



# Your Website Can Be the 'Apple Store' of Deathcare

*Upping Your Game as  
a Virtual Business*

by Gabriel Ngo

***“I believe that feedback thrives in cultures where the goal is not ‘getting comfortable with hard conversations’ but normalizing discomfort.”***

—Brené Brown, Ph.D., professor, lecturer, author, and podcast host

## **“HARD CONVERSATIONS” and “NORMALIZING DISCOMFORT”**

are two concepts that funeral, cremation, and cemetery professionals handle and deal with daily. We all recognize the ideal of “being your best on the family’s worst day,” or something very similar, and take it as a rule in serving the families who come to us. Certainly, we all have been called on and have exemplified this in person through various aspects of serving families who need our services. But how do we continue to do this (much less do it better) in a “brave new world” where more and more consumers depend on the internet—whether it be in educating themselves before deciding or by reading reviews from other client families when deciding about choosing your firm?

I published an article on e-commerce in the July 2022 issue of *Memento Mori*; since then, dizzying numbers and statistics about the growing consumer spending online as come to light. For now, I would like to focus on the importance of your firm’s website—and how you should be viewing it as your virtual online business site—and the importance of encouraging your client families and guests to write more online reviews of your business.

The key to maximizing the value of a website is to educate visiting consumers at their convenience, on their time, and for their comfort. It is crucial for you to start thinking (if you have not done so already) about your website and online presence as your virtual business.

I can almost hear the scoffs and snickers from some readers as I write this. Don’t believe me? How many of you are now moving toward showing caskets and other merchandise virtually because families now prefer not to have to walk into a selection room to look at corner cuts, end cuts, or full-size caskets?

Be honest—not with me, but with yourself, when you answer. A strategically designed website educates your online visitors and is a great opportunity for you to distinguish yourself from your competitors by communicating your value proposition. It also serves to prepare an online visitor for those hard conversations, and it can normalize discomfort on their terms and at their convenience well before they ever meet you or your staff in person.

If you have never done so, I encourage you to spend some time at your nearest Apple Store. I use an Android phone, but I have spent plenty of time in Apple stores looking for gift ideas or doing some holiday shopping for family and friends.

### **The ‘No Sales’ Approach to Sales**

The reason for this is that I’d like you to notice whether there is any selling that goes on when you are physically in an Apple store. The quick answer is that there isn’t any selling, or at least no concerted effort to sell, yet there is almost always a crowd of people in an Apple store.

Sure, some, if not many, end up purchasing some Apple product or accessory, but the majority of this crowd is trying devices out or learning about how great a new Apple product is, or talking with an Apple representative on how to use an application to edit GoPro video shots from their skiing trip.

Now compare the Apple store with a Microsoft retail location, one of which can often be found within walking distance of an Apple store. You will notice that there are maybe seven to 10 people in the Microsoft store (five of whom work there) at any given time; compare this with Apple’s crowds. The Apple store is designed primarily to invite customers to learn about and experience products, not specifically to sell them things on the spot.

Here is why I think you should spend some time in an Apple store: your website, your virtual online business site, really needs to take a few notes (to say the least) from the Apple approach. Long gone are the days when a landing site with a picture of your property, chapel, or facility, a phone number, and a few listed obituaries were adequate.

Here are some requirements in this new world for you to consider in turning your existing website into your virtual online business site:

- Tailor and personalize your website to reflect who you are. This includes pictures of you and your staff, your property, facilities and grounds, features, and so on. Even the banner should be personalized. For example, although having a banner with a picture of the Rocky Mountains is better than not having a banner at all, if you operate in Colorado, personalizing this banner picture will distinguish your virtual online business site from the competition—at least some of them will have the same, or a remarkably similar, banner picture of the Rockies.
- Your website should be designed to look uncluttered and be easy to navigate yet invite visitors to learn more about your business. This should include plenty of information about how you serve families, about features that are unique to your business (be it your people or your facilities and grounds), and about what is your service belief and how it is unique to you and your business.
- Balance the presentation between written content and short videos to retain the visitors' attention.
- Ensure that key search words that will be found by Google's search engine algorithm are embedded all throughout your website. Your website should be designed to maximize search engine optimization (shorthand: SEO) so that when a consumer searches for "funeral home crematory near me" or "cemetery near me," your website will appear near the top of that consumer's search results, not buried one or more results pages down. And your website should also be correct and accurate as it relates to Key Citation Scores.
- Ensure the redesign of your website allows room and capability for you to grow your e-commerce potential.

