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Marketing on a Budget Creative strategies for future funeral directors.

By Welton Hong

As a future funeral director, you might presently be focused on mastering the essentials of funeral service, but there’s another critical skill you can’t afford to overlook: marketing. After all, while you might become one of the most compassionate and skilled funeral directors in your community, if no one knows about you, your impact will be limited.

And marketing isn’t just about promoting your services – it’s about building trust, establishing your presence and creating meaningful connections with the families you serve.

In a world where people often turn to the internet and social media for information and recommendations, learning how to market yourself effectively is essential in reaching those who need your support and in creating a sustainable future for whichever funeral home you join.

When you enter the profession, though, I suspect one of the biggest hurdles you’ll face is how to market yourself and your services effectively without a big budget to lean on. Here’s the good news – with a little creativity and a lot of strategic thinking, you can make a significant impact without breaking the bank.

Whether you begin three years from now or much sooner, check out these quick and easy ways to kick-start your marketing strategy as a new funeral director.

BUILDING YOUR COMMUNITY

The backbone of your marketing strategy, as well as the key to establishing a positive reputation for any local business, is to build a community – online and offline. To do this, start with *social media*, arguably one of the most powerful and cost-effective marketing tools at your disposal today. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn give you direct access to your community and offer a space where you can share valuable content that builds your brand.

The key is to create content that resonates, whether that involves articles, videos or simple posts that offer helpful information related to funerals, grief support or community events. The more you can position yourself as a knowledgeable and caring professional, the more trust you’ll build with your audience.

And don’t underestimate the power of engagement. Re-

sponding to comments and messages quickly shows you're attentive and accessible, which are crucial traits in this industry. Use hashtags and geotags strategically to expand your reach and connect with a broader local audience.

Networking locally is another crucial element of your marketing strategy. You might think this requires a lot of money, but, in reality, it's about the time and effort you're willing to invest. Start by attending community events, whether they're charity fundraisers, church gatherings or business expos. Being present at these events helps you meet potential clients and solidify your presence in the community.

You can also form *partnerships* with local businesses, such as florists, caterers or grief counselors. These partnerships aren't just about mutual referrals; they're about creating a collaborative marketing force that can benefit everyone involved.

If you're looking for even more structured networking opportunities, consider joining your local chamber of commerce or other business associations. These organizations offer networking events and collaborative marketing opportunities that can prove incredibly valuable as you build your career.

BECOMING A GO-TO PROVIDER

Another key to your marketing strategy should involve establishing yourself as an expert in deathcare and as the go-to provider for your community. To do this, start with your website, aka your "digital storefront." Your site often forms the first impression potential clients will have of you.

Luckily, optimizing your website doesn't have to cost a fortune. Start with the basics of search engine optimization (SEO) to ensure that you show up in local search results. Such simple things as using relevant keywords, updating your content regularly and making sure your site is mobile-friendly can go a long way.

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Offering valuable resources, such as downloadable guides or checklists related to funeral planning, can not only help your visitors but also establish you as an expert in the field.

And don't forget to showcase testimonials from your past clients. Positive reviews can significantly influence a potential client's decision, especially in a field where trust and reputation are everything.

Content marketing is another strategy that can help you establish yourself as an authority in funeral service, even if you're working with a limited budget. Starting a blog is a cost-effective way to share your expertise and improve your

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website's SEO. You can write about a variety of topics, such as funeral planning tips, grief support resources or even stories about meaningful memorials.

If you want to expand your reach, consider guest blogging for local community blogs, religious organizations or other relevant platforms. This not only increases your visibility but also drives traffic back to your website.

Another cost-effective marketing tool is email marketing. Building an email list is easier than you might think. Start by collecting emails from website visitors, social media followers, and during in-person events. Offering a valuable incentive, such as a free funeral planning guide, can also prove a great way to encourage sign-ups.

Once you have a list, send out regular newsletters filled with helpful tips, company updates and special offers. This will keep you top of mind when families are in need of your services.

And here's a tip many overlook: Personalize your emails. Address your recipients by name, and tailor your content to their interests or needs. Personalization can dramatically improve your engagement rates.

In addition, don't underestimate the power of video content. Creating short videos that explain your services, offer funeral planning tips or provide virtual tours of your facilities can be incredibly engaging and doesn't require a big budget.

Finally, make sure your funeral home is listed on Google Business Profile (formerly Google My Business). This is a free tool that can significantly improve your local search visibility and help potential clients find you more easily.

So, there you have it. Marketing on a budget isn't about cutting corners – it's about being smart, strategic and genuine in how you present yourself and your services. By leveraging social media, networking locally, optimizing your website, using email marketing, creating valuable content and taking advantage of free tools, you can effectively promote your funeral services and build a strong, respected presence as a new funeral director.

It's not about how much you spend, it's about how wisely you invest your time and resources.

Welton Hong is founder of Ring Ring Marketing and author of Making Your Phone Ring With Internet Marketing for Funeral Homes (Second Edition). funeralhomeprofits.com

ORIGIN STORY

Transcending Limits

By Calvin M. Amato

How did you get into that?" It's one of the first questions we hear when someone finds out they're speaking with someone in funeral service. Sometimes it's asked with genuine interest in mind, while others may have a morbid curiosity. Be that as it may, almost everyone enjoys a good origin story. In this issue, Calvin M. Amato, a student at Pittsburgh Institute of Mortuary Science, offers his origin story.



Fire, that fickle and relentless force of nature, holds within it the secret of rebirth. For even when the flames appear to have been extinguished, a single ember can lie dormant, biding its time, waiting for the slightest whisper of air to rekindle its blazing potential and reignite the world around it. In moments when our own hopes seem extinguished by life's per-

sistent challenges, we can find ourselves desperately searching for that spark – anything to rekindle the fire within us.

For me, these moments of internal turmoil were relentless, each one a trial that tested my resolve and forced me to confront the darkest aspects of myself. Throughout my life, I've faced an uphill battle, one often exacerbated by the constant barrage of negativity and doubt from those around me. From an early age, teachers and peers alike would echo the same sentiment: "This kid will never make it anywhere." Their words hung heavy in the air, each one a damning indictment of my potential.

