

BUSINESS AND FINANCE

BY CHRIS CRUGER

Stand Out or Step Back

Personalization as the new advantage in 2026.

Each January creates a natural pause – a moment to reset, refocus and reimagine what's possible. For funeral home owners and cemetery operators, 2026 isn't just another year on the calendar. It's the start of a new era for the profession – one defined by personalization, differentiation and the courage to stand apart.

Over the past two years, this column has explored various avenues of business. In January 2025, for example, I explored three pillars of success: self-awareness, proactive planning and strong culture. In November 2025, I urged you to build your 2026 strategic plan so that you could act with purpose and discipline at the start of the new year.

Now, it's time to take the next step. Strategy and awareness mean little without execution. And in 2026, execution will be measured by how well you create experiences that feel uniquely personal – both for the families you serve and the people who power your business.

Families no longer compare you to only other funeral homes. Rather, they compare your service to the personalized experiences offered by every other brand.

Why Personalization in 2026?

For years, funeral service professionals have associated personalization with products: themed caskets, video tributes, favorite songs, customized stationery, etc. Although those elements matter, they are no longer enough. Today's consumers expect personalization in the experience and in the way they interact with your brand, your people and your process. They want to be seen, heard and understood long before they walk through your doors.

The results of The Foresight Companies' 2025 *Funeral and Cemetery Consumer Behavior Study* underscore this reality. Families now expect:

- **Trust:** Nearly three-quarters of the surveyed consumers said that online reviews significantly influence their confidence in a funeral provider. This means a strong and well-managed review presence is essential for credibility and trust.

- **Education:** Only 37% of consumers reported feeling informed enough to make meaningful decisions about end-of-life services. This highlights a major opportunity for providers to close the education gap.

- **Ease:** About 78% of consumers said they plan to research and compare funeral providers online before they ever reach out. This means your digital presence is the first impression you make, therefore it sways the consumer's preliminary decision-making process.

Families no longer compare you to only other funeral homes. Rather, they compare your service to the personalized experiences offered by every other brand, including Amazon, Netflix and their local boutique.

The firms that succeed in 2026 and beyond will be those that make all interactions, including website visits and arrangement conferences, feel authentic.

Lessons From Last Year

In the November 2025 issue, I talked about how to turn your 2026 business plan into reality with discipline and clarity. That strategic foundation can become the stage for personalization.

Strategy answers *what* you want to achieve. Personalization defines *how* you'll achieve it – in a way that only your firm can. If your 2026 plan is about increasing preneed sales, retention or profitability, the differentiator will be how you make families feel while achieving those goals. In a profession where services can look similar, the experience becomes your brand.



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The following breakdown shows the areas where personalization will have the greatest impact this year:

1. People

The most personalized experience you can create is the one delivered by your team. In my January 2025 article about culture, I emphasized that a valued and supported staff drives loyalty and performance.

That truth will only deepen in 2026. In the same way that consumers can sense when employees are disengaged, families notice when your team members feel connected to the mission and empowered to express care in their own authentic way.

- *Recruit for empathy, not just experience.* The technical skills of funeral service can be trained, but emotional intelligence cannot. You must constantly look for good people.
- *Empower individuality.* Encourage arrangers and directors to bring personality into the process. Human connection is what sets firms apart.
- *Train for consistency rather than conformity.* Every family deserves the same level of care, but that doesn't mean every experience should be identical. Teach staff how to read cues, listen closely and tailor responses.

In 2026, leadership is creating an environment where your people personalize procedures rather than simply follow them.

2. Data and Technology

The word "data" might not sound personal, but when used wisely, data is one of the keys to meaningful connection. Technology allows funeral and cemetery businesses to better understand and anticipate what families want.

Start with your website. In 2025, I called it your "digital front door." In 2026, it becomes your "digital handshake." The moment someone visits your site, personalization begins.

- *Leverage analytics.* See where visitors spend time, what pages they click and how long they stay. These insights can guide which services to feature or which FAQ to clarify.
- *Automate with empathy.* Use customer relationship management (CRM) tools to help you commemorate anniversaries, send personalized thank-you notes and follow up with grief resources. The goal isn't automation for efficiency's sake; it's to show that you remember and care.
- *Integrate AI thoughtfully.* Artificial intelligence (AI) can assist with scheduling, content creation

and memorial design, but it must always feel human. Technology should remove friction, not feeling.

