

FINANCE 301

BY DANIEL M. ISARD



The Importance of Technology My Knowledge Transfer Plan, Chapter 17

Funeral home owners and staff, for the most part, are technophobic. Despite this, every reason exists for them to embrace and effectively use technology to improve both their business and their customer service. So, I beseech you to either embrace it or hire some 17-year-old kid to do it for you.

Funeral service has always hated technology, however. The last technology this profession universally adopted was gravity! Cremation remained a limited service before we could automate a crematory. The first manually operated cremation in the 1880s actually took three days to complete. Even with the automation of the modern retort, a few fires still destroy the crematory, and sometimes the building, each year.

Another technology – the telephone – helped save time but, most importantly, gave way to the answering service. Why? Because nothing costs funeral homes more money than employing staff to wait around to answer the phone every night. Moreover, many firms did not respect that if an employee had to be at the funeral home, or at their home, to take night calls, they were supposed to be paid for that. (The Department of Labor pursued many cases against funeral homes in the 1970s and '80s.)

Anyway, the cellphone did not necessarily do away with this issue. If you had to be prepared to answer the phone, meaning you could not go out to eat (or drink), then you were technically on duty and should be paid. Fortunately, answering services helped resolve this issue and, with the telephone, reshaped funeral service.

Scheduling staff is much easier with another technology: the HR software system. In states that do not exempt funeral directors from overtime, for example, it is very costly to screw up someone's hours. Forty hours in a pay period is one thing; each hour

over is a problem that comes with a 50% premium since the nonexempt staffer must be paid 150% of his or her regular hourly compensation.

Until roughly 20 years ago, the arrangement conference always included a trip to the casket selection room. At some point, someone thought about showing images on a large-screen TV so families did not have to go into "that room." I've studied the average retail sales of virtual selection rooms versus actual selection rooms, and virtual selection produced a 20% higher average sale!

Puzzled, I set out to understand why this occurred, which led me to my "Intelligence Vacuum Theory." I realized that, previously, when a family toured an actual selection room, the funeral director serving them was the most knowledgeable person in the room about the quality of the available caskets. After the funeral director excused him- or herself to let the family privately make their decision, however, an "intelligence vacuum" took place. When this occurs, the vacuum is usually filled by the most assertive stupid person in the room. Thus, the son-in-law from California, for example, would assert his opinions and influence the retail merchandise sale.

When the virtual show room became part of the arrangement conference, however, the funeral director did not leave the room. In fact, he or she was the one in possession of the computer mouse. There was no longer an intelligence vacuum, ergo the higher retail merchandise sale.

Getting back to this month's focus, customer service should drive every decision funeral professionals make, yet too often they turn a blind eye to how technology can enhance service to families. For example, during the arrangement conference, directors typically take notes using pen and paper instead of recording details directly into a computer. Appar-

ently, funeral directors prefer redundant efforts over using a digital tablet to enter data directly into the arrangement record.

By eliminating that redundancy, however, they can generally save two hours of time per service. While that might not seem like a lot, consider this: If a funeral director makes 100 arrangements per year, it adds up to 200 hours wasted annually. If you work the typical 2,000 hours a year, you're wasting 10% of your total time!

Another way you can enhance customer service using technology involves photographs. In the 1980s, some smart person came up with the idea of memory tables and memory boards that reflected the merits/interests of the deceased. Well, with technology, you can accomplish this same thing with a video program that can include far more images, as well as video and sound.

Next, please consider obituaries. With the demise of newspapers around the country, getting the word out about a death has become more inefficient and less timely. Using email, social media platforms and/or your firm's website, you can post information about a death and the service information quickly and without the limitations posed by a printed newspaper. Plus, many papers would charge you (the family) hundreds of dollars to include a photograph with the obituary. You can now do this and much more for much less. In addition, an online obituary can last in perpetuity and any errors can be corrected immediately.

Previously, for many technophobic licensees, the use of recordkeeping software was mainly as a tool to help create memorial folders in-house. Back then, the ability to add pictures to these folders and other handouts for a service was a big thing. This technology shift made the printer a key part of the offering to families – and a color printer took it to another level. These days, however, many firms have abandoned printed materials entirely for an online offering, saving both paper and time.

Most funeral homes also do not use their website to maximum advantage. Here is a simple test to check yours: If the copyright date on your firm's homepage is 2000 or earlier, your website is out of date!

In addition, internet speed has improved vastly since 2000. In the 1990s, webpages loaded slowly, from top to bottom, before our eyes. While the concept of Web 2.0 was a big jump, we've now reached Web 4.0. You must use your website as an interactive tool, which includes educating your community with videos and blogs, allowing people to plan a funeral online and posting your pricing online!

Finally, the biggest technologic evolution in funeral service involves broadcasting. The great Merrill Womach, the funeral director and singer who founded National Music Service in 1959, enabled funeral homes to provide the stereophonic power of his recorded music during funeral services. It was an amazing jump from the lackluster live performances.

The next jump will involve funeral homes that turn their chapels into broadcast centers. By doing so, consumers will be able to remotely watch a funeral live, play it back whenever they want and/or have it sent to them for their digital archive. This offering is not the same as asking one of your funeral directors to FaceTime a service from a smartphone;

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Please don't be afraid of technology – it can save you countless hours. Staffing is the primary problem facing funeral homes and you must help your limited

licensed staff focus on families more efficiently. Getting more people to attend a service without increasing seating or parking is better. Getting more people to the cemetery safely is better. Life with technology is much better. As a matter of fact, I look forward to sitting in my solar-powered rocking chair soon!

Dan Isard, MSFS, is founder of The Foresight Companies, which has served thousands of funeral homes nationwide for four decades. Articles in this series can be found on the Insights section of theforesightcompanies.com. Contact Isard at 602-274-6464 or disard@theforesightcompanies.com.

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