When the time came for me to contemplate a future after

"Initially, my gaze fell upon the legal profession... But the reality failed to live up to my expectations... [and] I'd be surrounded by people whose values did not align with my own."



high school, I found myself adrift in a sea of uncertainty. The voices of doubt that had plagued me throughout my life still lingered. Aside from family, I was left without many resources or much support to help me find my way.

As I began my college journey in 2015, I cast about for a sense of purpose. Initially, my gaze fell upon the legal profession. Seduced by the allure of law, I envisioned myself as a powerful advocate for justice. I was drawn to using my voice to champion the causes of those in need. The power and prestige associated with the profession were not lost on me either, as I longed to prove myself worthy to those who had doubted me.

As I delved deeper into the world of law, however, the reality failed to live up to my expectations. The day-to-day work seemed dry and tedious. I would also find myself surrounded by individuals whose values and motivations did not align with my own.

Searching for an alternative that would resonate deeply with my values and interests, I found myself drawn to education. As I excitedly shared my newfound passion for teaching with my family, they were supportive. I felt validated in my decision, confident that I had finally found a career path that aligned with my values. Unfortunately, my confidence would again be tested during an unexpected encounter.

During a trip to Madison, Ohio, with my fraternity brothers, we ventured out one evening to a restaurant for dinner. The atmosphere was lively, and we decided to order drinks and engage in friendly conversation with our waitress. When the discussion turned to our college majors, we eagerly took turns sharing our academic pursuits.

When it was my turn, I proudly declared, "I'm studying education."

Her response was far from what I anticipated. She stared blankly at me for a moment before bursting into laughter. "No, seriously," she said, still chuckling, "what are you really studying?"

Confused, I reiterated, "Education."

Her laughter intensified as she exclaimed, “That’s really funny! Maybe you should think of another career.”

Her words stung, and I felt a sense of dejection wash over me. In that moment, the supportive reactions of my family seemed a distant memory, overshadowed by the derision of a complete stranger.

As time passed, the harsh words of the waitress and my peers from years before still echoed. My enthusiasm for teaching began to wane and I found myself struggling to stay afloat in my studies. I knew life would always present obstacles and doubters, but this time felt different. The doubt wasn’t just coming from others anymore; it had seeped into my own thoughts, whispering that this wasn’t the right path for me either.

As if sensing my growing uncertainty, life saw fit to throw me yet another curveball. One day I returned home to find a letter waiting for me – an eviction notice. Balancing the costs of college and rent had always been a tightrope act for me, one that depended largely on the support of my student loans and work. Unfortunately, despite my careful planning, the funds I received fell short of what I needed.

Come December, I found myself in a room with my landlord and her lawyer, who assured me they had my best interests at heart. We discussed our options, and it seemed we’d reached an agreement: I’d have 60 days to reapply for financial aid and provide the necessary payment. Relieved and hopeful, I looked forward to presenting our solution to the judge.

When we appeared before the judge, however, I was reminded of why I had decided against pursuing a legal career. The attorney, whose values and motivations clearly did not align with my own, suddenly changed the narrative. He stated that, contrary to our previous agreement, I had agreed to move out within a week and pay back every cent I owed. Betrayed and blindsided, I once again felt the weight of my world crashing down around me.

In the wake of the devastating court decision, I made the difficult choice to venture into the unknown, determined not to return home. This decision was swiftly tested by a cascade of new challenges. Debt from my schooling and previous apartment began to mount while the eviction made securing a new place to live an insurmountable hurdle. Forced to further pause my education as I struggled to get by, I felt the familiar grip of despair take hold.

Fortunately, a spark of hope came from the most unlikely of sources. Into my hands fell the phone number of a man who might be able to provide me with housing. Bracing myself for whatever might come, I dialed the number.

His voice was surprisingly welcoming, and his willingness to help me was palpable. His offer included a peculiar condition, however – the apartment was attached to a small funeral home he had recently acquired, with plans to eventually open it as a secondary location. At the time, the situation seemed far from ordinary, but I couldn’t afford to be picky. Little did I know that this small act of generosity would prove a turning point, shaping my life in ways I couldn’t have imagined.

As I settled into my new living situation, I found myself drawn to the atmosphere of the funeral home. During the day, my thoughts centered on the necessary tasks at hand,

but as night fell, a different kind of contemplation took hold, allowing memories from my past to surface. This included thinking about the numerous funerals I had attended with my dad as a child – some for loved ones, others for complete strangers. My mind also drifted back to junior high, where I had learned about the ancient Egyptians and their fascinating practices surrounding death and the afterlife.

My grandfather’s final days in the ICU also played out vividly in my memory, particularly his unwavering spirit as he mustered the strength to open his blue eyes one last time at

“At that moment, I realized that by pursuing a career in mortuary science, I would not only help others navigate their grief but also begin to heal my own.”

my grandmother’s heartfelt request. I pictured the funeral home staff’s efforts to prepare him for his final viewing, their delicate touches ensuring that his final appearance reflected the dignity and strength he held in life.

My grandmother’s death came a few years later. In her final hours, she, too, seemed to transcend her weakened state. Despite being unconscious for days, she awoke to our arrival so she could share a moment with us. Through sheer force of will, she found the strength to tell me how proud she was of me. After we left that night, she would again slip into unconsciousness, but this time she would not wake up again.

As these powerful memories echoed, the weight of my debts continued to persist, stalling my education and driving me to explore new professional avenues. I offered my expertise in food-safety consulting, assumed multiple management positions in the hospitality industry and contributed to certifying products and establishments as allergen-free and gluten-free.

Just as I was finally beginning to find my footing, COVID-19 swept the globe, bringing with it a new perspective on life. The world seemed to grind to a halt, and the timing was oddly coincidental – I had just paid off my remaining debt and purchased my first home a mere two days before the shutdown.

Attempting to adapt, I offered virtual consultations, but my heart wasn’t invested in this new way of working. Instead, I found myself drawn to a deep-seated desire to help, teach and guide others through their most challenging moments. Determined to follow this newfound passion, I chose to pursue an unconventional path by studying neuroscience, hoping to uncover the secrets of the human mind and equip myself with the knowledge and tools to make a meaningful difference in the lives of others.