### Wait for It ...

I've saved the most controversial topic for last: Consider strategically presenting your pricing online. This is not just about having a PDF of your general price list hidden somewhere on your website. Strategic means taking advantage of an upcoming requirement by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) to transparently educate website visitors about your pricing, by distinguishing the experience, education, training, and professionalism that go into your services. Some quick suggestions:

- Start with a pricing range—perhaps from the cost of direct services up to the cost of full services.
- Have the website designed so that the visitor can "peel back" a few layers when looking for information on pricing and on why your prices are what they are.

In the Foresight Companies' 2023 Funeral and Cemetery

Consumer Behavioral Study (FCCBS), more than 68% of respondents insist on the need to have online pricing available for funeral homes and cemeteries or else the consumer might not want to engage with businesses that do not have pricing online. The reason for this, believe it or not, has more to do with consumers' feeling assured that a business is being transparent than it does specifically with price shopping.

I am not denying that there are, and will always be, price shoppers for any good or service. I am simply pointing out that consumers have stated that having pricing available to them online gives them more assurance that you are a bona fide business. And regardless of how you might personally feel about the FTC, this online pricing mandate was not just cooked up in a regulatory vacuum—it does seem to have real consumer support.

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### What People Say About You

Some sources say that around 90–95% of all purchases these days begin with an online search. Today, managing your brand is about as important as your reputation within your community, and more and more of your brand's reputation requires actively managing online reviews and ratings.

Some 67% of prospective buyers of funeral or cemetery services and goods visit an average of two to three websites before making their decision. Another finding reported in the 2023 FCCBS is that more than 76% of survey respondents stated that online reviews and ratings are very important to their decision-making, with 41% of consumers relying mostly on Google reviews, followed by the Better Business Bureau ratings (24% of consumers). Yelp reviews ranked third (13% of consumers).

So the question you may be asking yourself is, "How do I encourage more of my client families to write Google reviews?" The answer lies in repurposing or refocusing your aftercare program, your survey program, or both, to encourage greater feedback from client families. Aftercare programs and family surveys are no longer solely about generating leads for pre-arrangement sales—these are also vehicles for your business to obtain invaluable feedback on customers' experiences.

By reading and listening to what the client families are writing and saying, you can learn how to continually evolve and improve your service and sales efforts. I also encourage you, when considering a redesigned survey program, for example, to place emphasis not only on reviewing what has already happened, but also looking to the future a bit with some of the survey's questions. Furthermore, surveys focusing on the overall guest experience (as opposed to just one client family survey per service or event) opens up greater feedback from all guests attending.


And thus, bringing this discussion full circle, we as funeral, cremation, and cemetery professionals really do need to listen more intently to what client families, in particular, as well as consumers in general, are saying. We live in an age of technology and a need for transparency, convenience, and experience. A website that has been strategically redesigned to become a virtual business site checks every box mentioned. It leverages technology for you to be “open” 24 hours a day, 7 days a week; it provides you with a platform to invite, educate, and inform consumers, and to distinguish your business in its transparency; and it can be utilized at the convenience of any visitor at any time of day or night on a desktop, cell phone, or tablet.

Your virtual business site can provide visitors with an experience (as an Apple store does) that will build trust, confidence, and assurance for them to choose you—now or later. Because your website is available 24/7 to consumers, at their convenience, spending money on upgrading it may be a strategic reallocation of your advertising

**Because your website is available 24/7 to consumers, ... spending money on upgrading it may be a strategic reallocation of your advertising and promotion budget and a wiser way to spend than buying a radio ad that runs only during specific times.**

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Finally, a well-designed aftercare or survey program will (in addition to generating the usual leads for pre-arrangement opportunities and encouraging more Google online reviews) provide you with invaluable feedback and information on

how you can continually refine your approach to how technology, transparency, and convenience will create a better experience for the families you serve. 

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