



**OPEN  
YOUR  
EARS**

**Funeral  
service  
consumers  
are speaking  
up, but are  
we listening?**

**BY NICOLE VULLO**



**A** little-known fact about me – I am a sucker for greeting cards and quotes. I cannot get enough of them and will easily spend hours browsing for the perfect card to give a loved one. Some may find them cheesy and cliché, but I am not one of them!

I want to begin with a quote from famous novelist Ernest Hemingway, who once said, “When people talk, listen completely.” Are you still with me? Those words of Hemingway’s are a solid example of what should be a guiding principle for funeral home owners and cemetery operators when dealing with client families.

Okay, one more and I promise I’m done. This is from Epictetus, a Greek philosopher. He states, “We have two ears and one mouth so that we can listen twice as much as we speak.” Both Hemingway and Epictetus show us the importance of listening to client families, for people like being listened to and like knowing they are being heard.

### PERMANENT IMPACT

While March 2020 is now a memory, we still feel its impact in all aspects of our lives. Everything has changed – some for the better and, sadly, some not. Some may liken it to a fever dream, and everyone is still trying to piece together the events that occurred and their repercussions over time.

One of the pandemic’s major impacts was felt on our profession, death. Pretty much every person on earth gained a newfound view of and approach to death, especially the grief process that surrounds it. Consumers yearn for as much grief and emotional support as they can get from the funeral and cemetery profession and I cannot help but wonder if the past three years of isolation have brought out this need for support. It was something that was, unfortunately, impossible to accommodate back in 2020.

Before 2020, conversations of death were mostly avoided until absolutely necessary. Italian families like mine never wanted to talk about death for fear of putting the “malocchio,” or negative energy, out into the universe. But during the pandemic, death

was all around us. From daily counts on the news to that dreaded phone call from a loved one, death was front and center in all of our lives. After some time, a topic that was strictly taboo became easier to digest and a fear was conquered. Everyone was more open to creating traditions and customs that had gone untouched and unchanged for decades, if not centuries.

### THE POWER OF LISTENING

What this newfound view has taught us is that the traditional client family is gone and a new, more aware consumer is in its place. They want what they want, and if you cannot provide it for them, you best believe they will find someone who will. So, what do we need to do to keep client families in our care?

We must listen to them. Listening is one of the most powerful tools a funeral service profession-

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positive reviews. Moreover, by actively addressing customer concerns and incorporating their suggestions, funeral homes and cemeteries demonstrate their commitment to customer satisfaction, building trust and loyalty in the process.

In my article in the April *Director* titled, “Go With the Flow,” I touched on a “secret sauce” element of employee advocacy. My point was to use your own workforce to build brand awareness of your funeral home or cemetery. My prediction was that employee advocacy would

al has quite simply because it is the way you learn about the wants and needs of the families you serve.

The 2023 business landscape is fast-paced and customer-centric. Success and, quite frankly, survival are based on more than just offering high-quality products or services. It is all about building strong relationships with families and truly understanding their needs, desires and pain points. By prioritizing and valuing the voices of their consumers, funeral homes and cemeteries can unlock a wealth of insight, develop a sense of loyalty and gain a competitive edge.

When funeral service professionals really listen to families, they tap into a gold mine of valuable insights, including feedback, (sometimes) complaints and suggestions that allow a business to gain an in-depth understanding of what works well and what may need improvement. These insights provide valuable guidance for product or service enhancements, innovation and business strategy. They can also highlight emerging trends, identify gaps in the market and reveal new growth opportunities.

**To bring themselves up to speed so they can make educated decisions, consumers want access, at their convenience, to transparent information.**

## DEVELOPING CUSTOMER LOYALTY

Listening to the families you serve makes them feel valued and heard, which goes a long way in fostering loyalty. When people believe their opinions matter, they develop a sense of ownership and connection to the brand, and loyal families are more likely to advocate for your business, refer others and provide

become the new go-to of building brand presence and loyalty. While I stand by this conviction, I also want to point out that having client families serve as advocates for your funeral home or cemetery will also help in building your brand.

