

## Progress, Expectations and Opportunity

What new consumer data means for funeral service and cemetery professionals.

**E**ach year, Foresight studies the evolution of consumer attitudes toward funeral and cemetery services. Over time, our *Funeral and Cemetery Consumer Behavior Study* has become an annual benchmark for deathcare, and we make a point of sharing its findings with readers of *The Director* first.

The goal of the study is straightforward: to better understand how families perceive funeral and cemetery services, what families expect from providers, and where the two professions can continue to improve.

This year's research includes feedback from more than 5,000 consumers and more than 1,000 funeral service professionals. This is the highest participation in the history of the study. With this level of engagement, the data provides a clear view into how families approach funeral service and cemetery decisions today.

The results offer both reassurance and direction. Consumer perceptions of the two professions improved modestly this year. At the same time, some of the most critical gaps between consumer expectations and professional assumptions remain firmly in place. What the data ultimately shows is not that deathcare is falling behind but that it is evolving – albeit more slowly than the consumers it serves. Families continue to place tremendous trust in funeral service professionals, but how families gather information, evaluate providers and make decisions is changing.

For funeral service and cemetery professionals, the opportunity is not to reinvent the mission of deathcare; it is to guarantee that the way they communicate, present and deliver their services keeps pace with how families navigate important decisions.

### PEOPLE CONTINUE TO OUTPERFORM THE PROFESSION

One of the most consistent findings of the Foresight study year over year is the difference between how consumers view the profession overall and how they view the professionals who serve them. Consumers rated the profession at 63% – a modest bump from last year's 61% – but this figure still leaves a lot of room

for improvement. Funeral service professionals themselves received a stronger rating of 73%, an increase from the prior year's 70%.

Families consistently recognize the compassion, professionalism and guidance that funeral directors provide during difficult moments. Providers often exceed the expectations of the individuals with whom they interact, demonstrating just how relationship-driven the profession continues to be.

Not surprisingly, the highest-rated attributes in the Foresight study remain those directly tied to personal interaction. Consumers rated professionalism, responsiveness to cultural and family traditions, and ability to provide a comforting environment among the strongest qualities of funeral service providers.

At the same time, broader perceptions of the profession – particularly those around transparency, modernization and business practices – tend to lag behind. Lower scores appeared in areas such as technology, modernization and ability to meet family budgets. For funeral homes, this presents an opportunity. When a firm clearly demonstrates professionalism, transparency and responsiveness, it reinforces the trust families already place in the people who serve them.

### TRANSPARENCY AND AFFORDABILITY REMAIN CENTRAL

When consumers were asked what would improve their experience with deathcare, their responses were remarkably consistent with those of previous Foresight studies. Transparency in pricing and services was the most frequently mentioned improvement, followed closely by affordability and clearer explanation of the arrangement process. Together, these themes accounted for more than 40% of responses.

Families want to understand what services cost and how their options compare. More importantly, they want this information presented clearly and simply.

Many respondents also emphasized the importance of patience and the absence of sales pressure during the arrangement process. These responses highlight

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the importance of guiding families through decisions in a way that feels consultative rather than transactional.

This expectation reflects a broader shift in consumer behavior. In sectors such as healthcare, travel and financial services, customers increasingly expect clear pricing and straightforward explanation of available choices.

Funeral service is moving in this direction, but progress remains uneven. For funeral homes that present pricing clearly and explain options thoughtfully, transparency becomes a competitive advantage. It builds trust and allows families to approach decisions with greater confidence.

### THE DIGITAL FRONT DOOR

Consumer behavior regarding online research continues to evolve. The Foresight data shows that 60% of consumers who had arranged services within the past two years conducted online research before selecting a provider. Among respondents who had not yet made arrangements, 81% said they expect to conduct online research when the need arises.

Consumers are concentrating their research in a few select places. Seventy-eight percent said they plan to begin their search on Google, and 69% expect to visit funeral home websites directly.

Families are using online tools to educate themselves before ever reaching out to funeral homes. Nearly 80% of respondents said they expect to search for pricing online, followed by customer reviews, cremation and burial options, and general information.

Online reviews play a growing role. More than half of families said they trust reviews on independent sites such as Google or Yelp more than they trust those posted directly on business websites.

Despite the growing importance of digital research, the in-person experience remains essential. Among the families who had arranged services, 87% visited the funeral home they ultimately selected, and many visited multiple locations before making their decision. On average, families visited more than three locations in person during the selection process. A strong digital presence might create a good first impression, but the in-person experience still plays a significant role in whether a family ultimately chooses the provider.

### THE EDUCATION OPPORTUNITY

One of the most important findings of this year's study involves consumer education. Only 32% of consumers said they received meaningful education about their funeral service options, whereas 77% of funeral service professionals said they provide it. This represents a 45-point perception gap between what professionals believe they are communicating and what families feel they are receiving.

