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The Changing Face of Funeral Service

By Sarah Rickerd

For the debut issue of this publication, I was given one of the most interesting writing assignments to date: to examine perceptions within the funeral industry of the students, practitioners and directors who bear visible tattoos and piercings, as well as the impact these perceptions have on their careers.

The response I received from interview subjects was, not surprisingly, largely conservative. Even the forward-thinking managers, owners and educators with whom I spoke agreed that, whatever their personal preferences may be, they couldn't risk alienating families – especially members of older generations – by hiring those with visible body alterations. And given the research cited in the original article on increasing competition and decreasing profit margins within the deathcare profession, it's easy to understand their perspective.

So when I was approached by NFDA to revisit the subject to see if anything had changed, I'll admit to being hesitant. To the best of my observation, the industry hadn't undergone any kind of sudden, liberal transition in its acceptance of visible tattoos and body piercings, and simply answering, "No, nothing has changed," seemed as if it'd make for a short, unhelpful article. If you're looking for simple, quick answers, I'll be upfront with you. After interviewing more than a dozen subjects – from active students to mortuary education chairs and more – the answer is clear: No, the funeral industry does not seem to be any more ready to accept those with visible tattoos and body piercings than it was a year ago.

However, during my interviews, several intriguing new threads emerged that deserved further exploration, perhaps due to heightened interest resulting from NFDA's thoughtful decision to raise the issue a year ago. While these discussions take us further and further away from a clear "yes or no" answer, they're vitally important considerations to explore as we prepare for industry shifts that may still be five to 10 years out.

Is there any actual evidence to support these concerns or has the industry simply made the decision to reject those with visible tattoos and body piercings out of unsubstantiated fear?

Public Perception

The question at the heart of the debate over visible tattoos and body piercings is whether or not families care enough about these modifications that it would deter them from working with funeral directors sporting them and consequently affect the firm's bottom line. But is there any actual evidence to support these concerns or has the industry simply made the decision to reject those with visible tattoos and piercings out of unsubstantiated fear? Although last year's NFDA Con-

sumer Awareness and Preferences Survey reported that most consumers still expect their funeral directors to dress conservatively, with more than 60 percent of respondents calling it “very important” or “somewhat important” that their directors wear suits and sport no visible tattoos or piercings, it’s difficult to know whether these self-reported preferences would ultimately influence buying behavior if consumers were confronted with a visibly tattooed or pierced professional.

Furthermore, while real answers to this question will vary based on geographic area, rural versus urban setting and a number of other factors, many of the professionals with whom I spoke expressed concern over the impact of public perception on the career prospects of tattooed and pierced individuals. Argued Lauren Budrow, former president of Mid-America College of Funeral Service in Jeffersonville, Indiana: “If anything has changed in conservative areas of the Midwest, it’s that I’m seeing a lot more tattoos and gauges. It seems to me the problem is folks still want to express their individuality, and these are the same people who are enrolling in school. Now, I’m in an area where it’s less accepted, but more people have tattoos and piercings. I’m stuck. The profession will literally say, ‘Don’t be sending me people who have tattoos and piercings,’ but I’m supposed to find jobs for these people.”

“It’s been difficult. I’ve had people turn up their noses at me about my tattoos. The fact that they base their perception of my professionalism on my tattoos is really frustrating, but I have no intention of letting everybody’s opinion decide what I do.”

When asked whether she felt these perceptions were driven by internal (from internalized fears within the profession) or external factors (based on actual feedback from the community at large), Budrow said, “I think it’s being driven by the profession. I don’t know how much the public really cares. We’re going to the hospital, and our physicians, our surgeons and our nurses all have tattoos. Nobody cares because they’re concerned about our health. If I am offered the greatest surgeon in the world, I’m not going to turn him down because he has tattoos. We pick and choose based on what we think is appropriate. [People with tattoos and piercings are] very much more integrated into our society, but our profession is choosing to alienate [them].”

Andrea Lotz, a mortuary science student with tattoos on her arms, ankle, foot and collarbone, provided a counter-example, suggesting that it isn’t just funeral professionals who are prejudiced against visible forms of body modification. After

sharing experiences in which she received negative comments from family members regarding her tattoos, Lotz stated, “It’s been difficult. I’ve had people turn up their nose at me about my tattoos. The fact that they base their perception of my professionalism on my tattoos is really frustrating, but I have no intention of letting everybody’s opinion decide what I do.”

Rachael Risbell, a former student interviewed for the first article who recently passed her state board exam, described taking a more circumspect approach. Despite being able to fully cover her tattoos while at work, Risbell shared, “I feel like some of the families wouldn’t have a problem with it, but I don’t want to offend anyone. If I’m working with a little 90-year-old woman, I don’t want her to feel uncomfortable. If you’re dealing with people who are really emotional and sensitive, you don’t want to be the one thing that throws them over the edge.”

Risbell may be on to something, as a 2015 survey conducted by Salary.com revealed that the older you are, the less tolerant you become regarding tattoos, particularly in professional settings. According to the survey: “Not surprisingly, people 18 to 25 were the most accepting of tattoos in the office, with just 22% claiming they are inappropriate. That percentage jumps in each age group, maxing out at 63% of people age 60 and older finding tattoos objectionable at work.” Despite that, the report goes on to suggest that these attitudes are beginning to shift, thanks in large part to millennials and other younger (and more likely tattooed or pierced) workers taking more prominent positions within many organizations as their careers advance.

Ultimately, evidence on whether internal concerns over hiring tattooed or pierced directors come from specific experiences or imagined prejudices is inconclusive (and again, likely to vary based on region and setting). That said, however, while many of the subjects interviewed for this piece described going to great lengths to cover their tattoos or remove their piercings while at work, their experiences raised another question: How are funeral directors who sport visible tattoos and piercings perceived within their communities while enjoying their personal time?

Private Versus Professional Lives

Imagine you’re sitting at a bar when a heavily tattooed gentleman sits down next to you. In polite conversation, it arises that he’s employed as a director at the local ABC Funeral Home. Do you, as a member of the public, now automatically associate tattoos – and the various stigmas that go along with them – with the funeral home itself? And if so, are you more likely to avoid working with that firm in the future?

That’s a question many in the industry are trying to answer for themselves. Argues Jzyk S. Ennis, Ph.D., funeral service education instructor at Jefferson State Community College in Birmingham, Alabama: “The question we have to deal with here is students will say, ‘Well, that’s on my personal time;

they can't tell me what to do with my personal time.' And while that's true, you can't detach yourself from the funeral home. When you walk down the street, people identify you as the funeral director first and by name second. You're immediately affiliated to the firm first, and you're representing the firm 24/7."

