

The Five Pillars of Strategic Planning

Are you building a business that will react to the future or one that will shape it?

Each November, business leaders in every profession pause to look ahead. For funeral home owners and cemetery operators, this isn't just an annual exercise in forecasting; it's an opportunity to figure out whether the next year will bring growth, stability or stagnation.

If 2025 taught funeral home owners anything, it's that they can no longer afford to coast. Consumer expectations are evolving faster than the profession can respond. Competition is intensifying. Technology – particularly artificial intelligence – is advancing at breakneck speed. The firms that thrive in 2026 will be those that prepare with clarity, intentionality and discipline right now.

This past year, in this column for *The Director*, I've explored themes that point toward this moment. These include the education gap with families, the role of valuations as business self-care, the complexities of succession, the digital avalanche that's shaping consumer behavior, and the promises and pitfalls of AI. Together, these insights form a road map for 2026. The question is: Will you act on them?

This month's article outlines the five pillars on which you should base your strategic plan for the coming year, provided you're more interested in business growth than stagnation.

A clear valuation grounds your planning in reality ... Without it, you're planning on instinct. With it, you're planning on facts.

PILLAR 1: EDUCATE RELENTLESSLY

According to The Foresight Companies' 2025 *Funeral & Cemetery Consumer Behavior Study*, only 37% of families feel informed about their options. Meanwhile, according to the same survey, 76% of funeral service professionals believe they are adequately educating the families they serve.

This 39-point gap is more than just a statistic – it's a warning. Families today are making decisions with incomplete knowledge. This means many choose lower-value services simply because no one bothered to explain their options to them!

In 2026, treat education as a growth strategy, not a courtesy. Implement this strategy in the following spaces:

- **Arrangement Room:** Go beyond a one-time conversation. Use visuals, handouts and digital tools to reinforce the breadth of available options. Families rarely retain everything they hear in meetings, especially when they are under stress.
- **Online:** Transform your website into an educational hub that has interactive tools, explainer videos and answers to FAQs. Instead of posting your General Price List as a static PDF, consider an online calculator that lets families explore options and costs in real time.
- **Community:** Host preplanning seminars at libraries, senior centers and/or places of worship. On social media, share content that demystifies topics such as cremation memorialization or the differences between preplanning and preneed.

Why This Matters: Education builds trust, and trust is the foundation of loyalty, referrals and long-term revenue. Funeral professionals who embrace education in 2026 will position themselves as thought leaders in their communities.

Quick Action Step: Ask yourself: "When was the last time I audited the materials my firm gives to families? Are these items clear, current and easy to understand?" If not, start there.

PILLAR 2: MEASURE AND MANAGE YOUR BUSINESS HEALTH

In the July 2025 issue of this magazine, I described valuations as "wellness check-ups" for your business.

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Too often, owners only think to have a valuation done when they're preparing to sell. But, just as you wouldn't ignore your physical health for a decade, you shouldn't ignore the financial health of your business for years at a time.

In 2026, establish business valuation as an annual discipline. A thorough valuation reveals more than a number; it also highlights what's driving – and eroding – value. For example, you might discover:

- Overhead is outpacing revenue growth.
- Your service mix has shifted heavily toward low-margin options.
- Customer counts are flat while costs are rising.
- Reliance on a single location, owner or staff member is creating risk.

Those aren't abstract insights – they're action items. A clear valuation grounds your planning in reality. It gives you the confidence to reinvest, adjust pricing, expand locations, reduce debt or strengthen your team. Without it, you're planning on instinct. With it, you're planning on facts.

Clarity is power. Whether you are planning to grow or sell, or simply wanting to breathe easier, a valuation should anchor your 2026 plan.

My Insight: During the past year, I've seen firms use valuations to unlock financing for acquisitions, negotiate stronger buy-sell agreements and identify hidden risks before they could become a problem. In each case, knowledge provided the leverage.

PILLAR 3: PREPARE LEADERS, NOT JUST SUCCESSORS

Succession planning is about more than just naming a successor. It's about preparing leaders who can sustain – and evolve – the business long after you step back.

In 2025, many owners told The Foresight Companies that they want to keep their business in the family or with a trusted employee. But wanting and executing are different things. Therefore, your 2026 strategic plan should include:

- **Timeline:** Define when and how you'll begin transferring responsibility. Succession works best over years, not months. A two- to four-year mentoring period is typical.
- **Training:** Expose your potential successor to finances, community relationships and high-level decision-making *now*. Leadership isn't learned overnight.
- **Visibility:** Include your potential successor in community events, arrangement conferences and industry gatherings. Families and colleagues

need to know and trust the next generation of leadership.

