

Fresh-Eyed Evaluation

Visibility also can look like a commitment to continually assessing and improving your business.

When was the last time you stepped back and truly evaluated your business? Not your month-end reports. Not last year's call volume. Not your website. Your actual business.

When I ask funeral home owners this simple question, it often catches them off guard. Most owners spend their days immersed in immediate demands. They are busy arranging services, managing employees, responding to unexpected challenges, overseeing operations and making countless decisions that move the business forward.

The challenge: While they're busy running the business, the business itself continues to evolve, as do their competitors, their employees, their community, the families they serve and the expectations placed on their organization. The question isn't whether change is happening but whether they're paying attention to it.

In July's issue of *The Director*, I wrote about succession planning and the importance of building a business that can endure beyond its current ownership. That article centered around operational excellence, leadership and intentional planning. But succession planning isn't just about preparing for a transition; it's also about building a business that remains healthy, competitive and relevant every year leading up to that transition.

This begins with visibility, and visibility is about far more than marketing.

VISIBILITY AS A REFLECTION OF LEADERSHIP

When most people hear the word visibility in a professional context, they think of advertising. They picture websites, social media, billboards, community sponsorships and digital marketing campaigns. These have their place, but each is simply an outward expression of something far more important.

Visibility begins *inside* your organization. Visibility is reflected in the clarity of your vision. It's signaled in the consistency of your service. It's shown in the way your employees talk about the business, the relationships you've built within your community, the condition of your facility and the confidence people have when they recommend your firm. In other words, visibility isn't created through marketing; instead, marketing simply reveals the business you've already built.

I've seen organizations invest heavily in advertising while neglecting the fundamentals that foster a strong reputation. I've also seen exceptional funeral homes remain largely invisible because they assume good service speaks for itself. Neither approach is sustainable.

The strongest businesses understand that reputation and visibility work together. One earns trust, and the other ensures people continue to discover that trust.

Another benefit of visibility is that it creates opportunity. A visible business attracts stronger employees because talented people want to work for organizations with purpose. It creates stronger community relationships because people understand what the organization represents. It supports healthier growth because the business consistently communicates its value. It creates confidence among lenders, advisors and future successors.

Yes, it strengthens enterprise value, too. And healthy, growing businesses expand their options for the future. Visibility isn't measured by how many people recognize your logo; it's measured by whether your business continues moving forward.

CHANGING MARKET, CHANGING FIRM

One of the greatest mistakes successful businesses make is believing that today's marketplace looks the same as it did 10, even five, years ago.

Think about everything that has changed in that short time. Families communicate differently. Employees have different expectations about workplace culture and career development. Technology influences nearly every aspect of business operations. And competition extends well beyond the funeral home down the street.

In addition, communities themselves have changed. Neighborhoods evolve. Demographics shift. Long-standing referral relationships retire. New organizations become influential. And expectations surrounding service continue to rise.

Despite this, many owners continue to make decisions based on assumptions they formed years, even decades, ago. It's not because they're resistant to change; it's because success has a way of creating comfort. When something has worked for a long time, it's natural to believe it will continue working.

Every successful business eventually reaches the point where it must ask an uncomfortable question: "Are we continuing to grow, or are we simply relying on yesterday's success?" These are two very different things.

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During conversations with owners across the country, I've heard one phrase repeated more times than I can count: "We've always done it this way." Most say it with pride. Sometimes, they say it because they're honoring tradition. Sometimes, it is because the process genuinely works. Occasionally, however, it is simply a way to avoid change. Tradition and legacy are the funeral service profession's greatest strengths. Complacency is its greatest risk.

There is an important difference between preserving the values that define your organization and preserving processes just because they're familiar. The businesses that continue thriving generation after generation are rarely the ones that refuse to change. They're the ones that know exactly what should never change and what must. Their commitment to compassionate service never changes. Their integrity never changes. Their mission never changes. But the way they lead, invest, communicate, recruit, develop and position themselves changes. This is true protection of tradition.

YOUR BUSINESS'S ANNUAL PHYSICAL

Most of us understand the importance of preventive healthcare. We don't schedule annual physical

exams because we expect bad news; we schedule them because we'd rather identify small issues before they become significant ones.

Businesses deserve the same level of attention. Imagine if you intentionally blocked out a day away from your funeral home once a year. You would not answer emails or attend meetings. You would simply evaluate the health of your business. You'd probably begin with financial performance. Are your margins healthy? Are your expenses aligned with your goals? Are you investing in areas that produce long-term value rather than simply maintaining the status quo?

Then, you'd move on to your people. Are you developing future leaders? Do your employees understand the vision? Are they engaged? If someone retired tomorrow, would another person be prepared to step into their role?

Next would come operations. Are your systems creating consistency? Are there any bottlenecks? Which processes frustrate employees or families? What operational habits have developed simply because no one challenged them?

Then, you would look outward. How is your business perceived in the community? Are you strengthening relationships with other professionals and the organizations that influence your market? Are you actively telling your story or simply hoping people remember it?

Finally, you would ask yourself the hardest question of all: "If I were to start this business today, with all the knowledge I have now, would I build it exactly the same way?"

Most owners answer that question with a smile and a pause because they already know the answer.

THE GREATEST THREAT TO SUCCESS

Owners spend a great deal of time watching their competition. Who expanded? Who remodeled? Who hired someone new? Who lowered prices? Who's advertising?

Competitive awareness is important, but the greatest threat to most funeral homes isn't another funeral home – it's complacency. A business rarely loses relevance because a competitor suddenly becomes exceptional. More often, companies slowly lose momentum because they stop improving. Small decisions accumulate. Strategic planning is postponed. Facility improvements get delayed. Employee development takes a back seat to daily operations. Marketing grows inconsistent. Goals become less defined.

None of these actions feel significant in isolation. Cumulatively, however, they slowly reshape the trajectory of the business. Owners might not notice

because the change happens gradually, but the marketplace notices.

Every funeral home owner I meet has something in common with their peers, and that is that they care deeply about the community they serve. They've spent years building an organization that families trust. That's a remarkable accomplishment, but leadership isn't simply about protecting what you've built. It's also about ensuring the business continues to grow long after today's challenges have passed.

In July's article, I encouraged you to think of succession planning as preserving your legacy. In this issue, I encourage you to think about visibility in a similar way – not as a marketing initiative or an advertising budget but as an ongoing commitment to evaluating your business with fresh eyes.

Businesses don't become exceptional by accident, and they don't remain exceptional by accident. The owners who continue to thrive are the ones willing to pause, ask difficult questions, challenge old assumptions and intentionally prepare for what's next. The question isn't whether your funeral home has a long history. The question is whether you're writ-

ing the next chapter or simply relying on a previous one.

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