Unsurprisingly, this sentiment doesn't sit well with many students and current practitioners, particularly those in younger generations. Stated Lotz: "I don't cover my tattoos when I'm not at work. My boss has made comments to me a few times about how we have to uphold the image of the funeral home, but if I want to go out to dinner and have a glass of wine in a short-sleeved T-shirt and shorts, that should be okay. I don't want to be disrespectful, but I also want to keep my personal life mine."

Certainly there should be distinctions made between the responsible director having a glass of wine with her family while out in public and an irresponsible director – tattooed or not – behaving publicly in a drunken, boorish manner. The problem arises when we conflate having visible body modifications with inappropriate behavior. Budrow explored this thought further: "We have equated tattoos and piercings with unprofessionalism, but there are plenty of other unprofessional behaviors out there. We've made exceptions for a lot of other negative behaviors as long as people look the way we expect them to. But the second a person has a tattoo or piercing, we link the two and say, 'That's a bad hire' because of the tattoo."

Shifts in Other Industries

Perhaps the best way to understand the potential impact embracing more visibly tattooed and/or pierced directors could have on the funeral profession is to look at other companies and industries that have undergone similar shifts. Coffee giant Starbucks, for instance, updated its formerly anti-tattoo dress code policy to a more inclusive approach October 20, 2014. Today, the company's tattoo policy reads, "We want customers to focus on you, not your body art. Tattoos are allowed, but not on your face or throat. Treat tattoos as you treat speech – you can't swear, make hateful comments or lewd jokes in the workplace; neither can your tattoos." The chain's customers, it appears, agree with the new approach (or at least do not disagree with it strongly enough to take their business elsewhere); stock prices for the company have increased from \$36.77 on October 17, 2014, to \$58.46 on February 23, 2016.

Since Starbucks' transition, two other major chains – PetSmart and Jimmy Johns – have followed suit, with Jimmy Johns founder Jimmy John Liataud stating, "I've learned from the best and now I'm taking their lead and my team has updated the JJ's dress code. It's time. It's time to focus on perfect sandwiches and serving our customers." As both the Starbucks and Jimmy Johns decisions came as the result of employee petitions arguing for more relaxed standards, it's clear that there is broad support from workers at all levels for policies

that allow for more flexibility in individual appearance and shift focus to the quality of the work being performed, not the look of the people doing it.

Certainly making sandwiches and serving coffee aren't perfect parallels to serving families in their hour of need. And while little public data exist on the way the public at large views tattooed or pierced directors, research has been conducted on another group working in similarly sensitive situations: nurses.

The problem arises when we conflate having visible body modifications with inappropriate behavior. "We've made exceptions for a lot of other negative behaviors out there, as long as people look the way we expect them to."

In July 2015, registered nurse Katreena Merrill, Ph.D., represented the College of Nursing at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, at the 26th International Nursing Research Congress, presenting a paper titled "Professional Dress vs. Employee Diversity: Patient Perceptions of Visible Tattoos and Facial Piercings." Merrill's research involved surveying hospital patients, family members and visitors in a rural hospital on 20 quantitative questions regarding professional dress and appearance in the healthcare field. The results of her paper concluded that most survey participants view nursing appearance as important and that both visible tattoos and facial piercings were considered common descriptors of unprofessional dress, a finding Merrill notes was more prevalent in older subjects (though she concludes that further research is needed in more diverse populations).

A Coming Labor Shortage

Interestingly, the question of whether or not funeral directors who sport visible body modifications would truly impact a firm's bottom line may ultimately be irrelevant. Some industry professionals believe a labor shortage is headed our way that will force funeral service's hand into taking on any qualified workers, regardless of personal appearance.

Gene Ogrodnik, president of Pittsburgh Institute of Mortuary Science, is one of these professionals. Based on his experience, he says, "What we're seeing across the country is that we're in the beginning stages of a real labor shortage, which is being created partially because enrollments at mortuary schools have been static for 20 years. We're also seeing an aging of the ownership, which tends to start to want to delegate duties in a way they wouldn't have before but are willing to do now that they're 75 years old and haven't sold their funeral homes."

When asked how he expects this labor shortage to play out in the deathcare profession, Ogrodnik said he believes the transition will be both quick and efficient. “I think the law of supply and demand is very perfect in terms of what has to be done, such as raise wages to accompany the scarce labor pool, which will bring people into the field. Funeral service has been laggard in that regard – in terms of keeping up with commensurate wage structures. We still have people in western Pennsylvania who are going to intern for \$18,000-\$25,000 a year. I think we’re starting to see this crunch now, but we’re going to really hit it hard in the next five years. I think it’s going to be that quick.”

Others aren’t so certain. Budrow expressed concern that the funeral industry’s current reluctance to accept those with controversial appearances could result in a lack of qualified professionals needed to fill positions in such a labor shortage. Speaking candidly, she argued: “The profession doesn’t recognize real talent when it’s hidden under tattoos. You can tell which students have gone through apprenticeships because they don’t have the same tattoos and piercings. You can tell that they’re already being told these things aren’t acceptable. That’s how they’re being weeded out.” Could weeding out potentially qualified professionals on the basis of appearance alone come back to confront owners and managers in the form of a labor shortage? It certainly seems possible.

Rob Lewis, the former mortuary student interviewed in last year’s article, may well be one of these students who’s been unfortunately weeded out. Since the first piece in this series came out, Lewis has taken a position working in a pathology lab, along with a classmate who also sports several tattoos. Though he is quick to acknowledge that his lack of a driver’s license has been a contributing factor to his inability to find work in the funeral profession, he shared experiencing negative feedback from managers and owners in the industry due to visible tattoos of the alphabet and daisies on his hands and neck.

“I checked around with different people in the area, but there’s definitely pushback for visible tattoos. At my graduation, I was the speaker in front of 1,500 people. There wasn’t a hold-up from the education side, but there was from the funeral homes. I wish you didn’t have to do an internship to get your license because then I could be a funeral director. I can’t get my license because I can’t get an internship because people don’t like the way I look.”

Ennis offered a pragmatic take on this challenge. “It’s your body, it’s your choice what you do, but any choice has a consequence,” he said. “We just try to help students mitigate and navigate employment. We try to fill a need because there’s a need for licensed workers. What will be interesting is finding where the common ground is between covering up tattoos and body art and just accepting them.” Echoing this sentiment was new funeral director Risbell, who suggested, “It would be nice if everyone was accepting of the way different people looked, but that’s not the world we live in. I feel bad for people who are getting into the industry and who don’t have a chance at getting a job, but it is a job where you’re dealing with the public.”