Even if your retirement is a decade away, succession discipline strengthens your culture today. It signals to your staff that you care about continuity, and it reassures your community that the business will endure.

Scenario to Consider: What would happen if an illness or sudden life change forced you out sooner than expected? A successor who is trained and trusted ensures stability. A successor chosen in haste creates chaos.

Firms that plan without accountability often spend more time reacting to crises. Firms that review and adapt quarterly spend their time seizing opportunities.

PILLAR 4: PUT DIGITAL FIRST, WITHOUT LOSING THE HUMAN TOUCH

The Foresight Companies' 2025 study made one thing clear: Families *expect* digital access, transparency and ease. Nearly 80% of consumers research providers online before making contact. Despite this, many funeral homes still treat their website as an afterthought.

Your 2026 strategic plan must recognize digital as the "front door" of your business. It should offer:

- **Transparent Pricing:** Provide easy-to-understand, dynamic tools instead of static PDFs. Transparency builds trust before a phone call is even made.
- **Scheduling:** Let families book appointments online. Don't make them wait until office hours.
- **Virtual Experiences:** Provide video tours of your facilities, and explain your services through short, engaging content.

And then there's AI. In the March 2025 issue, I wrote about its pros and cons. AI can streamline scheduling, analyze financials and help create personalized memorial content. But it cannot replicate empathy. In other words, use AI to remove friction, but use people to provide care. In 2026, let tech make it easy, and let people make it meaningful.

Quick Action Step: Audit your website from a consumer perspective. Can an individual find pricing, book an appointment and understand their options in less than five minutes? If not, that's your starting point.

PILLAR 5: BUILD A CULTURE THAT EXECUTES

Even the best strategies fail without execution. And execution, i.e., actually getting something done, is

ultimately dependent upon people and culture. In the September 2025 issue of *The Director*, I noted that funeral professionals themselves are asking for more education and clarity. They want to understand not just what to do but also why it matters.

To that end, your 2026 strategic plan should directly address:

- **Structured Onboarding:** When you first meet with a newly hired employee to explain company policies, benefits, etc., make sure they also understand your firm's values, processes and expectations from day one.
- **Ongoing Education:** Provide training in customer service, product knowledge and technology.
- **Mentorship:** Capture institutional knowledge by pairing senior staff with newer employees.
- **Recognition:** Celebrate wins, such as positive reviews, sales achievements and staff milestones.

Remember that culture isn't "soft" – it's strategic. A team that feels valued and prepared will serve families better, stay longer and help your firm grow.

My Insight: High turnover is one of the most expensive problems in the profession, but it's also one of the most solvable. Investing in culture costs far less than replacing burned-out staff.

EXECUTION: WHEN PLANS BECOME ACTIONS

The biggest pitfall of strategic planning isn't bad ideas – it's poor execution. Too many plans end up in a binder on a shelf, returned to only when the year is over. For 2026, commit to accountability by conducting:

- **Quarterly Reviews:** Measure progress against SMART goals (see page 32 for more information).
- **Monthly Financial Check-Ins:** Track revenue, expenses and service mix in real time.
- **Weekly Leadership Huddles:** Keep execution visible and momentum steady.
- **Annual Valuation:** Treat this as the scoreboard of your firm's long-term health.

Execution requires not only discipline but also courage. It means deciding not just what to do but also what to stop doing. It means raising prices as needed, cutting underperforming services and investing in technology, even if it feels uncomfortable. Firms that embrace these hard choices will pull ahead.

Contrast to Consider: Firms that plan without accountability often spend more time reacting to cri-

ses. Firms that review and adapt quarterly spend their time seizing opportunities.

LEADING VS. CHASING

One of the themes I've returned to this year is the risk of being reactive. Too often, the funeral service profession has waited for change to force its hand, whether that's concerning consumer behavior, regulation or competition. Let 2026 serve as an opportunity to lead, not chase.

That doesn't mean you have to predict the unpredictable. It means you should prep your business to be resilient and adaptable, no matter what happens.

From my vantage point, the difference between firms that grow and firms that struggle is leadership. Leaders who create disciplined plans, align their teams and hold themselves accountable always outperform those who drift.

Never forget that your strategic plan is more than a document; it's a declaration of your intent to grow, serve, endure. To keep it simple, here are three "nonnegotiables" for your 2026 business strategy:

1. **Get a valuation.** Know the health of your business.
2. **Modernize your digital presence.** Your website is your front door.
3. **Plan for succession.** Whether you're five or 20 years away, your legacy depends on it.

The future of the funeral service profession will be shaped by those willing to plan for it. So, as you put pen to paper to draft your 2026 strategy, ask yourself: "Am I building a business that will react to the future or one that will shape it?"

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