

by Daniel M. Isard, MSFS

Attracting the Next Generation of Deathcare Leadership

BEING BORN INTO THE DEATHCARE BUSINESS is the way that most of the owners and leaders of cemeteries and funeral homes chose their careers before 1970. Almost 75% of cemeteries or funeral homes were transferred from family member to family member. Families that wanted to increase the odds that the next generation would take over the business had large families.

But family or not, those who chose to come into the cemetery business started in one of three career paths: outside, administration, or sales. If you were a kid who didn't like sales, then it was either wear the outdoor uniform or sharpen your pencil.

In thinking about the future, I am going to focus on the path to working with a cemetery more than on the path to working in the funeral services business. That said, it should be clear that the "funeral path" presents its own challenges and hurdles. And if you are an owner or manager of a combination business, you face multiple issues: In one business, the individual is licensed (funeral business) and in the other, the business is licensed (cemetery business).

Licensing

Are the licensed staff members of a funeral business trade workers or professional workers? Nurses face a similar conundrum. In many cases, nurses or staff members of a funeral business must make professional judgments, which makes them professional workers. However, there are times when their work is more like that of skilled craftsmen, making them trade workers.

The conundrum gets more complex when you apply consider compensation. Nurses are often paid by the hour; just as funeral directors are in most states.

Is a funeral services business a one-license (funeral director and embalmer), a two-license (funeral director or embalmer), or a no-license business? The last time I looked at this, in 20 or more states, only one license was needed (funeral director and embalmer). A few more states made this a two-license matter; only one state didn't think it was necessary to license funeral directors.

Until the funeral services world can come to one opinion on these matters, there will be no concentrated focus on how to handle recruiting issues. I understand that each state has the right to establish its own rules. But the funeral services industry must eventually take the lead in saying what it wants the conclusion to be.

Expectations for the next generation in the cemetery business are perhaps more open and sophisticated than hoping that one of the kids will want to take over a funeral services business.

Whether the next generation of leadership comes from the owner's family or not, the cemetery industry has better tools to help prepare those future leaders for their careers. ICCFA has many educational offerings, often presented as part of a convention or meeting. There is also a great summer series offered by ICCFA to help guide someone's career path.



Convincing





Outsiders

To Take the Leap



We must position ourselves to emphasize the business management side of cemeteries.

Recruitment

What do we do to help recruit people who are not family members into the cemetery business? Each cemetery is a business—essentially, in my opinion, a sales business. That means inventory and the need to sell that inventory to generate revenue to fund overhead costs, including the cost of maintaining the grave spaces, marketing costs, and administration costs of compliance with law and regulation.

Venturing from Sales

Most people I have met in my 40 years came into the business from the sales side. As such, they tried to make a living by selling the inventory. Those who worked for well-managed businesses were able to make a very good living in sales. Many mid-level salespeople move from property to property, plucking the low-hanging fruit; then, when that runs out, going on to the next property. The not-so-good salespeople wash out and their only reference to being a part of this business is in the list of previous employers on their résumé.

Venturing from Admin

How do we bring people into the cemetery business from the administrative path? We know that large companies can operate cemeteries as well as family-run companies. We must position ourselves to emphasize the business management side of cemeteries. ICCFA classes help with this. The classes are useful to those who have taken the leap into the cemetery business, but how do we get more people to leap? That is a matter of education—of making cemeteries, and the cemetery business, better known to the public as well as to jobseekers and bankers.

Share Your Story

We have great stories to tell. Great people have come into this business and have run some amazing companies. We need to promote their stories. This is not a time to be shy about success or about results-oriented compensation for those who do their job well.

What to Emphasize

The job description of a cemetery business leader must emphasize supervising sales, understanding consumer needs, and taking pride in the company's stewardship of the historical community.

His or her task list would focus on the real property, administration, trust funds, and forms of memorialization. We can look to the insurance world to see how salespeople and sales managers coexist.

We can look at banking to see what is implied by the position of such a business within a community, and at the financial world for how to position a business for paying off debt and managing assets in perpetuity.

Better Marketing

Many banks don't like to loan to cemeteries because if the borrower defaults, the bank doesn't want to have to operate the cemetery until it can be sold. I have operated small and large cemeteries on behalf of banks and state attorneys general. This reluctance is largely an emotional reaction that associates cemeteries with distasteful or spooky things.

But a cemetery is a simple business. You create inventory. You mark up the inventory so as to generate enough revenue to cover your overhead and make a profit. You sell the inventory at need and in advance of need. You maintain the appearance of the facility to make it a desirous choice for people who know their time on earth is limited.

Getting rid of the "distasteful" and "spooky" just takes marketing. Rather than using it only for interment and memorialization, open the cemetery up for other uses:

- You have a wonderful and safe environment to host events. Why not have walking groups get their steps in on your property? Track their steps. Post their successes. Offer water bottles for those walking.
- Host fundraising events. Have a monthly luncheon for a good cause—supply the food and drink and get people to donate to a charity (changing the charity from month to month is a great idea). Track how much the charities have raised through your outdoor events.
- The cemetery probably has some areas where live music of all kinds can be presented. Imagine a weekend with a brass quartet playing in a gazebo, or having a bagpiper play at sundown once a week. Present a contemporary music concert.

Spread Out

There are many possibilities. Some religious events work very well outdoors. Sunrise services or evening luminary events can take advantage of the vistas that your cemetery may offer. Or hold a memorial event, honoring the memories of fallen heroes with flags or wreaths. Can you bring balloons in to help people adorn a gravesite? Or consider a kite-flying day.

First, get the spooky out. Then, start to use these events for recruiting. Find, among those attending these events, someone who has the energy to carry on—or maybe create a small community board to help plan these events. Perhaps someone will demonstrate a desire to be part of the bigger picture of operations.

Burial grounds are no longer graveyards. There are many forms of interment options and even some memorial or cenotaph options. A cemetery is a business. Let's focus on finding the people to keep your cemetery business alive. ■

Daniel M. 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 disard@theforesightcompanies.com.