In truth, returning to the subject has left me with more questions than answers on this subject. Are we unfairly punishing those who make the decision to undergo body modification at a young age, before they’re fully aware of the day-to-day requirements and social mores of a profession to which they feel called? Should the fact that we’re educating students we know won’t be able to find work call into question our education practices, hiring priorities or both? While these answers won’t be given by one voice or become immediately apparent, it’ll certainly be fascinating to watch the impact of shifting public perception and potential labor shortages on the industry’s acceptance of those with tattoos and piercings in years to come.

Sarah Rickerd is owner of Carry Your Heart, a memorial jewelry and gifts company supporting bereaved parents.

A Day in the Life: Four Funeral Professionals Offer Advice to Mortuary Students

By Sarah Rickerd

Mortuary science students enter the profession for many different reasons. For those raised in multigeneration funeral home families, becoming a funeral director is a natural, expected next step. Others feel called to funeral service, either as part of a lifelong passion or as a career change from fields that offer fewer tangible ways to support families in need.

It is after graduation, however, that scholarly theories become practice and many newly minted funeral directors experience a disconnect between what they expected their work lives would be like and what they actually encounter.

Rehearsing arrangement conferences, for instance, can only account for a fraction of real-life responses families will offer when facing the death of a loved one. Others find the 24/7 nature of deathcare work to be more challenging than anticipated.

To help outgoing students develop more realistic expectations about their future work, *Director.edu* reached out to four working professionals with a variety of experience levels and backgrounds. Each was asked three questions, and their answers are presented below (with minimal edits for clarity

and consistency) to better prepare future funeral directors for the realities of the profession.

Kurt D. Bass, Funeral Director, Bass and Avant Funeral Homes

What was the biggest surprise for you when transitioning from school to practice?

“I grew up in the funeral business with a small family firm, so I already knew about the work schedule, the way to carry myself, the prep room ins and outs, etc. My biggest surprise was how connected I would get to people. I have made some very dear friends by being able to care for their families during their hardest times. I have been able to grow and connect more with the people I knew before being able to serve and to the people I didn’t know, I have been able to develop a relationship with them that lasts far after they leave the funeral home.



What one thing do graduating students need to know about working in the field?

It isn’t easy. There are sleepless nights, whether from working all night or from bringing work home with you. There are times when your family will have to be put on the back burner for work. There are days when you spend all morning shoveling snow just to take off your boots and coveralls at 12:45 to walk the preachers down for a 1 p.m. funeral. You will miss family parties, dinners with friends, ballgames and whatever else you see as important. But... it will be the most rewarding work of your life.

When taking their first jobs, what can students do to be as successful as possible?

Do *whatever* needs to be done. Don’t think that just because you are a licensed or dual-licensed person that any work is meant for someone else, even if it is their job. When I went to college, I worked at a large firm – 800-plus a year – as a funeral assistant. My dad (with more than 45 years of experience) told me that on the phone on my way to work on my first day. It

was the best thing I could hear. You will show your manager, boss and even families that you will go the extra mile to make the funeral home a better place and serve everyone better.

I want people to know this work is not just dressing up and showing care. It is so much more. I’ve always listed my priorities as this:

1. God
2. Family
3. Friends
4. Work.

But more often than not, work steps ahead of all of the others (missing church, parties, home late, etc). Being the best funeral director you can be is more than a caring nod and a nice suit!

Chastin Brinkley, Weeks’ Funeral Homes

What was the biggest surprise for you when transitioning from school to practice?

I worked in a funeral home prior to going to mortuary school, so I had a pretty good idea of what to expect.

What one thing do graduating students need to know about working in the field?

There are two major issues graduating students need to know when they enter the field. You don’t always get to go home at 5 o’clock. For large funeral homes that have a night shift, going home at 5 won’t be an issue. Many times, you must stay late to embalm or go home to eat, then go back to the funeral home to embalm because the next day you are already scheduled to meet with a family and work a service. Some nights when you are on call, you don’t get any sleep because of multiple deaths. Just when you fall back to sleep, the answering service notifies you of another death. And just because you did not get any sleep does not mean you don’t have to work next day. You will still be expected to be sharp the next morning when helping a family plan a service.

There also can be high levels of stress. For example, on Monday morning, your secretary calls in sick so you’re by yourself. You are doing your best to type up an obituary to make the print deadline in a few minutes. The phone rings. The person on the other end is reporting a death and has a lot of questions. Then someone walks in the front door obviously distraught. Perhaps they are one of the family members who experienced a death during the night. Another example of high stress is when you are making funeral arrangements with a family and the adult children of the deceased are arguing. They will not agree with each other on anything, nor will they make any concessions. The daughter in charge of the finances says she will not pay you unless her siblings agree to her wishes.

When taking their first jobs, what can students do to be as successful as possible?

Students should invest in their wardrobe. A well-dressed and

-groomed individual is a must. Looking professional will give you and client families confidence. A sloppy appearance may make a family second-guess their choice of funeral home. Imagine yourself making funeral arrangements for a loved one. The director sitting across from you has smudged glasses, clothes that are not tailored or are out of style, unmanicured fingernails and scuffed shoes. Are you going to have confidence that the deceased will look better than the funeral director presenting himself or herself to you? Probably not. When the funeral home at which you are employed has an opening for a licensed director, will they consider you a well-dressed and -groomed employee or will they look elsewhere?

Take notes! There's a lot of information to learn and memorize for a new intern. Most directors understand the mechanics of arranging funerals but may set themselves up for heartache by not having access to critical information at the arrangement conference. For instance, you arrange for a church service and tell the family you will have the casket arrive early for viewing. On the day of the service, you arrive at the church and discover that there are six steps impeding your entrance. You told the family the pallbearers don't need to arrive until 20 minutes before the service, the part-time employee driving the flower van has a bad back and the church employee is elderly. Guests are starting to arrive for viewing and the casket is still in the coach.

In another example, you arranged for an out-of-town graveside service. You spoke to the cemetery caretaker who is providing the grave opening and closing and concrete grave liner. When you arrive at the graveside for the service, the grave is dug and the liner has been set; however, there is no lowering device or tent. The caretaker tells you that the funeral director always orders the lowering device and tent from the local vault company. Could these rookie mistakes have been avoided? Certainly. Some funeral homes have a notebook that contains important information. If the funeral home does not have such notes, you need to start your own. Record information such as which churches have steps, which cemeteries expect you to rent lowering devices and how much advance notice the cemetery needs to schedule a service, etc. Client families employ us for our knowledge and guidance, and it is incumbent on us to know what is needed. A knowledgeable employee is a valuable employee.

