



Funeral Service at the Crossroads

PART 1 OF 3

**Will you succeed in your
profession's new era?**

BY CHRIS CRUGER, WITH ALICE ADAMS

This is the first of a three-part series based on the results of The Foresight Companies' Funeral & Cemetery Consumer Behavior Study, its annual public/professional funeral and cemetery survey conducted for the past four years. This article will focus on current perceptions and expectations of the consumer public and the gap occurring between these perceptions and those of funeral service and cemetery professionals.

The second installment – education, education, education – will appear in the October issue of *The Director* and provide an extensive “how to” for educating your community. The final article in November will amplify the survey data on the importance of trust and transparency in the reality of consumer perceptions and needs in today’s marketplace.

Modern eras are generally marked by financial realities (e.g., the Great Depression that followed Wall Street’s stock market crash) or in geological ages, such as the Paleolithic. Our modern society has now witnessed a pandemic that engulfed the globe, killed millions and affected the lives of all of us.

While this era has been slow to come to an end, we are seeing fewer COVID cases and fewer deaths. The World Health Organization has downgraded COVID to a public health emergency but because of new and emerging coronavirus variants, it is still perceived as a health threat. Still, for the most part, our society perceives 2023 and beyond as “the other side of COVID,” and for all practical purposes, 2023 marks the end of the Pandemic Era.

This milestone, of course, has been embraced by funeral service because it marks the end of restrictions: the limited numbers allowed to gather, the masking mandates and the sheer case numbers that caused funeral homes and cemeteries to expand operating hours, rent reefer trailers, scramble for enough staff and PPE, and juggle schedules for staff who required time off to

care for family who had contracted COVID or who had contracted the virus themselves.

What did funeral homes and cemeteries look like in the aftermath of the pandemic? How can the funeral service and cemetery professions better understand post-COVID consumer perceptions and how consumers want to do business in this new era? Even more importantly, are these professions ready to make the changes necessary to survive and succeed in this new normal?

The Foresight surveys – for the past four years – have found consumers relying more on the internet and online commerce. Since this is how many people were able to conduct business, including restocking home pantries and refrigerators, during the pandemic, the required operating changes should not come as a surprise.

The 2023 survey found that the new era has ushered in an amplified need for funeral directors to get out from behind their desks and become more engaged in the communities they serve. This new normal mandates not just writing a check to sponsor a soccer team or buying T-shirts for a basket-

ball team but hosting a team party with hot dogs and lemonade at the funeral home, attending games or partnering with law enforcement to bring new drivers to tour your firm as part of a driver safety program.

This further effort to step up engagement with the community you serve is prompted by the massive disconnect discovered in the Foresight survey. In this new level of engagement, reconnection begins by bringing the community into your funeral home for events other than funerals. It means making a meeting room available for a nonprofit organization or hosting a lunch and learn to discuss local history or the options your firm offers for green burial or pet services, etc. It means offering your facility for a 50th birthday party or hosting a monthly local book or bridge club.

All are ideas for creating more public familiarity for your location and serve as steps toward community engagement and more transparency, a much needed change across the professions.

Before COVID and the isolation and quarantines that followed, funeral professionals had largely been insulated from this transparency and the use of more and better technology. During and after the pandemic, though, consumer expectations for more tech and transparency were no longer options for funeral homes and cemeteries but instead essential aspects in doing business.

This change is now required because conducting business in person during the pandemic wasn’t possible and consumers were forced to rely on technology for online purchases, Zoom meetings and internet access to needed information. These and other uses of technology proved effective and efficient and were adopted by a majority of the consumer public.

The 2023 Funeral & Cemetery Consumer Behavior Study data found a profession too often resisting changes required to do business with the new, evolving and less traditional consumer. These consumers, less educated about death, want to access transparent information at their convenience and on their own time. The new, post-pandemic consumer also wants to make educated decisions, and while some firms have posted GPLs and modified price lists online, the majority have hesitated to provide this information.