As the pandemic waned, the mounting death toll forced me to further question the direction of my life. Fortunately, in

a moment of serendipity, I enrolled in a class on death and dying, which served as a reminder of the kindness extended to me years earlier when the rest of the world doubted my potential. This class further opened my eyes to the profound impact that funeral professionals can have on both the living and the dead.

At that moment, I realized that by pursuing a career in mortuary science, I could not only help others navigate their grief but also begin to heal my own. I began to research mortuary science programs and reached out to several funeral homes in early 2023, eager to begin this transformative journey.

I also continued to broaden my knowledge in the field by completing a crematory operator course offered by NFDA, and I obtained my death doula certification at the International Association of Professionals Career College.

Finally my perseverance paid off when three funeral homes expressed interest in me. I soon began to conduct my research, seeking the best fit among those funeral homes. Ultimately, I chose one located just 30 minutes from my home [Koch Funeral Home in State College] and offered my support to another conveniently situated down the road [Derman Funeral Home in Tyrone], both in Pennsylvania.

In the year that followed, I dedicated myself wholeheartedly to the funeral profession, serving as a funeral assistant. From assisting with service details to bringing decedents into our care with the utmost respect, I began to discover the profound impact of empathy and attention to detail in this line of work.

Simultaneously, my sights were set on securing a formal education in mortuary science, with Pittsburgh Institute of Mortuary Science (PIMS) as my top choice. As I eagerly awaited acceptance into its program, I continued to hone my skills, determined to make an impact on the lives of those we served.

December 2023 marked a significant turning point in my journey when I was officially accepted into PIMS beginning in January 2024. I swiftly acquired my trainee license, propelling me into full-time work as funeral director-in-training at Koch's by February.

Embracing Mark Twain's sentiment, I refused to let my schooling limit my education, so I sought additional certifications to expand my expertise. By June, I was a certified

funeral celebrant through InSight Institute and a Certified Preplanning Consultant through NFDA. Seeking even more opportunities for personal and professional growth, I became a mentee in the inaugural Continuing Vision mentorship program. Additionally, I was honored to join the Independent Advisory Committee at PIMS, collaborating with diverse experts across the industry to exchange ideas.

In addition, I joined a local hospital to assist with autopsies. An unexpected golden opportunity arose soon after when I was invited to partner with the Boston University CTE Center and UNITE Brain Bank as a brain recovery specialist. This role has afforded me the chance to combine the chance of contributing to vital research while supporting families grappling with the effects of chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE).

Looking back on this whirlwind of experiences, I can't help but feel humbled and profoundly grateful for the journey that brought me here. Each milestone, each moment of growth – even the setbacks – helped shape me into the professional I now aspire to be. The sheer joy I felt the first time a grieving family thanked me for restoring their loved one's appearance is indescribable. After successfully extracting a brain, cradling within my hands the very essence of humanity for the first time, I was overwhelmed by the weight of emotion and memory it once held.

Now, as I suit up for work each day, I'm struck by how far I've come in such a short time. Despite the setbacks and wrong turns, I followed a path to where I now have the privilege of guiding others through their most vulnerable moments in life and in death.

Just as a single ember has the power to reignite a once extinguished flame, refusing to succumb to the darkness, my inner fire has endured. Similarly, the phoenix, with its wisdom and resilience, does not fear the flames, for it understands that the power of rebirth lies within them. Often in our darkest moments, we, too, can find the strength to rise anew.

Calvin M. Amato, CCO, CPC, is a student at Pittsburgh Institute of Mortuary Science and a funeral director in training at Koch Funeral Home in State College, Pennsylvania.



Good Habits Start Early

How paperwork can save your firm (and your career).

By Edward J. Defort

Mike Nicodemus unremittably preaches that when it comes to paperwork, dotting the i's and crossing the t's is not to be taken for granted. And for students in funeral service education programs, getting into the habit of maintaining the proper paperwork can save them headaches throughout their career.

Nicodemus' point is clear and simple: To avoid being sued,

you'd better have good, proper paperwork. Sloppy, incomplete, inaccurate paperwork will lead to litigation – and possibly unemployment. This is a Nicodemus guarantee. "I've received calls from a number of attorneys since October 2017 asking if I would serve as an expert witness," said Nicodemus, NFDA vice president of cremation services.

During a recent presentation called "Facing the Judge,"

Nicodemus quoted attorney Kevin Foley, who said, “Failure to have proper documentation regarding your interaction with clients damages your credibility if you are called to testify in a lawsuit. The lack of proper documentation makes the company look sloppy, unorganized and lends to the plaintiff’s allegations of negligence and breach of contract. If an individual or a company is sloppy with its documentation, it’s easy for a jury to believe it is also sloppy with the way it does business.”

A judge doesn’t want to listen to stories, cautioned Nicodemus. He wants to see it in writing. Incomplete work, mistakes, poor quality, late delivery and ineffective or unsafe shortcuts are all examples of poor paperwork. “People who have terrible time-management skills might not allocate enough time to prepare for a family coming in,” said Nicodemus. “They don’t feel the importance of double-checking their work, they are rushed to finish, they have low ambition and/or simply don’t care about the quality of their work, which might indicate disengagement from their job.”

According to the Federal Trade Commission, cremation procedures are the largest source of risk exposure and liability in the funeral industry.

Underscoring his point, Nicodemus noted an Alabama case in which a jury awarded \$12 million to a family when the funeral home could not locate a woman’s cremated remains. In fact, four years after her death, the firm could not even produce any paperwork! “Don’t you think someone on the jury would have asked, ‘Where has she been for the last four years?’ Could you appeal the decision? Sure, but that will cost you, too, in legal fees.”

“Opposing counsel will try to illustrate how sloppy documentation and unreadable handwriting are indicative of a messy and careless funeral director,” Nicodemus explained. “Anything that cannot be read, they will use technology to blow it up and then ask jurors if they can read it yet. When none of them can, the lawyer will say, ‘Well, how can anyone be expected to read it?’”

Proper and legible documentation, on the other hand, can show that the families the firm serves are well informed and made aware of their options. “One of an attorney’s favorite lines is, ‘If it isn’t in writing, it didn’t happen,’” shared Nicodemus. “Especially when you have a situation in which you think there might be a problem, document everything.”