Jenni Bryant, Smith Funeral & Cremation Service

What was the biggest surprise for you when transitioning from school to practice?

The biggest surprise for me was that I didn't know nearly as much as I thought I did! School prepares you for the National Board Exam and gives you some information about the business, but by no means was I prepared for everyday in the funeral home. I had a lot to learn and was very thankful to be in such a great funeral home with people who wanted to teach me."

What one thing do graduating students need to know about working in the field?

Some days are hard. That is the simple way to put it. It is no cake walk; you are going to laugh, cry and be mad as hell. But just know that you are helping people at a time in their lives when they need it most. It is also the most rewarding job. People will not always sing your praises, but you have to have self-pride and know that you did a good job and did it to the best of your abilities."

When taking their first jobs, what can students do to be as successful as possible?

Listen. Take it all in! Hopefully, you will find a job at a funeral home that is excited about a new generation coming in and will be willing to take time to teach you and help mold you into a great funeral director. Have that inner drive to be the best and do it!

Dannon Todd, Todd Funeral Centre & Crematory

What was the biggest surprise for you when transitioning from school to practice?

There weren't many surprises, to be honest. I am a fourth-generation funeral director. However, I served the first half of my internship at a firm with two other interns who had zero experience in the profession before school. The surprise will more than likely be that as a newly licensed intern/apprentice, you will be expected to hit the ground running. Many funeral directors don't mind training a new person, but there is no better way to train than being out making removals, meeting with families and embalming/restoring the departed. Don't expect to be coddled for very long. Your help is very much needed or you wouldn't have been hired in the first place.

What one thing do graduating students need to know about working in the field?

Students need to realize that the job won't always be holding someone's hand and telling them that everything is going to be okay. People grieve in so many different ways, and it is wise to keep your eyes open. Pay attention to the directors and how they interact with families and handle abnormal situations. Talk with them about how they greet families at the door, how they prefer to answer the telephone, the types of information they give on the phone. Verbiage is actually a huge thing funeral directors have that is quite unique to their individual firm."

They also need to be prepared to spend a lot of time at work. This is a 24/7 profession.

When taking their first jobs, what can students do to be as successful as possible?

It is important to know that there are loads of jobs available to newly minted interns/funeral directors. The ability to relocate for a job is what will help ensure that a new funeral director can be successful. I have said many times that there are three types of students in mortuary school:

1.) Students with jobs waiting after they graduate and pass the National Board Exam who just need to make a phone call or go home to the family business.

2.) Students who do well in school and will have to go searching for a job after graduation and boards. They are usually well equipped to handle the work – they just need to get their foot in the door.

3.) Students who go to school and either graduate or don't finish. These students never make it into the profession (as a funeral director, anyway).

I personally recommend that the first category do some or all of their internship at a firm that isn't part of the family firm. It

will let them see how things work, and they can be completely objective in their practices.

There will be some nervousness and apprehension at times. That's a good thing; it's what teaches you to problem-solve. Not every case is going to be easy. You will miss something. You will get a dead body that just doesn't embalm well. You will get a family that is very demanding. Do your best to be the best and offer the best service you can.

There will be one or two out of 10 families you serve that no matter what you do, they will not be satisfied (or just one member of that family won't be). That's okay, it's part of being a funeral director. Get up every morning and ask yourself, 'What can I do to help someone today?'

Sarah Rickerd is owner of Carry Your Heart, a memorial jewelry and gifts company supporting bereaved parents.

Understanding What Each Generation Brings

By Lacy Robinson

The conversation usually starts like this: "It's not working out between us. And the reason this isn't working out is that we believe we need a more experienced person in your position. Since we know it's easier to find a job while still employed, you can remain a paid employee for the next two months."

Or sometimes it begins like this: "We said we would give this a trial run for a year and revisit where we are when the year was up. I'm happy we've been able to help you start a career in funeral service, but we just don't have the means to keep you on board."

George has been having these types of conversations for the last 50 years. He's owned Smith Funeral Home since his father died in 1962. While George appreciates the help of employees, he feels like no one quite lives up to his standards or, especially, his dad's standards.

He does have one employee who's been with him for nearly 20 years. His name is Michael. He's a great employee who always wants to put in the extra work. For the past five years, Michael has really been putting the pressure on George. He feels his loyalty to the funeral home should make him a prime candidate for ownership when George is finally ready to hang his hat. But George doesn't think Michael can handle it.

There's also Jennifer, who was hired by George and Michael because they thought she could be both funeral director and secretary. But Jennifer finds herself doing mostly secretarial work and cleaning, and her frustration is increasing daily.

Then there's the revolving door of millennials George and Mi-



chael keep hiring. The last one was Jason. He was a good kid, eager to be a funeral director and embalmer. Jason tried to convince George that he needed a better website and needed to be on social media. Jennifer was on board, Michael was so-so. George didn't want anything to do with technology even when Jason explained how he could help keep costs down. Jason is just one of several millennials George has taken on to help. Unfortunately, he just doesn't see anything long term with them.

It appears from the outside that everything is picture perfect and everybody gets along. Truth be told, the surveys and thank-you notes they receive from families are all very positive, indicating that what they're doing is working. In George's mind, changes to the running of the funeral home aren't necessary because families seem very satisfied.

Behind the scenes, however, it's a completely different story. Every single day they're going at it. Tensions rise, arguments

occur and they each go home frustrated, dreading the start of a new day.

This is reality, and many of you can relate or will eventually relate in some way to the challenges George, Michael, Jennifer and Jason are experiencing. While it would be very unusual for members of all four generations to agree on practices and procedures across the board, the reality is that it can be expected that tensions will rise and miscommunication will occur within the workplace. This is the first time in American history that all four generations are working together.

Traditionalists (1922-1943)

Baby Boomers (1944-1964)

Generation X (1965-1981)

Millennials (1982-1999)

What does a generation gap feel like? Well, a millennial funeral director may get frustrated that traditionalists or baby boomers aren't quick on the computer. Those same traditionalists and baby boomers could get irritated that younger employees appear to be rushing through tasks and attempting to do 10 things at once. People get annoyed, patience is tested and that generation gap continues to widen.

The reality is that it can be expected that tensions will rise and miscommunication will occur in the workplace. This is the first time in American history that all four generations are working together.

According to Haydn Shaw, a leading expert in multigenerational teams and author of *Sticking Points: How to Get 4 Generations Working Together in the 12 Places They Come Apart*, employees have approached the generations with hesitation and uncertainty about how to build relationships.

