



LIFE IN THE FAST LANE

BY JOHN T. MCQUEEN

**TO KEEP UP WITH CHANGE,
WE DON'T NEED TO
CHANGE CARS, WE SIMPLY
NEED TO SHIFT GEARS.**





or some, it wasn't long ago, while for others it's been decades, but all of us graduated from funeral service school and are licensed to tend to the needs of the dead and those left behind. Disposition of the deceased is the part that makes us funeral directors, but caring for our communities is the ingredient necessary to turn the local undertaker into the true funeral professional.

Yet for some, the community aspect is the troublesome part.

In this age of technology and instant everything, we often lack connectivity to our communities. Many no longer see the need to belong to civic and social organizations because we stay "connected" through social media. The nightly news will soon follow the daily newspaper as the day's events play out on livestreams around the world.

That is until someone in your community has their world turned upside down by the loss of someone they loved. At that point, time stands still. Where do they turn for help and guidance? Some may say it's the internet, but most people still turn to someone they know in the community. And the best way to ensure that that connection is you is to BE REAL!

Let me share how each of these steps will help solidify your position as the trusted leader

- B = BEHAVIOR**
- E = EMBRACE**
- R = RECOMMEND**
- E = EDUCATE**
- A = AUTHENTIC**
- L = LISTEN**

in your community and create a win-win for everyone. The *BE* is about you; it's an internal thing with external impacts. The *REAL* is about

your community and how you can bring real value to the relationship.

B = BEHAVIOR

My father always taught us that a leader should "never ask someone to do something you couldn't or wouldn't do yourself." The behavior you exhibit is noticed by every-

one. Staff members emulate behaviors of their boss, whether good or bad. The community will view the behavior of the funeral professional as a testament to their work ethic. Be an ambassador for your company and your profession both on the clock and off.

E = EMBRACE

Our profession is steeped in hundreds of years of tradition. Change has occurred slowly for the funeral industry – until recently. Just the word *change* causes consternation for many in the profession. Why? Because change pushes us outside our comfort zone. It requires us to do and see things differently. So, don't focus on change even though your community and the world around you all seek change. Yes, that's what I said – forget change!

Now that "change" is off the table, let's talk about the pace at which the world is moving. Change is accelerating at an unprecedented rate and the pace of life is accelerating, too. Much of this is due to technology. According to world-renowned futurist and best-selling author Raymond Kurzweil, the rate of change accelerates every decade. Therefore, he states that in 20 years, the rate of change will be *four times* what it is today and that we will experience 20,000 years of change in this century. Wow! That represents a world, which includes your community, that is truly living in the fast lane.

How can funeral service keep up? It's simple – we need to shift gears. We think nothing of shifting gears (whether manually or automatically) when we desire to pass another vehicle on the road. We might even downshift at times when hauling a heavy load up or down a steep grade. Shifting is an everyday part of driving our car, and yet shifting gears is all about change.

So, let's forget "change" and instead embrace "shifting gears." Our communities change rapidly, and to keep up, we don't need to change cars, we simply need to shift gears. Be open to new ideas and new technologies, enhance your facilities, empower your staff. These shifts will result in improved performance and increased

These shifts will be noticed by the community and give your firm the momentum it needs to travel in the fast lane.

satisfaction among both internal and external customers. In addition, they will be noticed by the community and give you the momentum needed to travel in the fast lane.

R = RECOMMEND

This is an area in which many funeral directors struggle and it seems to be tied directly to their misconception of what it means to be a professional versus a salesperson. We might feel we are not salespeople, but everyone in your organization is a salesperson, including you. You are selling to your clients and com-

munity through your actions, words, appearance and more.

True professionals will make recommendations to their clients. From my experience, most clients will often agree with those recommendations if they benefit their overall experience.

Of course, making recommendations also means taking a chance that your client will say no. When they do, remember that their “no” is not a rejection of you. Keep making valid recommendations as you move forward. Worst case, they accept none, but you have fulfilled your obligation as a professional.

E = EDUCATE

As a professional, it is not just your job but your duty to educate your clients and community on the value of the funeral. It can be done easily at the start of the arrangement conference by explaining your duties as the family’s funeral professional, with one being to educate them on all their options (regarding cremation, burial, preneed, etc.), so they can make the best decision for their family.

Regarding the community, take every opportunity to speak to various groups – from school kids to seniors. Use these forums to present age-appropriate information, including how the various aspects of the funeral process benefit the grieving family and the community. The more you become an educator, the more your community looks to you as the expert on all things death related.

Of course, to truly educate others, you must first educate yourself. The education you received in funeral service school was merely the beginning. Continuing education and trade shows are important, but reading about and learning from other industries can also open new avenues for success in your profession and in your community.

If you are a senior funeral professional, listen to and embrace what your younger colleagues are sharing. If you are a young funeral professional, seek the counsel and experience that your senior colleagues can give you. If you are a lifelong learner, you will become someone who can truly educate others in the valuable service we bring to our communities.



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If you're a senior professional, actively listen to what younger colleagues are sharing. If you're a young professional, seek the counsel and experience senior colleagues can provide.

A = AUTHENTIC

In a world packed with social media postings, authenticity is still a much sought-after trait, so much so there's an app for that. "Be Real" invented in 2020, encourages people to "show your friends who you really are, for once," by removing filters and opportunities to stage, overthink or edit photos. Its popularity has grown exponentially and it ranks fourth on the list of most downloaded social media apps, behind Instagram, Snapchat and Pinterest.

How does this relate to the funeral director and the community? Be authentic in your social media postings. If you are celebrating a staff member's anniversary, working a community event, participating in a parade or other such activities, share the news and some photos on your platforms. Let your community see that you and your staff are people, too, and that you are involved in the community. There are dozens of articles online that attest to real imagery and authentic photos and how they out-trend stock photos and generic posts. People connect with people, so help them connect with you and your funeral home.

L = LISTEN

Active listening has a profound impact in every setting – at work, in the home, in the community, socially – yet it is perhaps the most difficult skill for most people to learn, including funeral professionals. But it is a skill and,



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Many directors struggle with what it means to be a professional versus a salesperson. Everyone in your organization is a salesperson, including you.

like others, it can be learned and improved over time.

Most people don't practice active listening; rather, they "listen to respond." But then

you're usually so busy thinking about your response that you often miss the meaning.

Active listening is a communication skill that goes beyond simply hearing the words someone speaks. It seeks to understand the meaning and intent behind what is said. It involves being fully present in the conversation, making eye contact, being aware of non-verbal cues and asking open-ended questions to seek knowledge and awareness – all while withholding judgment. Not only does active listening keep you engaged in the conversation, but it also lets the other party feel heard and valued.

To quote Coco Chanel, "Hard times arouse an instinctive desire for authenticity." We are privileged to serve our communities during such times, and our communities seek those who are authentic. ☰

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