When used intentionally, data and technology don't depersonalize service; they enhance it. They help you deliver the right message to the right person at the right time.

3. Arrangements

The arrangement conference is still the most critical moment of differentiation. In an era where online options have multiplied, in-person conversation remains your best opportunity to show value. The challenge is that too many arrangements feel transactional, but there is an opportunity to make them transformational.

- *Ask deeper questions.* Go beyond logistics to understand the person's story. What made them unique? What memories bring comfort to their family?
- *Visualize options.* Use digital screens and printed visuals to show families how different services or memorials might look. People connect with what they can see.
- *Honor autonomy.* Don't tell families what they "should" do. Invite them to co-create the experience. Choice creates ownership, and ownership drives satisfaction.

The most memorable arrangements are the ones where families walk away and say, "That felt like us." That's the essence of personalization.

*Strategy answers what you want to achieve.
Personalization defines how you'll achieve it.*

4. Community Engagement

Your business doesn't just serve families during times of need; your business is a trusted presence in their lives. Community engagement is about making that connection.

- *Think smaller and smarter.* Instead of sponsoring every event possible, focus on micro-engagements that reflect your community's diversity and interests. Host educational sessions for specific groups, such as veterans organizations, cultural clubs or local businesses, and tailor your messaging to their values.
- *Prioritize partnerships.* Collaborate with local florists, mental health counselors, hospice providers and clergy. These relationships demonstrate your firm's commitment to holistic care.

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Community engagement in 2026 isn't about being everywhere; it's about being meaningful somewhere.

5. Brand and Marketing

In an age of sameness, brand identity is a clear way to differentiate. The days of generic taglines and stock imagery are over. Your 2026 marketing should feel personal and authentic to your voice, your story and your community.

- *Lead with purpose.* What do you stand for? Why do families trust you? Bring that forward in every communication.
- *Show rather than tell.* Feature real team members, real families (with permission) and real stories. Stock photos are forgettable. Be authentic and relatable.
- *Be consistent across channels.* Across your website, social media and printed materials, the tone, look and feel of your brand should be instantly recognizable.

Marketing personalization isn't about gimmicks or trends. It's about creating content that speaks to the emotions and values of your community.

6. Leadership

Finally, personalization and leadership are linked. I believe that self-awareness is the foundation of effective leadership. In this new era, that awareness should extend to how you lead your people and position your business. Ask yourself:

- "How personally connected am I to my team?"
- "Do I know what motivates them, challenges them and helps them succeed?"
- "How personally connected am I to my community?"

The best leaders in 2026 will not be those who hide in the back office. They will be visible, accessible and human. They will lead by example and with empathy.

That sameness is your opportunity. The easiest way to win in 2026 is to stop blending in.

A Call to Action

Personalization isn't just a feel-good philosophy; it's a business strategy that delivers measurable results. Consider these outcomes I've seen:

- Higher satisfaction scores from families and more positive online reviews
- Increased preneed sales due to improved trust and education
- Lower employee turnover thanks to an engaging, mission-driven culture

- Stronger community reputation and referral business

The equations are simple: When families feel understood, they return. When employees feel valued, they stay. When communities feel connected, they support you. When you do these things, you win.

When I talk with owners across the country, they express a similar sentiment: "Everything feels the same. The facilities, the websites, the services – it's all blending together." That sameness is your opportunity. The easiest way to win in 2026 is to stop blending in. Be the firm that educates instead of sells. Be the firm that remembers families by name. Be the firm that leads with empathy, not ego.

Personalization involves refining what you already do and delivering it with purpose. Make 2026 your year of differentiation. Build on the foundation of awareness and strategy you created last year to establish a personalized, purpose-driven approach and better serve families. Here are three commitments to guide you:

1. **Empower your people.** Equip your staff with the tools and autonomy necessary to create experiences that matter.
2. **Know the families you serve.** Understand their values, their expectations and their backgrounds. Let that insight drive every decision.
3. **Lead with authenticity.** Be the example of the personal connection you want your brand to represent.

In this new era, success is measured by sincerity. In a world where everything feels automated, personalization is your greatest competitive edge.

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