The first approach is a complete disregard for the other generations. This could be an owner seeking to employ only traditionalists or baby boomers and not giving Generation Xers or millennials a chance. Or perhaps a manager often thinks to himself, "If they would just do what I ask them to and do things the way we have always done them, there would be no tension." This negative attitude toward the different generations only contributes to the generation gaps.

Compromising on big issues is an approach with the intention for everyone to get along. For example, the traditionalist funeral home owner doesn't see the point in the funeral home having a website. The Generation X director thinks the funeral home not only should have a website but one with all of the bells and whistles, including a virtual funeral home tour,

staff pictures and bios, e-commerce capabilities, video tributes, even virtual candle lighting. Negotiations take place. The result is a two-page website with a few pictures, directions to the funeral home and contact information. Both parties are still unsatisfied.

The last approach is trying to change employees. Changing Generation X and millennials to be more like baby boomers and traditionalists creates more stressful situations. Generation X and millennials will struggle when they work independently with client families as they attempt to do what they were taught and try to develop their own unique skill sets.

Working effectively with co-workers means having a proactive attitude and the desire to get to know the people on your team. Getting to know them doesn't mean finding out their favorite college team or favorite vacation spot. It's knowing their strengths and expected behavioral traits. More importantly, it is understanding that experiences in their lives have shaped their behavior and strengths. The key is learning about their strengths and understanding how they can incorporate their current skill sets in services provided to families.

Below are the expected strengths and behaviors for each generation:

Traditionalists: loyal, disciplined, patient, formal

Baby Boomers: optimistic, challenge decisions, work efficiently, competitive

Generation X: independent, tech savvy, accept diversity, value balance

Millennials: multitaskers, ambitious, sociable, confident.

These skills may or may not sound familiar. Maybe the baby boomer employee lacks confidence and focus or the millennial is not a team player; all he or she does is play on the internet. Shaw says it best: "As human beings, we are heavily influenced by the environment in which we are raised yet are unique and distinct and ultimately a product of our choices."

Shaw is essentially saying that an individual may carry characteristics from all four generations. It's important to keep an open mind when identifying an individual's skill set. They may have skills completely in line with their generation and carry a few extras that could be consistent with a different generation.

Bridging the Gap

There's a tendency to focus on differences and perceived weaknesses. The key is to identify the strengths of each individual. Time spent focusing on strengths and how they can be incorporated to reach goals will bridge the generation gap. Make the decision to focus on the positive skill set of each individual. Take a step back, observe co-workers and ask yourself these questions:

- What can he or she do better than anyone else at the funeral home?
- In what unique way does he or she make a family's experience positive?

- How can I learn from him or her to enhance my skills?

Resolving Conflict

Focusing on strengths is just one part of working together successfully. Being prepared to resolve conflict in the most effective manner is the second part. As tensions rise or conflicts occur, give careful thought as to why this conflict exists before trying to solve the problem.

Ask these questions: Will the outcome of this conflict affect a family's experience? Does this conflict exist because of my personal opinions and my expectation of certain behavior? If personal opinion is the reason for the conflict, move forward in exploring how one's thoughts can be changed or how you can change so the conflict no longer occurs.

If a family's experience is affected, define in what ways they are affected and work to understand the reasons why this conflict exists and how certain events may have shaped their behavior.

Here is an example conflict to consider: The Generation X general manager is known for big ideas and progressive thinking. When asking for thoughts and opinions during team meetings, the traditionalist funeral director seems hesitant and timid. It's easy to assume that the traditionalist is hesitant because he or she is not open to new ideas and change. But in understanding the traditionalist generation and their past experiences, it helps to know that in the height of their careers, a younger employee leading team meetings was unheard of and employees not in a management role were not part of important meetings or were called on to offer insight. If they were involved, they knew their role was simply to listen.

Solution: The Generation X general manager should begin the meeting by explaining the agenda and defining the roles for participants. To encourage interaction, communicate the value of participants' input and feedback. Traditionalist funeral directors may need permission as motivation to share their opinions. The goal is to help traditionalists feel comfortable in sharing their thoughts prior to the start of the meeting.

Engage Everyone on the Team

Engaging team members is simply ensuring that everyone gives their maximum effort every day at the funeral home. This helps everyone feel involved and part of the success of the firm. To engage everyone on the team, take time to discover each person's full commitment to the funeral home. This involves a real conversation with each employee to explore just how motivated and committed he or she is.

Shaw recommends asking questions that explore the employees' professional goals and how they feel about rules and regulations or training and development. Explore their opinions on giving and receiving feedback, as well as how they

feel about maintaining a fun and friendly environment at the funeral home. By asking questions that discover their commitment level to the funeral home, the generation gap will begin to narrow.

Continue to engage employees by providing honest feedback to each person, which reinforces positive behavior. And remember, every generation values feedback, they just prefer to get it in different ways.

Continue to engage employees by providing honest feedback to each person. Whether you are an owner, manager or co-worker, providing feedback to others reinforces positive behavior. Traditionalists may not ask for comments but appreciate a subtle acknowledgment. They really only expect feedback when something is wrong. Baby boomers want to know where they stand and prefer annual performance appraisals. When providing feedback to boomers, remember these two things: Schedule it and document it. Generation X will be the least likely generation to request feedback. They prefer for their manager or co-worker to keep things simple and say what they're feeling. Millennials want feedback as often as you can give it. Without feedback, they may mistake silence for disapproval. Remember, every generation values feedback, they just prefer to get it in different ways.

Being a mentor to co-workers can quickly bridge the generation gap. Take the initiative to work alongside someone from a different generation. Work closely with him or her during visitation hours or in co-directing a funeral. Approach each mentoring opportunity with an open mind and be ready to learn. Consider what skills should be shared as well. Time spent in getting to know each generation and being each other's mentor will help prevent future conflict.

Getting to know each generation and discovering the strengths of everyone on the team takes time and effort. Those who benefit the most from this effort will be the families you serve. A positive working relationship with every employee will be motivation to put client-families first each day. Attention to detail will improve as employees feel empowered to make the best choices and decisions. This is the result of being fully engaged every day and contributing to a positive working environment.

Lacy Robinson is director of member development for the National Funeral Directors Association.



Don't Fear the Retort

By Mike Nicodemus

The year is 1974 and I'm about to graduate from Pittsburgh Institute of Mortuary Science. I learned so much about anatomy, pathology, embalming chemistry and restorative art,

but one thing I didn't learn much about was cremation.

All of the students were well aware of cremation, but there wasn't a whole lot of information out there for us to know what cremation was all about. Not too many funeral directors in the 60s and 70s wanted to talk about cremation because it certainly wasn't the most popular method of disposition, and to be honest, they didn't like it. It was just a fad passing through.

