



Funeral Service at the Crossroads

PART 3 OF 3

**Will you succeed in your profession's new era? Then consider
transitioning to transparency a matter of survival.**

BY CHRIS CRUGER, WITH ALICE ADAMS



Remember “The Emperor’s New Clothes”? That folktale may have been your first experience with the word “transparent.” As the story goes, the emperor was duped by a tailor, and the new clothes he had ordered were not as they should be. As he marched through the city, his subjects were afraid to tell the emperor that his clothing was transparent – clear, see-through – and that he was, in fact, totally naked!

Transparency in business is similar (without the nudity). Transparent businesses publicly share information about their company – information traditionally kept private or revealed only in-house. Transparency today is essential. It is about being real and often carries different meanings from business to business.

Exactly when and where does a funeral or cemetery firm’s transparency begin?

While some say transparency for a funeral home begins when prices are published on a firm’s website, recent surveys tell us that 25%-30% of U.S. funeral firms do not even have websites. Despite this handicap, experts contend that a firm’s transparency begins long before consumers find themselves at need and researching funeral homes online.

Transparency is also about technology. Do your drivers have GPS when they take out a funeral? Does your first-call team have GPS and cellphones? Do you have internet at your firm? Do you have a website? Do you accept online arrangements? Do you have a way for families to pay for your services online? Can you provide for online document signatures? Do you offer video life stories at your services? Can you provide families with a video of the funeral service? Do you have the technology to livestream the service

so family members in other cities can virtually attend the service?

Since most all technology mentioned here is standard for most firms, answering “no” to any question means you have work to do.

MAKING TRANSPARENCY HAPPEN

STEP 1: As one example, transparency begins when funeral home owners and/or employees attend games played by the teams the firm sponsors. Be easily recognizable by wearing a team T-shirt or your firm’s nameplate. Be visible at community celebrations or volunteer at a nearby school (booster clubs often serve food at ballgames, take tickets, etc.). Local bookfairs, cook-offs, county fairs and races from 5-Ks to full marathons – these events attract crowds and offer volunteer opportunities.

Remember, consumers prefer doing business with folks they know, even if “knowing you” means picking up trash together after a local ballgame.

STEP 2: Join a civic group. But just joining is not transparency – become an active member, enlarge your circle of acquaintances, get to know more folks and let them know you. You may even make some lifelong friend-

ships. This is also how you move toward transparency. If people know you, they will not hesitate to call on you because they know your integrity and your heart – and they’ll also recommend you to their friends.

STEP 3: It’s not too early to begin setting your strategic goals for 2024, and – like including your GPL on your website – this step is nonnegotiable. Bring people into your building *before* a death sends them in to make arrangements. Plan events and invite people to your firm for special holiday events. Have a Q&A night. Invite a group to use your space. Host a Chamber of Commerce event. Have a “couple’s school.” Make a few opening remarks. Add some historical facts. Then invite questions. Educate, educate, educate! The communities you serve deserve this.

WEBSITES AND WHAT LIES AHEAD

We are almost a quarter of the way into the 21st century and yet up to 30% of funeral homes do not have websites – now, in a time when websites in the funeral profession can be built at no charge. If your firm does not yet have a website, ask a neighboring funeral director or NFDA for resources.

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If you do have a website, have someone outside your firm visit the site and then ask these questions: (1) Was the information clear? (2) Did you learn anything? (3) Could you make online arrangements, for example, for a cremation? (4) If there was not enough information to help you make a decision to use the firm, what information needs to be added? (5) Based solely on the information on the website, are you comfortable allowing this firm to remove, transport and prepare a family member for final disposition?

As you update your website, you can leverage it to welcome those wanting to educate themselves on their own time and at their own convenience about the profession as a whole but more specifically about the options you offer to serve them.

Finally, as most of you know, the FTC is currently looking to update the Funeral Rule, and one of the points discussed at a recent FTC workshop was to require firms to publish their GPL on their website.

The 2023 Foresight Companies' survey of American consumers, funeral directors and cemeteryans, conducted earlier this year, found that when a funeral home does not disclose its pricing online in a clear manner for consumers to understand, consumers think the firm has something to hide. In fact, 70% of consumers across age groups agree – their trust decreases if they do not see prices online.

The survey also revealed that today's consumers are less educated about death but do want access to transparent information – at their convenience and on their own time – to make educated end-of-life decisions.

The funeral profession has for decades lived in fear that competitors would find out their pric-



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ing, product lines and marketing strategies. Because of these attitudes, many firms have limited websites to such meaningless word salad as, “In your time of need, we will take care blah-blah-blah,” and stock photos of peaceful meadows and flying geese taking up space where the general price list could be.

The average consumer in 2023 can research, find and purchase almost anything they want online. Teens know how to shop for anything – say, running shoes – in a brick-and-mortar store in the mall. Then they find the exact shoes online, usually for a lower price, and order them before heading home.

Online shopping, we can't forget, became a necessity during the COVID-19 quarantines. This type of shopping, in turn, generated the current consumer perception that the funeral and cemetery professions are not transparent or have something to hide. These professions, therefore, have consumer trust issues because of lack of transparency.

The survey also found that some professionals were not responding to – and in some cases were actively avoiding – how consumers want to do business. Historically, the funeral service profession has, too often, resisted changes in the marketplace without long-term strategies to han-

dle the new and less “traditional” consumer.

Equating trust with price transparency, more of today's consumers prefer to use computers and/or cellphones to carry on business they conducted face to face in the past. To amplify this trend, the survey found that 71% of consumer respondents said they would not do business with a funeral home that is *not* providing prices online. Some 68% of the respondents said the same about cemeteries.

