coming out of 2022 is to finish strong and set a strong direction going forward. The actual format of the plan and goals are less important than the accountability behind it. Put together a plan that is realistic and one that your team can get behind. Make the plan your playbook for 2023. **M**



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