Back then, cremation consisted of picking up the deceased, holding the body in the funeral home (without refrigeration) and transporting the remains to the crematory. There was no embalming, no services, no nothing, really. Funeral directors assumed that's all the family wanted because if they had wanted embalming and services, they would have chosen burial.

It's now 2017 and I want to share a little secret I learned years ago: Learn all you can about cremation. Why? Just in case you haven't heard, 2015 was the first year in which cremation surpassed burial as the preferred method of disposition.

NFDA projects that the national cremation rate will be 57 percent by 2020, which means that for every 10 death calls you receive, six of them will be cremation. Are you ready to answer the questions that will come your way? How long does it take? How hot does it get? Or, one of my favorites, does the body have to be embalmed if we chose cremation?

Let's explore an answer to the last question. When the family asked if they needed embalming, the most common answer years ago, and unfortunately even today, given by the funeral director is, "Are you looking for a direct cremation?"

Where did that term come from? It came from funeral directors, not families. If I've said this once, I've said it a thousand times: Cremation families know one thing – they want cremation. Other than that, they don't know what they want.

We have to be able to provide answers to families' questions when it comes to cremation. How do we do that? Read, read and read some more. With NFDA publications like *The Director* magazine, *Memorial Business Journal* and now this publication for students, there's plenty of information out there to keep you current on many cremation issues. Sign up for webinars, attend conventions, do whatever it takes to find out all you can about cremation.

Now, I'm certainly not saying you should ignore subjects near and dear to my heart, such as embalming, anatomy, microbiology, physiology or restorative art, but I'm saying don't treat cremation like it doesn't exist or as if it's a fad. It does exist, and it's not a fad!

What if you're in a state with a 70 percent cremation rate or higher. There are more than 10 of them out there, so the chances that you will be seeing cremation families your first week on your new job have increased greatly.

Ask any director if it takes less time to make arrangements with a family that has chosen cremation over burial and you will be sure to hear a resounding no – it takes more time.

Cremation has become litigious, and in the United States, the average settlement in cremation cases gone wrong is \$350,000 to \$400,000. Last year, I conducted cremation training programs in two countries and half of the states in this country, and I can unequivocally tell you that we still have a number of funeral directors who don't place enough importance on cremation documentation.

Just last October, I received calls from three attorneys from different parts of the country who were looking to see if I could help them as an expert witness in the cremation lawsuits they were handling. Three in one month!

I could speak about litigation for weeks, but for the sake of not taking up the entire publication, let's finish with a few tips on cremation arranging. Get to know your families. Ask questions of them about the deceased, not just "You want a basic cremation?" Try this: "Has anyone explained your options when it comes to selecting cremation?" Or "How do you plan on celebrating your loved one's life?" Don't ask leading questions; let the family decide based on the information you provide them. For example, don't say: "We offer direct cremation if that's what you're looking for."

You're the funeral director; you lead the conversation and ask the questions. But don't just make it a Q&A session, make it personal. And be ready to answer this question: "We saw that one of your competitors offers cremation for \$895. Your fee is \$3,295. Aren't you both doing the same thing?"

There are funeral directors who struggle with this question, so don't feel bad. Answer by communicating what makes you better, what makes you different. Let the families you serve see that you're the cremation expert in your area.

Mike Nicodemus is vice president of cremation services for the National Funeral Directors Association.

Find Your Mentor

By Heather Braatz

My half-brother, who I haven't seen since my father's funeral in the 1990s, recently reached out to me via LinkedIn to congratulate me on a new position. He wrote:

"As always, get yourself someone in the business to be your mentor... someone you can talk to and get good advice from and someone who is ready to help you succeed by making introductions and sharing contacts. Figure out who that is, don't be shy and ask if they will help you in that capacity. It is very flattering to have someone ask for mentoring help, so the chances that you'll get a mentor are easier than you think. In the early years, it is what you know that gets you advancements. As you enter your middle career years, it is who you know that will move you forward."

Part of the struggle of being a young funeral director is landing a job at the perfect place. Whether that exists or not depends on you and your disposition. It helps to be humble yet modest. Although most of us are eager to prove our worth, we also have to prove that we're always open to learning more. I love working at NFDA, which says a lot considering that I have had the great privilege of working at some pretty excellent places. (I've worked at some really terrible ones, too, but that's a story for another day.) Let us focus on how to find your mentor and how that relates to doing your job and doing it well.

Many times, a firm may not have the time or personnel to make a mortuary student into a funeral director. As previously covered in Dan Welch's article "10 Items to Consider When Looking for an Apprenticeship" (*Director.edu* Fall 2016), it is important to find an employer who will take the time to train you. Nonetheless, prepare to hear the saying "trial by fire" more often than you'd like, as there are some things you must learn simply by doing them. There is some merit in proving oneself by this method, but it comes with some growing pains! Being able to watch and learn from a funeral director who has a couple of decades under his or her belt is preferable.



I started out my funeral service career in a small, slow cemetery, followed by a high-volume, contemporary cremation station where I became licensed. I probably shouldn't have been as nervous as I was when I had my second interview for a director's position at a corporate combo location. I sweat profusely and stuttered awkwardly whenever I tried to say the word "disposition." I suppose some of the interviewers (the location manager and funeral home's three directors) must have found it endearing, save one.

"You don't know the first thing about how to really be a funeral director," she said. She was a gruff, mature, wise woman who had worked at this particular funeral home before I was



born, had managed a high-volume, direct-cremation provider before I learned how to drive and generally scared the bejesus out of me.



Who was she to tell me I didn't know anything about funeral directing? I had worked more than 100 witness cremations, received my fair share of red envelopes and lumpia, wiped up every color of purge imaginable, was a certified funeral celebrant, had met with 400 families last year and gotten my average arrangement down to 45 minutes and even booked some celebrations of life at swanky historic mansions.

But I soon came to find out that she was absolutely right. I had never really directed a funeral or taken charge of the situation as the leader. I had ordered flowers and booked events at venues, sure, but any hotel concierge can do that. To be honest, most of the 400 families with whom I had met just needed me to "burn and return" so they could have dad's ashes for when they scattered them off the edge of the ferry – without me. I could count on one hand the times I had asked a family if they wanted to witness the lowering of the casket.