According to the Federal Trade Commission, cremation procedures are the largest source of risk exposure and liability in the funeral industry. Funeral homes have a binding responsibility to ensure that every cremation is carried

out in a legal, professional and ethical manner. “A lot of funeral homes think that when they take a decedent to their third-party crematory, their hands are clean,” said Nicodemus. “You might think you didn’t have anything to do with [a situation that arose], but you were the one who hired the third-party crematory.”

He then went on to explain the primary liability issues:

- **Wrongful authorization.** Know your state statutes and who can sign the authorization form. “Funeral directors are honest, hardworking men and women who take people at their word,” he said. “Know what you can and can’t do, according to state statutes, and know who you’re meeting with.”
- **No identification of the remains.** Nicodemus continues to wonder why only 38 of 50 states require identification. “It is just unfathomable that in 12 states, a body can be cremated without having someone identify it,” he said.
- **Lost or misdelivered cremated remains.** “Well, that’s who the hospital said it was,” he offered as an example.
- **Family disputes.** Nicodemus offered four simple words: “Stay out of them.”
- **Paperwork.** “I guarantee you that sloppy, inaccurate or incomplete paperwork is going to be your worst enemy if you end up in court.”

At the funeral home at which he worked for 35 years as vice president of cremation operations, Nicodemus shared that its authorization forms were six pages long. “I had a guy tell me once that he didn’t sign [that many pages] when he bought his house. I explained that he was not buying a house but cremating his wife and that that was the way we did things. After all, if you don’t like your house, you can move, but we can’t uncremate your wife.”

Every employee must also be familiar with their firm’s policies and procedures. “Policies and procedures are mandatory for a reason,” Nicodemus said. “The state you’re in might not require that you ID the body, but your company



does. Whatever needs to be filled in, fill it in – it’s on the form for a reason.” He added that if an owner/manager has to admit ignorance, a jury will view that as uncaring and purposeful, not as forgetfulness.

During a lawsuit’s discovery phase, he explained, the plaintiff’s lawyers will come in and look for every document that can possibly be attributed not only to the present lawsuit but maybe also to those over the last five to 10 years.

If a family is not willing to provide the information required to complete your forms, contact your supervisor immediately warned Nicodemus. “Don’t ever make exceptions because that’s the case that’s going to come back and get you.”

If a family isn’t willing to work with you and cooperate with what you’re requiring them to do, then you must tell them that you won’t be able to help them.

Circling back to family disputes, Nicodemus’ advice is threefold: Don’t offer your own opinions, don’t take sides, and never side with the person who has the checkbook. “You’re not going to win,” he stated flatly. “You will have to tell the family that you would be glad to help them once again after they work out their differences.”

One basic fact to always keep in mind is that funeral homes are litigation targets. The average wrongful cremation award is \$350,000-\$400,000, but Nicodemus shared that he’s been involved in cases in which awards were well above \$1 million. And don’t forget attorney fees; billable hours can range from \$370 an hour for an associate to \$535 an hour for a firm’s partner.

A funeral home cannot afford to just roll the dice when it comes to sloppy, inaccurate and unfinished paperwork. Lawyers will ask the firm what steps it took when the unacceptable paperwork was discovered. Was the employee trained? Disciplined?

Sloppy paperwork will also have a negative impact on consumer perceptions of your funeral home. Said Nicodemus: “It will reduce your credibility, diminish your reputation and draw question to your integrity. Any misleading or factually inaccurate information can have an enormous financial impact as well, if litigated.”

Here’s the question the defendant will be asked in court: Do you just not know any better or do you just not care? “You really can’t answer that one,” said Nicodemus. “If you know better, then you don’t care. Or you do care, but you don’t know any better. Or if you cared, you would know better. They’ll twist you up like a pretzel.”

There are only two things that show that a funeral director’s actions are professional and appropriate: “Our word and proper documentation,” he summed up.

Nicodemus next explained that there is a big distinction between “negligent” and “reckless.” Negligent means you made a mistake; you didn’t mean to, but you did. Reckless means you knew better but went ahead and did it anyway. “The lawyers are going to try to prove that you were reckless, and that will certainly increase the size of the settlement,” he said.

The discovery process in a lawsuit is very important and might involve entering the funeral home with warrants to go through all paperwork involved. “A pretrial procedure in a

lawsuit is where each party obtains evidence from the other parties, including production of documents,” Nicodemus said. “After discovery, both sides agree as to the strength of the case and whether to settle or go before a jury. Lawsuits can drag on and are very expensive.”

If you’re involved in litigation, Nicodemus advised retaining the right attorney – someone familiar with funeral, cemetery and cremation law. “It could be a year or two before you even find out you’re being sued,” he said. “It’s not uncommon at all for a trial to take place a year and a half or two years after the incident happened. And you’ll have 30 days to answer the complaint. That will test your memory. Lawyers aren’t interested in your memory; they want to see it in writing.”

There are only two things that show that a funeral director’s actions are professional and appropriate: “Our word and proper documentation.”

Nicodemus then shared the story of the \$4,600 pen. A funeral director who used a third-party crematory took a body there, where it was cremated. The crematory gave the director the container, which he then gave to the family.

“The family took the container to scatter the remains, and out comes a ballpoint pen,” he said. “The family got in touch with the funeral director, who said he would find out what took place. The crematory operator said he had no idea what happened, and asked, ‘What’s the big deal? It’s only a pen.’”

Fortunately, the director and his firm had helped the family on other occasions, and their kids had grown up together, so they said they would not seek legal counsel. The family, however, did want their money refunded, and that’s exactly what the funeral director did – he wrote a check for \$4,600.

Nicodemus posed a question: “Do any of you, when making a removal, remove and itemize [the contents] and have a representative [of the deceased] at the place of death to sign off on what you’re giving them?” To his point, Nicodemus advised taking everything off at the place of death, cataloging it and placing it in a bag. Have [the representative] watch you and have them sign off.

“Where is my wife’s necklace?”

“She didn’t have a necklace on, sir.”

“Yes, she did.”

“No, she didn’t.”

You get the idea. “You should have written procedures for handling valuables,” he emphasized.

Crediting NFDA for the comprehensive list of forms it makes available to its members, Nicodemus stated that a firm

could have the best, most comprehensive forms in the world, but if they are filled out improperly, they are worthless.