Harsh but true, client families have a huge stake in credibility and authority within their social media community, which can help expand your own reach and build your brand’s credibility. Imagine all the power that a positive review from just one family’s experience can do for your business. But use caution as this reach can work against you as well with a negative experience. Customer advocacy can be a double-edged sword, but one factor will always be in your favor – listening to the families you’re serving and giving them what they want.

## WHAT DO CONSUMERS WANT?

One goal of The Foresight Companies’ annual Funeral and Cemetery Consumer Behavior Study is to attempt to understand the gap between consumer attitudes and those views of the funeral and cemetery profession. What we uncovered is a profession that (1) is not responding to – and in some cases is actively avoiding – how consumers wish to do business and (2) a profession too often resisting change in the marketplace with no long-term strategic plan on how to handle new, evolving and less “traditional” consumers.

## THEY WANT EDUCATION

Even though we know today’s client families are more *accepting* of death, we still have a wide range of consumers who are *less educated* about it. To bring themselves up to speed so they can make educated decisions, they want access, at their convenience, to



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transparent information. It is thought that the funeral and cemetery professions have not given this to consumers in a day and age when they can find and purchase literally almost anything online. Even though we know this is not the case, it has created a consumer perception that the profession is not transparent or has something to hide and therefore, the profession has a trust and confidence issue. Perception is everything in this world, and this is not a good look for our profession.

We've also found that there is a substantial knowl-

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edge gap with products and services, along with the misconception within our space that families are more knowledgeable than they really are. This disconnect is particularly evident when looking at

online cremation arrangements, memorialization and eco-friendly burials. As an example, when Foresight asked consumers if they have ever heard of cremation memorialization, only 43% of respondents answered that they had. More shocking was that 93% of our professional colleagues think consumers know all about cremation memorialization. This major gap shows that we have abundant opportunity to educate consumers not only for their own sake but for the success of our businesses.

One other data point that struck me was that consumers do not know what we have to offer. In fact, 42% of consumers stated they do not know enough about fu-



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neral home and cemetery products and services and want to know more. You've worked hard to become licensed and there is an absolute value to the noble work you do in providing your services and merchandise. It is time to educate consumers about your professional skills and experience and what value you can bring to their lives.

At almost no other time have consumers provided such a clear road map of how to serve them simply by educating them. The funeral and cemetery industry must prioritize educating the public on the importance of human ritual and the need for a place of final rest. This can be achieved through national/local ad campaigns and workshops and in engaging with the community.

### **THEY WANT A HUMAN CONNECTION**

I briefly touched on the desire for grief support at the beginning of this article and now I want to close with it. In the funeral and cemetery profession especially, we still need to have a human connection to how we do business. The fact of the matter is our clients are just people – people who sadly are experiencing one of the worst moments of their lives. It is our duty to use empathy and compassion to treat them with the utmost care.

To me, making a human connection has become a bit of a lost art. Today, we (present company included) are all so consumed by our cellphones that at times they're like an additional body part. It is my opinion that funeral homes and cemetery businesses that place an importance on the human connection will become more valuable and, most of all, earn the trust and loyalty of the families they serve.

One other question asked in Foresight's 2023 study was, "What can the funeral and/or cemetery profession do to deliver a better experience?" Two of the top 10 answers were provide compassionate service and comprehensive support. Families crave empathy and understanding and are looking to those who can provide quality customer service and additional support, such as grief counseling, along with a supportive environment throughout the process.

When I read the data and saw that more consumers today want grief counseling and support

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even after the service is over, it resonated with me that care for the families we serve goes far beyond the moment they leave our doors. Are we checking in with them? Did we thank them for choosing our business as their care provider? While I know we are all busy with hectic workloads, it's these simple instances that can make an incredible impact for client families.

In a time when consumers have numerous options and a strong voice via social media and review platforms, listening is more vital than ever. Funeral and cemetery businesses that actively listen to families' wants for education and human connection are better positioned to build loyalty and enhance the customer experience.

By valuing these customer insights, opinions and concerns, you can forge stronger relationships and create a customer-centric culture to drive long-term success. Listening to families is not an option; it is imperative for any funeral business aspiring to thrive in a fast-evolving marketplace. ☰

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