Wise Woman, who I later found out had served Courtney Love after the death of her husband and had basically dealt with every difficult funeral case in the book, generously became my mentor. She walked me through the basics of how to keep organized, the importance of not rushing through the details like an impatient, know-it-all kid and the finer points of how to make a service "pretty" by slowing down and paying attention. She took long, laborious notes, jokingly in the event that were she ever hit by a bus, anyone would be able to pick up her service file and know exactly how to run the ceremony based on her notes, penned in cursive. Even though she was a lot stronger than me (probably from decades of lifting obese cases), she let me take her nights on call for removals and eventually trusted me to cover most of her services (her ankles were starting to bother her). It was not long until everyone from the removal technicians to the most senior embalmer chided me as being "someone to watch out for; [Wise Woman] has this kid under her wing!"

For most of the services she scheduled, she requested a specific assistant, whom everyone called Mac. Mac was self-professed “old school” and had started out in the limousine profession, worked celebrity services and somehow landed in my neck of the woods through some stroke of good luck. He was revered in the profession, but most of the young apprentices and mortuary students avoided him like the plague because he would constantly provide constructive criticism of their methods. He liked me because I let him know that I had been told by Wise Woman that I had donkey brains, and if he could tell me what to do, I wouldn’t argue.

Was that a smart move! Always admit to people who know more than you that you are new and out of your league when it’s true. They love to help! Mac taught me how to instruct pallbearers to walk, drive and hold on to a casket in such a way that it would look good in photos – hand closest to the casket on the rail, free hand atop the casket or pall and face each other when you are squeezing through a narrow doorway or lifting in or out of a coach. If everybody doesn’t have gloves, you better have extras in your pockets. If you don’t have pockets, you’re buying the wrong type of suit. He taught me how to tell the pallbearers to remove their gloves and place them on the casket in such a way that they would look good enough to photograph and was always on point with the head counts of how many loose roses we would need for everybody to throw one into the grave (plus singles to take home to press for the next of kin).

A family I once served told me, “Serendipity is finding something good without looking for it.” I wouldn’t go so far as to say that my life and career in funeral service has been serendipitous but perhaps more of a “series of fortunate events.”

One of the best occurrences that worked out for me was when our general manager was transferred and we got a new manager who – although he wasn’t generational – had basically grown up in a cemetery and had been newly appointed to the State Funeral and Embalming Board. He was a wealth of knowledge, and I was sure to annoy him into a state of despair with my constant barrage of questions.



Much to my surprise, the new boss was patient beyond his years. I distinctly remember one of the first times he walked into the floral room and heaved a heavy sigh.

“What’s wrong, Boss?” I asked because I’m pesky and have never learned to mind my own business.

“Apparently it’s not common practice here to stack the flower stands correctly? They nest for a reason – so you can grab them all and go.” He proceeded to stack them from tallest to shortest, grabbed the whole bunch of them by the bottom rung and walked away.

Well, go tell it on Mount Sinai, I had found my rabbi! Boss

mentored me on the finer points of how to calm down angry families so they would not want to sue us. He taught me how to correctly display a flag on an open casket – with three layers – and to use your hand to measure the (10-inch) folds. He taught me how to fix dry lips that were creeping open, blend makeup (seriously, better than most YouTube videos) and, most importantly, built an unwavering sense of trust in the funeral home that we – funeral directors, sales and grounds – all must be honest and upfront with each other, with client families and the community. It was pretty much everything I had been looking for in a boss. I wouldn’t call it serendipity; it was more like being in the right place at the right time.



Whenever one of us troublemaking directors or overly creative family services counselors would run into Boss’ office, knocking on the door frame while simultaneously blurting out a request for permission (or forgiveness) for a family to do something unique – “The family I’m serving comprises of a bunch of hunters, and they want to spray paint the casket and vault camouflage in the parking lot tomorrow morning. Please, Boss?” – his answer, invariably, was, “Is it legal?” And if so, we could proceed.

One of the worst funeral fouls I ever made was booking a memorial service so far in advance that by the time it rolled around, I realized, only hours before it started, that I had failed to book the catering. I ran into the boss’ office, yelling before I even got close enough to knock, “Boss, I messed up! I didn’t book catering! This family is going to be so mad!”

Boss told me to get my coat and meet him at his truck. I jumped in and he calmly asked me to call the caterer for a shopping list. He then asked if I had a grocery store preference (they were across the street from one another). I picked the one with the better bakery.

“What’s my budget, Boss?”

“Whatever it takes,” he sighed.

After about 20 minutes, I had enough brownies, cookies, miniature cupcakes, fruit salad and pretty Chinet platters to put the caterers to shame. The family was extra pleased that we had more options than what had been on the catering menu (this was mainly because I couldn’t find chocolate-dipped strawberries but did find strawberries, chocolate, skewers and a microwaveable bowl). When I confessed that I had forgotten to book the caterer, I never would have guessed they would be so happy to hear about my mistake. Needless to say, Boss didn’t have to remind me to be more careful about double-checking my vendor bookings, and I have fanatically triple-checked all arrangements, professional and otherwise, ever since.

It’s rare to find a group of people that get on well together and are happy to call their co-workers their “work family.” It’s also

rare to find a manager who will tell you, “You’ve got this,” help you hone good work habits and treat you like an asset. This may not be an easy or quick task. Like me, it may take you a few years and locations. Your mentor may not even work at the same funeral home you do; he or she may be a retired director or a professor.



My old location manager, Amanda McElreath, a funeral mentor in her own right, said it most succinctly: “Finding a mentor to navigate through the politics, systems and customs of this business is essential. I’ve had a lot of foot-in-mouth moments talking with families. You can’t expect to always say the most eloquent, meaningful thing to a family. Just be real, be yourself, and the key is listening to what they have to say. I’ve dropped caskets, put dents in the coach and nearly set the funeral home on fire – twice. Don’t be afraid to admit when you’ve made a mistake. It happens to all of us.”

It’s my hope that you can find whatever it is you’re looking for, but remember that it helps to be particular and work toward being in the right place at the very least. This may mean moving out of-state or even to a different country, depending on what suits you. It also requires taking a hard look at yourself and being honest about what kind of funeral director you want to become.

Ask yourself what is important to you in a place of employment? Quiz your interviewer about the firm’s mission, its vision, its ethics, its whistleblower policy, its training methods, etc. Make a list of what floats your boat and what is an absolute deal-breaker before you fill out a W-9. And once you get the job, find your mentor.

Heather Braatz is professional development coordinator for the National Funeral Directors Association.

Charting Your Course

By Joseph Marsaglia

Welcome and congratulations as you join the ranks of thousands of students enrolled in one of 59 accredited mortuary programs in the country. The start of your education can be quite intimidating, to say the least. And regardless of the program in which you’re enrolled, one certainty is the hard work and dedication you will be putting forth. No one can tell you it’s going to be easy.

