





# *End-of-Life Celebrations* *for Your Furry* **Companion**

*Serving Pet Families Can Be a Worthwhile Proposition*

**by Chris Cruger with Alice Adams**

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**M**y friend, Andra, called to tell me her beloved Schatzki, a beautiful 12-year-old German Shepherd, was in hospice, her voice choking with emotion. “I’ll call you as things move along,” she promised. “I cry every time I say ‘hospice,’” she confessed before ending the call.

A few days later, Schatzki succumbed in Andra’s arms as the vet administered the euthanizing injection.

Her vet was partnered with a local funeral home offering end-of-life services for pets. Two uniformed and neatly groomed attendants waited in a removal vehicle until Andra had said her tearful goodbye. While the vet summoned the waiting attendants, a friend led the sobbing woman out of the room for a glass of wine.

While Schatzki was in hospice, Andra made arrangements with the funeral home’s pet services division. She selected a private cremation where Schatzki would be the only animal placed in the retort. And although Andra did not want to witness her pet at the crematory, she did plan a celebration of Schatzki’s life, placing enlarged photos on easels around the crematory’s reception area where invited guests sipped champagne, snacked from a catered buffet, and shared their stories about Andra and her dog. Tables were decorated with Schatzki’s favorite flowers: roses.

At the end of the celebration, one of Andra’s friends from the county’s no-kill animal shelter spoke; and then a doggie food bowl was passed around and donations were made to the shelter in Schatzki’s memory.

Cremated remains were delivered to Andra a few weeks later in the beautiful urn she had selected; and when Andra passed away, Schatzki’s urn was placed in her casket as she wished.

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In consulting with owners considering adding pet services, we encourage them to be brutally honest about resources. Having the resources is critical. Adding pet services will not rescue a funeral home with a long history of financial losses.



**Did you know:**

- 66% of U.S. households own a pet, a significant increase from 56% in 1988, indicating that pets have become an essential part of many people’s lives (American Pet Products Association, 2023).
- In 2022, Americans spent \$136.8 billion on their pets, up 10.68% from 2021.
- Forbes also reports households with annual incomes of \$100,000 and over are most likely to own pets, and homeowners are more likely to own pets than renters.
- According to a new Synchrony (NYSE: SYF) study entitled «Lifetime of Care,» nearly half of pet owners underestimated the lifetime cost of care, which ranges from \$20,000 to \$55,000 for dogs and \$15,000 to \$45,000 for cats.
- 45% of pet owners spend more on healthcare for their pets than they spend on their own.
- All pet owners (97%) say their pets are members of the family (Pew Nearly Research Center Survey)

**End-Of-Life Pet Services**

Chris Cruger, Chief Executive Officer of The Foresight Companies, encouraged funeral directors considering adding pet services to their offerings to first do their homework.

“Success or failure hinges on how pet services are added to your firm’s existing offerings,” Cruger said.

“Two important questions to ask are, ‘Do we have the specific skills necessary to be successful?’ and ‘Can we do this and do it right?’”

He cautioned that “adding pet services requires many of the same steps as establishing a new funeral home or any new business. Talk with respected veterinarians in your area. Partner with those who reflect your business ethic and personal values. Do your research and find out whether there is any—or enough—business to justify the investment—like the purchase of a pet retort and providing a space, separate from your funeral home—to offer pet services such as visitations, receptions, and celebrations.

“I also want to emphasize, pet services done well will provide you with the opportunity to engage pet parents and their families and friends as well your firm and your name as a trusted professional and a provider are further proven,” Cruger added.

“It’s all about how you approach this or any expansion of your services,” Cruger continued. “As an example, when Schoedinger Funeral Home in Columbus, Ohio, added Schoedinger Pets Memorials and Pet Cremation, they established a high, professional bar for their services (for example, their pet removal team wears coats and ties). Personnel are trained to approach and handle the deceased pet with the same gentle compassion and respect the pet’s family deserves.”

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Additional standards and services at the Schoedinger Pets Memorials & Cremation Services include cremated remains returned to the pet parents in a wooden urn with the option of a customized name plate. The pet service offers a wide selection of keepsakes, along with providing the pet parents with the pet's paw print in ink and a clipping of the pet's fur, in a comprehensive packet of grief information for the entire family.

Mourning pet parents are given access to support from pet loss professionals who are also pet parents...and pet parents are invited to share the deceased pet's story on their Facebook page and their website.

"The Pet Care addition was made in 1995, and this branch holds CPLP (Certified Pet Loss Professional) distinction and are active members of PLPA (Pet Loss Professionals Alliance)," Cruger continued. "Adding pet care services is not simply a one-time investment of resources, but an ongoing effort to remain knowledgeable of new trends in the profession, new equipment, new products and new services plus continuing professional education. It is a true commitment, just as providing funeral services for humans," he added.

Aside from serving pet owners whose grief from a pet loss is often as deep as the loss of a human loved one, what better opportunity could there be to touch a family than through services for their beloved pet?

"Adding pet services takes a leap of faith," Cruger explained. "You cannot just dabble. Either go all in or don't go at all. Over the past 15 or 20 years, there has been a push to memorialize pets, which translates into a huge opportunity for professional pet services.

"How many times can you touch an individual or family that magnifies 10 times because—before you are asked to take care of a human family member—you have, professionally and compassionately taken care of a beloved pet? How better can you demonstrate your ability to provide services that are any more meaningful or more powerful?"

"Many times, I've had friends guiltily confide in me that they grieved more over the loss of a pet than over the loss of friends or relatives," said Knox College's Cornelia H. Dudley Professor of Psychology Frank McAndrew. "Research has confirmed that for most people, the loss of a pet is, in almost every way, comparable to the loss of a human loved one.

"Serving the end-of-life needs of an individual's or family's pets offers huge opportunities, but to do it well, to do it right takes work," Cruger said. "Aside from the right equipment, services and products, it also takes the time needed to be engaged, to show up, to be dependable and to be there for those you are serving."

A few final points from Cruger to consider:

- In consulting with owners considering adding pet services, after doing the market research, we encourage them to be brutally honest about resources. Having the resources is critical. Adding pet services will not rescue a funeral home with a long history of financial losses.

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—Chris Cruger

- If you decide to partner with one or more vets, do your research and select ones who share your same approach, your same level of caring. Both you and the vet are collaborating with end-of-life services. Both share the goals of arranging a compassionate ending of a very strong—and often, a long-term—relationship. Pet parents are relying on you and the vet to provide wrap-around professional support in a seamless manner to make it as easy as possible for the pet owner.
- There is no franchise model. End-of-life pet services are often a learn-as-you-go, on-the-job training situation, which is why active association participation and networking, research, and listening to pet parents is essential to your success.
  - The public does not understand what funeral directors do—that the services we provide require training, experience, hard work, caring and compassion. These last two attributes—caring and compassion—cannot be taught; so if you don't have them, pet services may not be a journey you want to begin.
- You can use social media, word-of-mouth, and mass mailings to let the community know of your new pet services; but doing it well the first time will bring the best possible marketing results. The same is true about building trust in your involvement of pet services.
- Finally, be real. Make sure you're in the right market, make the right financial decisions, adopt the right business practices, and work with the right people. ■

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

**Alice Adams**, award-winning journalist/writer and co-author of the book, *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, Cameron School of Business—University of St. Thomas, Houston.

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