So, what are some methods to avoid sloppy, inaccurate paperwork and the headaches that can create? First, when you talk to a family at the onset to set up cremation arrangements, Nicodemus advises telling them the meeting will take two to three hours. The family, of course, thinks that because it is just going to be a cremation, they'll be in and out in 20 minutes. "You all know that cremation arrangements take longer than burial arrangements," he said. "Set that right from the start with families that it's going to take several hours."

He also offered the following suggestions:

- Know your forms like you know your way around your funeral home.
- Prior to seeing the family, highlight areas on the forms that need to be signed or initialed.
- Give yourself plenty of time with a family. Don't rush.
- Never cut corners.
- If you make a mistake on a form, start over. Do not cross out or white out anything; that will void the contract.
- If you're not sure of something, have someone in the office double-check.

"If a problem arises, make sure all documentation is isolated and preserved," warned Nicodemus. "Failure to maintain documentation can result in you automatically losing a lawsuit. Put [the documents] in a safe-deposit box or give them to your attorney."

Nicodemus suggested documenting everything, including who you spoke with (first and last name) and the date and time you spoke with them. As a rule, let the family alleging the problem do the talking while you write down everything. Also, never make an admission of guilt.

The first thing to do is call your attorney so anything you say is protected by the attorney-client privilege. "I don't know why, but some people will put in an email or text something they would never say to someone's face or in a letter," Nicodemus said. "Email and texts are just as admissible in court as any other forms of documentation. An attorney can get a subpoena to get all your texts, emails – all your written documents."

Finally, Nicodemus cautions that under no circumstance should a document ever be altered, created or forged. "That will be a separate lawsuit," he warned.

Edward J. Defort is editor of NFDA Publications.

STRATEGIC PLANNING

Navigating Technology Advancements And Enhancing Customer Experience

By Melissa A. Cyfers and Terry Cyfers

Strategic planning for funeral homes involves a comprehensive approach that considers various factors, such as changing demographics, cultural shifts, technological advancements and evolving customer preferences.

Strategic planning is an area that most small-business owners, like funeral home owners, have not really had to be fully invested in for most of their career. It is an area that current owners should familiarize themselves with if they want their business to survive the changing market and changing needs. The change is occurring quickly, on both the consumer side and the employee side.

Think of strategic planning as the road map for achieving the long-term goals of the business. The plan will assist in defining where the funeral home is headed, where you want the business to be, and how to get there. One benefit of strategic planning is to help the funeral home define the mission, vision and core values of the business. This helps guide the decision-making processes. If you have a measure, you can use this to



ensure that all activities align with reaching the goal.

Another benefit – arguably the most relevant to the need for a strategic plan – is the adaptation to change. The funeral industry has been subject to many external factors in recent times. These factors include things such as demographic shifts, regulatory changes, and technological advancements. (COVID-19 pulled out all the stops to get funeral homes live-streaming!) Strategic planning allows anticipatory change and gives proactive responses.

That is all great, right? Now, the next question: How do you do it? One of the most common tools used in strategic plans is a SWOT analysis, which examines strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

While the SWOT analysis is a strategic planning tool, it is better to utilize resource allocations. Thus, the SWOT in combination with a PESTLE analysis for funeral home strategic planning gives the best results. PESTLE is an acronym for political, economic, social, technological, legal and environmental. It originated from Francis Aguilar in 1967, who delved into different factors that affect an organization in his book *Scanning the Business Environment*. The PESTLE analysis encompasses a deeper look into the business and has evolved over time with the changes in each of the analysis areas.

For a funeral home, regardless of its size, to begin to develop a strategic plan, it is important to first determine the direction and focus of the company. The most common approach to this is to develop a mission, vision and define the overall values. Before diving right into the PESTLE, you should be familiar with your strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT). Ask questions, such as what factors give your funeral home a competitive advantage? Consider your reputation, expertise or geographic location.

What about weaknesses? Are the facilities outdated? Are you fully staffed? What are the current opportunities? Can anything be leveraged to expand or enhance the business?

Another benefit – arguably the most relevant to the need for a strategic plan – is adaptation to change.

Finally, is there anything that poses a risk to the success of the funeral home? The crucial piece is being honest with yourself when answering questions about the current state of your business.

Next, it is time to take the deep dive in developing the strategic plan using the PESTLE analysis framework, considering each piece as it relates to individual businesses.

• **POLITICAL** The political factors differ for each location. What are the current regulations related to funeral service? Are there any proposed changes that could improve or

Strategic planning allows for anticipatory change and gives proactive responses.

inhibit the funeral home? It is important to understand the legal requirements or any upcoming legislation that could impact the firm.

• **ECONOMIC** Is the economic health of your region doing well? Understand the market area of your location. What is the unemployment rate? What is the average disposable income level?

• **SOCIAL** Do not overlook this crucial piece in your planning. What are the cultural attitudes toward death and traditional funerals? You can increase your business by understanding the preferences and beliefs of the community you serve.

• **TECHNOLOGY** Are you leveraging technology in a way that matters? Are you holding online memorial services? Livestreaming? Hosting digital platforms for arrangements and preneed funeral planning?

• **LEGAL** Stay abreast of any changes regarding licensing and certification requirements, especially for firms adding event venues and catering services. These might require additional licenses and permits above and beyond the funeral home requirements.

• **ENVIRONMENTAL** This assessment is two-fold to both the internal and external business. First, internally, are you complying with regulations regarding waste disposal or emissions if you operate a crematory? Externally, are you offering sustainable options to families? Are you knowledgeable about green burials or cremation alternatives?

Going through the PESTLE process and answering the difficult questions (and often facing the truth about your business) allows you to move to the next step, which involves detailing actionable items to address each phase. Which of the items in your assessment have the ability to impact your business most? Start with those.

Use the insights from the PESTLE analysis to innovate and develop differentiated services that cater to emerging trends or address unmet needs in the market. For example, if social trends indicate a preference for eco-friendly options, consider offering green burial services or environmentally sustainable funeral products.

If technologic advancements present opportunities for virtual memorials or online funeral planning platforms, invest in those areas to enhance customer experience and accessibility. If demographic shifts suggest an increase in multicultural communities, adapt your services to accommodate diverse cultural and religious practices.