Not surprisingly, this gap affects consumer confidence. Forty percent of respondents said they do not know enough about funeral or cemetery products and services to feel confident in their decisions.

Another finding (this one is encouraging) involves the role funeral service professionals play in guiding families through decisions. Although some families arrive with clear expectations, many rely heavily on professional guidance. More than half of respondents said their counselor helped them understand their options and select the right services for their situation. In addition, 15% said they ultimately changed their initial decision after receiving professional advice. Clearly, the role of the funeral director as a trusted advisor is as important as ever.

### AWARENESS OF OPTIONS REMAINS LOW

Another important finding relates to the education gap: Consumer awareness of funeral products and services remains significantly lower than professionals believe it is. Professionals gauge consumer awareness at 59%, but actual consumer awareness is closer to 29%.

In some categories, the gap is even larger. For example, professionals believe awareness of cremation memorialization options is around 90%, but consumer awareness is just under 50%. These sizable gaps appear in several areas, including personalized memorial products, keepsakes and emerging forms of disposition.

For funeral homes, the lesson is simple: Never assume families already understand the services available to them. Proactive education through conversations, community events, and digital and print materials can help families better understand the full range of options available.

### TECHNOLOGY EXPECTATIONS CONTINUE TO EVOLVE

Families today place great importance on the availability of certain technologies. They increasingly value services such as online arrangements, digital paperwork, online payment options and service streaming.

Service streaming illustrates how quickly expectations are evolving. Among the respondents who had arranged services in the past two years, 56% were offered the option to stream, and 61% of those chose to use it. Per the Foresight study, this means roughly one-third of all services now involve some form of streaming.

At the same time, nearly 45% of families reported experiencing technical difficulties while streaming, highlighting the importance of reliable technology solutions. As funeral homes expand their technology offerings, ensuring those tools work smoothly and consistently will prove important.

### PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT STILL MATTERS

Although digital access is increasingly important,



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physical environment continues to play a significant role in how families evaluate funeral homes and cemeteries. Consumers ranked cleanliness, overall appearance and decor, parking availability, and accessibility for elderly or disabled visitors as the most important characteristics of a funeral facility. Each scored above 80% in importance. Modern audiovisual systems and updated facilities also ranked highly.

Compassion and professionalism remain essential, but the results of the study suggest that physical environment also plays an important role in shaping families' perception of a provider's quality and professionalism.

### CREMATION TRENDS CONTINUE TO SHAPE THE PROFESSION

Cremation preferences are relatively stable, with simplicity and cost remaining the most frequently cited reasons for cremation. At the same time, generational data suggests the future of disposition might be more nuanced than previously assumed. In the Foresight study, 46% of millennials and 42% of Gen X respondents indicated a preference for burial, compared with 34% of baby boomers.

These findings suggest that future memorialization preferences might be more diverse. Younger generations appear more interested in personalization and alternative service formats, so the assumption that they simply want less might not hold up.

### WORKFORCE ENGAGEMENT MATTERS

The Foresight study also examined how funeral service professionals view their workplaces. Encouragingly, engagement scores improved this year. Company-focused engagement reached 80%, and employee-focused engagement rose to 71%.

Organizations actively involved in professional associations reported higher levels of employee satisfaction. Fifty percent of employees at these firms reported feeling completely satisfied, compared with 43% of employees at organizations not involved in associations.

The bottom line: Organizations that invest in their teams tend to deliver stronger customer experiences.

### THE ROLE OF PRENEED PROGRAMS

Although the Foresight study focuses primarily on consumer behavior, the research also offers insight into how funeral homes are preparing for the future, particularly through preneed. Encouragingly, most firms reported having a structured preneed approach in place. Nearly 89% of funeral homes said they know their preneed provider, and 83% reported having dedicated preneed sales staff.

The most common approaches for generating preneed activity are: advertising through direct mail,

email or digital marketing; educational seminars for community groups; and outreach to existing client families. When professionals were asked how preneed programs could be strengthened, community outreach and local engagement were the top responses.

These findings reinforce an important point: Preneed decisions rarely are made in response to a single marketing message. They typically are the result of trust built through long-term relationships within the community.

### THE PROFESSION'S ESSENCE REMAINS UNCHANGED

Finally, the Foresight study asked professionals to identify the issues they believe will shape the profession in the next several years. The most frequently cited responses were financial pressures, staffing challenges, changing consumer expectations and the continued impact of cremation on traditional revenue models. These concerns reflect the broader transformation across deathcare.

At the same time, the data reinforces an important reality: Funeral service continues to provide deeply meaningful support to families during some of life's most difficult moments. Consumers expect clear information, thoughtful guidance and convenient ways to engage with funeral service providers. These expectations do not conflict with the values that have always defined the profession. In many ways, they represent a modern expression of those same principles.

The data provides direction. The profession has the experience, expertise and community trust to meet consumers' evolving expectations. The opportunity now lies in how you choose to respond.

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