Whether you have just begun your education or are near completion, do not get discouraged. This is one of the most exciting and memorable times of your life. The education you receive coupled with the friendship of your classmates will last forever. Your training is to assure society that deathcare is needed and is in good hands.

One suggestion is that you “make it hurt now,” meaning that the sweat and tears you put into your education will be worth the hard work. Yes, sacrifices have to be made, but always keep in mind that you have to start somewhere. Military generals started at the bottom ranks, your teachers worked their way to where they are now, and great funeral directors/embalmers started in your shoes. If they can do it, you can, too. Thirty-four years ago, I was one of a few mortuary students whose family was not affiliated with a funeral home. Never could I have imagined as a student that I would go on to earn my doctorate and be named dean and chief operating officer of the school I attended.

You are the future of our profession. You are the future officers of your state and county associations. You are future state board members. You are future preceptors and educators.

In a sense, your education is more intense than those who graduated before you. Curriculum standards have increased and federal regulations have focused on funeral service. Some old-timers may have difficulty adjusting to these changes, but you are being entrenched in them.

Regardless of where we practice, continuing professional education is a means of staying current with the many changes and issues facing our industry. Not only is it required by state boards, it is expected by the general public. The next continuing education program you attend should be with the intention of *wanting* to be there, not just having to attend.

Talk about change – look around you. With 62 percent of enrollment in mortuary schools being female, is this still a male-dominated profession?

Your well-rounded education will be an amazing asset for you in your career. Regardless of whether you simply wish only to make arrangements or solely do clinical work, you are receiving the education necessary for your personal and professional development and for the good of our profession and society.

Again, congratulations and best wishes with your studies. Study hard and learn all you can. Remember, your learning does not cease upon graduation from mortuary school or when obtaining licensure – it’s a lifelong process.

Joseph Marsaglia is dean and chief operating officer of Pittsburgh Institute of Mortuary Science.

Funeral Service Foundation Launches Foundation '45 Awards

The Funeral Service Foundation has launched its Foundation '45 Awards, which are offered on the premise that access to a solid education and resources can help funeral service professionals propel their careers to the next level. The awards include an expanded array of academic scholarships, the newly created Career Awards and NFDA Professional Women's Conference scholarships.

These scholarships, professional development opportunities and mission-focused resources can help funeral service professionals unlock their potential throughout every stage of their career.

Academic Scholarships

The Funeral Service Foundation now offers up to 12 scholarships ranging from \$1,000 to \$2,500 to full- and part-time students pursuing a degree in mortuary science from an ABFSE-accredited school. Scholarships include the Foundation '45 Academic Scholarship; the Shipley Rose Buckner, Joseph E. Hagan and Dennis Schoepp memorial scholarships; and the Memorial Classic Golf Tournament Scholarship.

"We're honored to offer a record number of academic scholarships this year," said Stephanie Kann, chair of the Foundation Scholarship Subcommittee. "Our additions include the newly created Foundation '45 Academic Scholarship, which honors our roots, and a record four Memorial Classic Golf Tournament Scholarships."

The Foundation is looking for applicants who demonstrate a passion for funeral service that sets them apart from other candidates. The best applications are those in which students give examples that show how they care about making a positive impact in their career. Apply at [FuneralServiceFounda-](http://FuneralServiceFoundation.org)

[tion.org](http://FuneralServiceFoundation.org). The application deadline is March 30.

NFDA Professional Women's Conference Scholarships

The Foundation is also accepting applications for the NFDA Professional Women's Conference Scholarships. Designed to support career development for women in funeral service by offsetting the costs associated with the annual conference, the scholarships cover recipients' conference registration fees and provide up to a \$1,000 travel and accommodation stipend. This year's conference will be held April 7-9 in Franklin, Tennessee. Those interested can apply at FuneralServiceFoundation.org. The application deadline is February 15.

Career Awards

New this year: The Foundation will allocate up to 60 Career Awards to licensed funeral directors across the profession. Career Awards underwrite registration fees for a single NFDA Cremation Certification, Arranger Training or Certified Pre-planning Consultant seminar of the recipient's choosing.

"Generous donor support has allowed us to expand our reach and help a greater number of funeral directors access career-fueling professional development opportunities," said Danelle O'Neill, executive director of the Funeral Service Foundation. "We're thrilled to roll out the Career Awards and help funeral directors take their careers to the next level."

Information about each of these innovative training programs is available at nfda.org. Those interested can submit their names at FuneralServiceFoundation.org. Names will be drawn in April, June and October. Recipients will have one year to redeem their Career Award, and the Foundation will accept names throughout the year.

From the Editor's Desk...

Knowing the Consumer

One of my favorite television dramas of all time is *The West Wing*. I have cited it often, quoted from it and expressed my admiration for its creator, Aaron Sorkin, on many occasions. To wit, this is another of those occasions.

One episode centered around the president's State of the Union address. Following the speech, staffers holed up in a call center waiting for polling data on how the speech had been received. An inconvenient plot twist had the electricity in the vicinity of the call center knocked out as polling was underway, which made for a stressful night for the White House staffer overseeing the call center, as he frequently ranted, "I want the numbers!"

The protagonist in this episode was seeking the data in order to find out from the general public what worked for them, what didn't and what the administration needed to do to move forward.

This brings me to NFDA's annual Consumer Awareness and Preferences Survey. In setting the stage in 2012 for the first survey, we stated, quite obviously and logically, that if you want to know what consumers want, you have to ask them. So we did just that and continue to do so.

We've also noted that with each survey, trends have been reinforced and the picture of what consumers know about and want out of a funeral or memorial service has been filled in and made a little clearer. Five years in, there are a few blips or aberrations in the data, some in the area of survey question wording. However, the historical data we've received tells us that the information gleaned has been consistent, accurate and indeed paints a picture of consumer preferences, just as we had hoped and anticipated.

Over the years, it's been interesting receiving observations and feedback from funeral service professionals regarding the survey. From every set of eyes reviewing the statistics comes a different perspective and a different read on what the numbers mean. As we ask a number of observers for their thoughts on the complete survey or key segments therein, their observations and suggestions help create a road map for dealing with and accommodating today's consumers.

Many of the articles in this second edition of *Director.edu* deal with relating to your co-workers and the general public. It is also readily apparent that this learning is a never-ending process. Staying current with demographics and surveys will help. When statistical data is studied, there often may be comments along the lines of "That's interesting" or "I wasn't aware of that" or even "Tell me something I don't know." But within these statistics are the blueprints. The challenge is to discover what we can make of them.



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