The strategic planning process can also be used to enhance the customer experience. Leverage the findings from the social and technological aspects of your analysis to enhance the customer experience at your funeral home. This might involve improving communication channels to provide personalized and empathetic support to families during their time of need.

Perhaps you should implement technology solutions, such as online booking systems or digital tribute platforms, to streamline processes and offer convenience to clients. Perhaps offer additional services, such as grief counseling or memorialization options, to meet the evolving needs of families. Each funeral home will differ in the results and needs based on many different factors.

You can start to see the importance of strategic planning and how you can leverage the information in your analysis to begin making a meaningful difference in your funeral home. Positioning for success is based on your interpretations of market needs and assessment of them.

Moreover, while flexibility and adaptability are key to creating and continuing a strategic plan, it is important to revisit the plan and ensure actionable items are being met. A key contributor to success in strategic planning involves timelines. It is important to place timelines on some actionable items, knowing that some are long term and some are short-term objectives.

Once a commitment is made to make it through the process, a strategic plan offers numerous advantages to an organization by serving as a compass that provides direction, alignment and focus. By clearly articulating the organization's mission, vision and objectives, the business ensures that its resources are allocated effectively, decisions are made

Leverage your findings from the social and technology aspects of your analysis to enhance the customer experience with your funeral home.

with long-term goals in mind, and communication among stakeholders is enhanced. The enhancement reinforces the importance of the input from stakeholders in the planning process.

Strategic planning allows steps toward proactive risk management, identifies areas for growth and improvement, establishes performance metrics for measurement and fosters adaptability in the face of changing circumstances.

Ultimately, a well-crafted strategic plan acts as a road map for the organization, guiding its development and ensuring its continued success.

Melissa A. Cyfers is executive director of the West Virginia Funeral Directors and Crematory Operators Association.

Terry Cyfers is executive director for small businesses at BridgeValley Community and Technical College and also a leadership development coach.



Death in the Line of Duty

By John Horan

Bruce VanderJagt, a Denver, Colorado, police officer, was ambushed and killed by a gunman on November 12, 1997. Called to serve, I arrived the next day at the family home to see nearly a dozen Denver police

vehicles parked in front. The living room was packed with officers, some of whom were already thinking about a venue large enough to accommodate as many as 3,000 attendees, including law-enforcement officers from throughout North America.

Officer VanderJagt's wife, Anna, was in a side room with

a family member. She looked like she had been up all night, carrying the weight of the world on her shoulders. (I share this story with Anna's permission, by the way.)

I sat down across from her and replied to her initial question: "Anna, your wishes come first."

Knowing she was being heard, her demeanor shifted from defensiveness to a willingness to listen. Before we went further, Anna accepted my suggestion that we arrange a private gathering for the family and their closest friends, to be followed a day later with the large service – including all the formal obsequies associated with a line-of-duty-death funeral.

Having cared for 29 public-safety officers (law enforcement, fire service, paramedics) who died in the line of duty during the last 35 years, here are some things I recommend you consider if you're ever called to serve under these circumstances.

THE FOUR ROOMS

Older readers might remember a training program taught by Bill Bates called “Life Appreciation.” Rather than open the arrangements with the usual functionary details, such as gathering vital statistics, Bates advocated funeral directors should begin with their pens down (or keyboards away) and their eyes up as they entered four “rooms” in their minds. Within each of these rooms, their goal was to learn unique information about the deceased – information to help them genuinely personalize the funeral service.

In my case, after the introductions (and a tour if we met in our facility), I’ve learned to begin the arrangement conference by saying something like this: “My goal is to help you create something special and meaningful. So, if it’s okay, I’d like to begin by getting to know something about your husband, your father, and your brother.”

I try to make eye contact with each family member and acknowledge their relationship. I always use a legal pad and jot down names of the survivors in attendance, as well as ideas or items for follow-through.

The first “room” is straightforward and helps break the ice. To enter, you ask: “What kinds of things did ‘Bruce’ like to do?” “Can you tell me about his hobbies or interests?” “What kind of music did he listen to?” The answers to these questions might suggest items to display and songs that are especially meaningful.

Over the course of a half-hour or so, the answers to these open-ended questions evoke laughter and tears. It’s easy to see how therapeutic this dialogue is to the survivors.

The enter the second room: “How would you describe ‘Bruce’ as a family member and friend?” “Who are his closest friends in the department, and outside the department?” “What are some words you, his family, and his closest friends would use to describe him?”

The third room: “Was ‘Bruce’ religious or spiritual?” Usually, this leads to a particular religious conviction or expression of spirituality, which then leads to a particular clergy person or, perhaps, a celebrant you can suggest.

The fourth room addresses the professional life of the deceased: “How did ‘Bruce’ feel about his work as a police officer/state trooper/deputy/firefighter/paramedic?”

My co-worker and friend Daren Forbes added a fifth room: “Did ‘Bruce’ ever talk about how he would want to be remembered?”

Over the course of a half-hour or so, the answers to these

open-ended questions evoke laughter and tears. It’s easy to see how therapeutic this dialogue is to the survivors. Occasionally, I jot a note to remember something we can build on, such as eulogies, displays, a video, music, religious or spiritual content, and other aspects that help make the services unique and meaningful.

Eventually, we go over vital statistics, the obituary and cover the necessities. But when we do, the tension in the room is gone.

Anna asked about her husband’s appearance and what I thought about her seeing him. We both knew Bruce was shot in his face. I asked Anna for permission to allow my co-workers to do their best work, to which she consented. We also agreed I would see Bruce first and then prepare Anna and any others.

I recall what magnificent and detailed work was done by Central Care Manager John Glaspy and his team. I recommended viewing and prepared Anna, her daughter, family, and closest friends. They seemed relieved that the image of Bruce they needed to see was the image we presented.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Should you find yourself preparing for a line-of-duty death, here are a few key things to remember.