According to public perception, a firm's reluctance to make prices public indicates that the profession doesn't want to be transparent or has something to hide, thus creating a trust and

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confidence issue for the entire profession. Bottom line, shoppers are likely to select a firm whose website is more informative.

Closely tied to the trend of online consumerism are the off-the-shelf, generic websites many firms have used for years. Back when these affordable, cookie-cutter websites were introduced, their sole purpose was to give your firm a presence on the internet. That is why the only distinguishing information (and only variable data) on these "websites in a box" is the firm's name, phone number and address, which falls far short of today's consumer's

needs – expectations – for data to inform or assist with making an educated decision in selecting a firm at need.

Giving consumers the information they need and the full options available to help them decide and act in one place is the new norm. Yes, making these changes to your website to create a more open and welcoming online presence will be an investment, but not only is it essential today, the return on investment will more than compensate for the investment while contributing to your success. As you prepare for the new era, you may want to think about the following questions:

- How easy is your website to navigate?
- When was the last time a web

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- Does your site welcome those who want to educate themselves about how you might serve them?
- Have you listed all of your service options and explained them in layman's terms?
- Do you introduce your staff on your site?
- Do you include pricing?
- Does your website explain the process – from first call to final disposition – and what to expect?
- Does your site answer basic questions and make things convenient for immediate-need and preneed families?

The real surprise of this year's survey was demonstrated by the gap between the profession's perceptions and the perceptions of consumers. Under the heading "Honesty," the profession scored itself at 76%, compared to the consumer score of 54%. That's a 22-point gap!

Under "Responsiveness to Cultural Traditions," while the professional perception was scored at 74%, consumer opinion scored 56%, leaving an 18-point gap – still a sizable difference. In response to "Responsiveness to Problems," funeral and cemetery professionals scored themselves at 66%, while consumer perceptions tallied at 56%.

In our discussion of gaps or differences in perception, there were survey areas in which consumers actually ranked the funeral and cemetery professions higher than the professions ranked themselves. These included providing a modern/contemporary environment for services,

celebrations and receptions (consumers: 57%, profession: 47%); access to technology-based products and options (consumers: 43%, profession: 35%); and support after the service (consumers: 52%, profession: 51%).

Bridging the gaps between public and professional perceptions takes commitment. Making upgrades to your website or opening your doors for senior bingo or hosting a wine tasting on the second Thursday of each month – all require dedication, planning and staffing.

"There's no better time than today to be in funeral service because the new era's bar is fairly low and your success in the era of this new normal begins by hiring individuals who are tech savvy and complementary to your business model," commented one of the profession's thought leaders.

Some firms today are hiring employees who do nothing but community outreach or who have experience in personalization and event planning – this engagement is that important and definitely worth the investment. Getting out the message begins by being out in the community, communicating one on one and educating people.

Employee compensation is another aspect of staffing that requires change. In the past, management has been miserly in compensation, but truly valuing a good employee today takes more than the occasional, "Good job!"

In this new era, hiring and keeping outstanding performers should be "Job #1" in your business plan. Replacing an outstanding employee takes money and valuable time, so it may also be time to reevaluate salaries, reward those who regularly go above and beyond, and pay them enough to keep them and make it clear that you truly appreciate the stellar service they provide.

The new, post-pandemic consumers wish to access transparent information at their convenience and on their time. They want to make educated decisions on funeral costs.

For your firm to meet the expectations of your consumers, every employee must reflect a pride of association, but they also must be valued by management. Feeling a valued part of the team enhances performance and this same pride brings a mindset of excitement in doing an outstanding job. ☰

Three Takeaways to Prepare Your Firm for the New Era

1. Upgrade your website, making it easy to use and information-rich, including pricing.
2. Review salaries. It's your chance to reward outstanding employees and attract new candidates.
3. Decide how you want to improve/increase community engagement. Never just make a donation – get involved.

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