All data gathered from this year's survey pointed out these truths:

- There are many gaps between what consumers know and what professionals assume they know about funeral services and cemetery practices.
- The public's trust of funeral directors is in proportion to the transparency of the firm.
- Today's firms have few, if any, touchpoints with potential and/or former consumers until an at-need event.
- 80% of a firm's communication with consumers is video calls; 70% is nonverbal (texts, emails, mailed ads, social media, newspaper ads and obits).
- Most firms have a serious lack

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of community engagement, grass-roots involvement, community education and attempts to desensitize consumers about the funeral service profession. This lack of transparency gives rise to a distrust among the public.

Let's look at Linda's story. Linda, 78, was shocked to hear that her brother Bill had unexpectedly passed away. Linda lived across the country. Also, Linda's husband was on oxygen 24/7 and could not travel, and Linda was his sole caregiver.

Her pastor suggested she call the funeral home to ask about

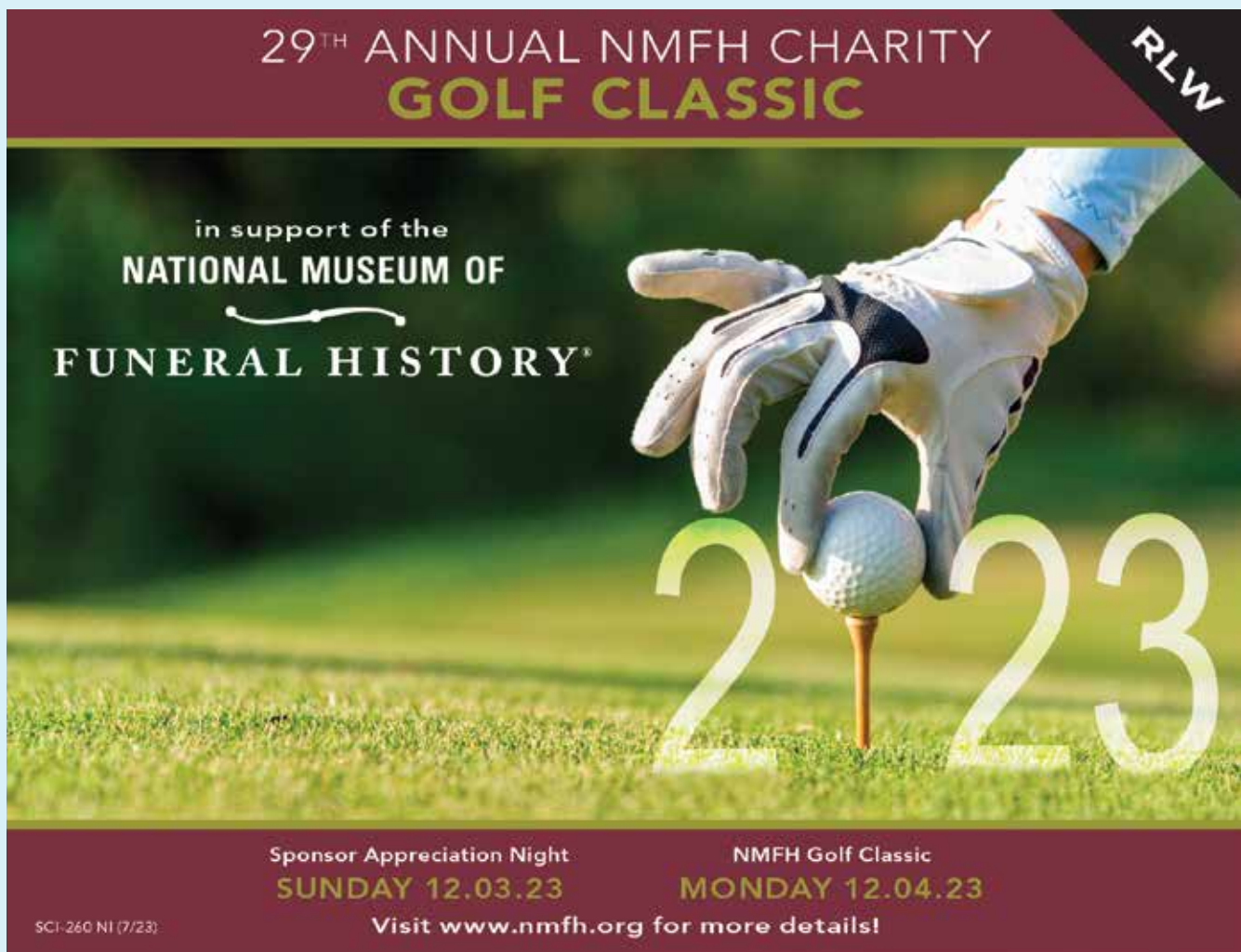
livestreaming her brother's service so she could attend virtually. The funeral director's answer was: "Oh, we did that during COVID, but we don't do that now."

For a firm's transition to transparency, technology and convenience is essential. Today's consumers must trust the firm they select. Consumers also seek value and convenience in what they experience.

Trust, transparency and technology are now expected by at-need families and online shoppers. They are now the norm. The speed of business is faster than ever, and the funeral profession must keep pace to remain relevant. ☰

Chris Cruger, CEO of The Foresight Companies, is a respected business principal and thought leader in the funeral home and cemetery industry. The Foresight Companies is a management consulting firm specializing in mergers and acquisitions, valuations, financing, HR and compliance services. Cruger can be reached at 800-426-0165 or ccruger@theforesightcompanies.com.

Alice Adams, an award-winning journalist/writer and co-author of One Block West of the White House, A History of Joseph Gawler's Sons, has been an advocate for the funeral profession for more than two decades. She is editor of The Texas Director, is working on a second book and previously served on the faculty at Cameron School of Business at the University of St. Thomas in Houston.



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