1. Transfer the deceased from the hospital or coroner’s office on a gurney with a funeral coach. Cover the deceased with an ironed American flag. You will travel in procession to the funeral home.
2. Slow things down. The survivors need time to move past their shock. Furthermore, there are hundreds of details requiring your attention and you need the time to organize it all. In addition, public-safety officers will travel to your community from throughout the country, and they need time to coordinate and travel.
3. An honor guard will be posted in your funeral home throughout the time the deceased is present. We provide them with coffee, snacks and a place where they can get away for a bit of respite.
4. For the public service, identify a venue that can accommodate more than a thousand people, taking into account the population of the area you serve. Departments will send representatives from near and far. If some attendees must be outside the venue due to seating constraints, consider a live broadcast or “DiamondVision” screen or other large screen, as well as a sound-projection system.
5. All services are scripted and a timeline is developed that highlights the names of individuals who have responsibility for a particular role. In the course of writing these scripts, I sometimes identify items that might otherwise have been overlooked. We prepare a shortened script for the officiant and highlight every point where this person has a role. We also highlight a script for the music and video coordinators.
6. Be prepared for law enforcement members who attempt to minimize or “fix” things; it’s often a reflection of their discom-

fort. Oftentimes, simplicity is suggested out of a well-meaning but mistaken belief that ceremony, ritual and the deceased's presence cause grief rather than assuage grief and help people meaningfully mourn. For those who prefer cremation, be prepared to express the "why" for the presence of the deceased at the services, with cremation following.

7. Identify a place at the venue where the family will be taken when they arrive an hour before the service. Consider restrooms, food and refreshments. At the service's conclusion, the family can return here while, meanwhile, the officers in attendance can be formed into ranks outside to come to attention and salute as the casket exits, followed by the family.

8. Work with the deceased's department to devise a seating chart that takes into account family and their friends. (Also consider a code word friends can share with ushers that ensures seating behind the family.) Ensure an officer with rank is in charge of the seating chart and in communication with the roughly 20 officers or explorers spread throughout the facility to ensure all are seated correctly. Reserve special seating for those who worked most closely with the deceased – such as a particular firehouse or police district/division – and save space for spouses, as well. Start seating in the venue an hour before the service, except for members of the deceased's department, who form ranks outside. Also, about 10-15 minutes before the service, members of the department should enter the auditorium, at which time people should be asked to stand.

9. It is customary for the chief of the department to speak and, oftentimes, the state's governor. Reserve seating for elected officials, usually in a front row to the side of the family. Assign department public-information officers to identify and direct these officials to their seating.

10. As the service nears conclusion, departmental honors will be rendered. A final radio call is followed by three volleys,

I asked Anna for permission to allow my co-workers to do their best work, to which she consented.

the playing of "Taps" and folding the American flag. A camera crew should video the firing team outside and project it to attendees inside. Alternatively (especially when death has occurred as a result of a gunshot and there are young children) some families express relief and appreciation for the use of a bell rung 21 times instead of the rifle volleys. The folded flag is presented by the honor guard to the department chief, who affixes the deceased's badge to it before presenting the flag to the closest survivor. (You should suggest a variation of the language the military uses for presentation of the flag.)

11. Finally, create a policy that sets forth what your firm is prepared to provide when a public-safety officer dies in the line of duty. We provide a fairly basic but attractive wood or metal casket, and our services, without charge. If cremation is preferred, we provide an oak or cherry ceremonial casket and cremate the deceased in a simple container.

This is not meant to be an exhaustive review of all the details. Please don't hesitate to let me know if I can provide to you a sample script, seating chart or be helpful in another way.

John Horan attended San Francisco College of Mortuary Science and earned a business degree from the University of Colorado. He joined Park Lawn in 2019 and continues his involvement in funeral service in Colorado, Kentucky and Indiana. He can be reached at jhoran@horancares.com.



Funeral Director Gets "Wired" But Stays Humble

By Tanya Kenevich

Victor M. Sweeney lives a pretty quiet life in Warren, Minnesota, population 1,600. He enjoys family time with his wife of 11 years, Paige, and his four children: Edmund "Ned" (age 10), Arthur (7), Fiona (5) and Peter (2). An avid reader, Sweeney enjoys "the ups and downs of fatherhood and being a husband" and the existence in a small town where everybody knows his name.

He is a funeral director at DuBore Funeral Home, also located in Warren. Sweeney, licensed in both North Dakota

and Minnesota, practices his faith right over the Minnesota border at St. Stanislaus Catholic Church in Warsaw, North Dakota.

An eclectic mix of old-school swagger with classic browline glasses and crisp band-collar shirts, he focuses on helping as many people as he can in this world until it's time to check out. "If I was really thinking about it... I don't know if I want to be remembered for anything, to be honest. If I could be remembered in the living memory of my wife and children, and some of the families I've served, that would be enough."

shared Sweeney. “I have a lot of thoughts on living memory, and I think living memory is where it’s at.”

It’s obviously not known how Sweeney’s memory will live on, but an email he received in February 2021 provided a very interesting and unique experience for him, his life and his future.

FIRST GENERATION

Unlike many others in deathcare, Sweeney was the first in his family to enter the profession – but the decision made sense when you look at the big picture. As an adolescent, he was exposed to a lot of funerals. During a span of about 10 years, he experienced 10 family deaths, such as aunts, uncles and grandparents.

He also related experiences of visiting the grave of his sister, who died before Sweeney was born. “We were always going to the cemetery to visit her and clean off her grave. As little kids, we’d do this. We’d fight over who got to pluck the grass around her headstone or who got to wash [the headstone] off,” he remembered. “It was just this thing we always did, and we really didn’t think anything of it. My first exposure to death, I guess, was when I was three and found my best friend dead in his bunk bed.”

“[But it was] a composite decision – it’s not like that happened when I was three and then I was like, ‘Oh, I’m going to become a mortician,’” said Sweeney. “But you do end up with this kind of background, or maybe even foundation of events in your life... that you can build on.”

“Truth be told, I always wanted to be a Catholic priest... Then, as a junior or senior in high school, I realized that wasn’t what I was called to do.”

Interestingly, however, he originally saw himself in another vocation. “Truth be told, I always wanted to be a Catholic priest, ever since the time I was a young boy. So, I always thought my vocation was going to be toward the priesthood, that I was called to this. Then, as a junior or senior in high school, I realized that wasn’t my vocation. That wasn’t what I was called to do,” shared Sweeney. The foundational events he’d gone through in his young life began to shape his future.

“Then my godfather, who was a priest, gave me the book *The Undertaking: Life Studies From the Dismal Trade* by Thomas Lynch,” he said. Originally sent to him as more of an interesting read, he really enjoyed the book. “It was kind of at the right time in my life – something in there that just kind of scratches the itch of the priesthood, and it is about serving people, and there’s a hands-on aspect that I think is really important,” he said.



BALANCING FUNERAL SERVICE AND SELF

According to Sweeney, there is a spiritual aspect to funeral service, as well as a temporal/physical aspect. “I found that that physical aspect is increasingly important to me. I used to think of funeral service more like this kind of nebulous service [in a] pastoral sort of way, and that is there, no doubt. But I found the hands-on portion increasingly important, at least to me, because that’s something that I can actually provide to a family,” he said. “I can show up at the place of death and carry grandma in my arms out of the house. I think that physical aspect is important.”

Having just celebrated his 10th year licensed in Minnesota, Sweeney enjoys his life and choices. “I couldn’t not do this,” he said. “I know how to do it, sure, and I probably have the aptitude to do a number of other things that probably provide a better living, but I like it and find it very gratifying, so why would I trade that?”

That’s not to say that Sweeney doesn’t have challenges, especially with balancing a 24/7 job and a bustling family, but being a small-town funeral director, there are ways to get around it. “I’m chained to death’s schedule but not my own,” he said. “It’s one of those things where I’ve tried to get better about realizing that I’m kind of the master of my own schedule, with some caveats. So, if I have a death call in the evening, I can go get them, I can bring them back and then I should go home and help my wife put the kids to bed,” said Sweeney. “Or, a lot of times, I’ll do something like that where I haven’t seen my wife in two days, so we’ll spend some time together, watch a movie and then I’ll just go back to work from midnight to 2 a.m. I think that has been a big game changer for me, realizing that while it’s very time sensitive, I also need to learn how to balance that with family life.”

SWEENEY GETS WIRED

In fall 2018, Sweeney got a call at night that a farmer out-

side of town had died. “I went out there, made the house call by myself... The gentleman who passed away, his son and son-in-law were there. I asked in advance, so they helped me carry the cot down the stairs, that sort of thing,” he recalled. Sweeney organized a beautiful funeral for the gentleman and happened to click with his son-in-law, John Enger, during the process.

A year later, Enger called Sweeney and explained that he was a writer for Minnesota Public Radio and had been thinking about an idea for an article that would showcase Sweeney, although he wasn’t quite sure of the article hook at the time. Sweeney was happy to help and invited Enger to the funeral home during a quiet day where they talked. At the time, Sweeney had no idea if anything would ever come of it.

In December 2019, a Minnesota Public Radio article came out about deathcare in Minnesota, with Sweeney’s picture right on the front. “About a year after that, I got an email from [Condé Nast-published] *WIRED* magazine,” he said. “They are like, ‘Hey, we think Victor Sweeney would be a great fit for a mortician video.’”

Initially, he thought the email was spam and contacted the Condé Nast webmaster to report it, only to be told that the communication was indeed legitimate. “So, I emailed them back, and the next thing you know, I’m on a Zoom call with a bunch of people who work in the new World Trade Center. We just kind of interviewed over Zoom, and they’re like, ‘Okay, cool. Now let’s figure out how to put you in a video,’” said Sweeney.

As this was during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, with so many changes and so much chaos, he simply couldn’t fly to New York and back for filming. Thus, Condé Nast decided to hire a film crew out of Bismarck, North Dakota, and everyone set up a “studio” at the funeral chapel.

“That first video was shot with everybody in masks, in front of my funeral chapel, in front of a backdrop,” explained Sweeney. “The desk [I used], I dragged down from the attic... and just made this lightning-in-a-bottle funeral video. It was really on the fly.”

This was a tough time for the deathcare profession, and even Sweeney was struggling at that point. With bags under his eyes from days of no sleep and a home haircut from his wife (all the local barbershops were closed), he pushed through to try and create something special.

In the *WIRED* video, Sweeney answered Twitter questions related to deathcare and death for 14 minutes – all in a fun, educational and respectful way. “The editors were superb,” he said. “I don’t really like to take too much credit for that. I just showed up, low on sleep, looking kind of scuzzy, I hadn’t shaved in a day and a half... but it was just this lightning-in-a-bottle thing.”

The response was staggering. To date, Sweeney’s first video with *WIRED* has 24.5 million views. According to Sweeney, COVID-19 was probably the reason why the video was so popular – people were asking questions about death and were becoming increasingly affected by it. “Maybe that’s why [the video] struck such a nerve,” he thought.

The video, posted May 7, 2021, was the most viewed video across all of Condé Nast’s platforms that year (including content from *GQ* and *Men’s Health*). “It’s a wild thing to think that some random, small-town nobody... I mean, Daniel Radcliffe had fewer views than me! How do you figure that?” laughed Sweeney.

To add to the unbelievable popularity of the video, the comments and reactions were positive. As he continued to scroll through the comments, Sweeney was surprised to see how many people were saying the video helped them or answered questions about people they lost, and now they felt better. “It’s really an amazing thing to be in someone’s mind that way. I’m surprised and honored that it was me. It could have been anyone, honestly. I think anybody who does this job might have stepped into that position and done great, but it has been a beautiful privilege to end up there,” he said.

After the overwhelming response to Sweeney’s first *WIRED* video, he was invited to do a few more, including one where he discusses the accuracy of movie clips related to death and funerals (“Mortician Breaks Down Dead Body Scenes From Movies & TV.”) Sweeney even made a video where he went to a local funeral home he formally worked for and showed some of the inner workings – respectfully, of course. (“Mortician Shows Every Step a Body Goes Through at a Funeral Home.”)

“I got an email from *WIRED* magazine. They’re like, ‘Hey, we think Victor Sweeney would be a great fit for a mortician video.’” To date, his first *WIRED* video has 24.5 million views.

“It was really fun to do the tour and give people a taste. I think that’s important, too. I mean, the profession is a mysterious thing people don’t know about, and the building itself can kind of be this scary, morbid, doctor’s office sort of place,” Sweeney said. “It was nice to open that up, too, a little bit.”

Things got a little crazy for Sweeney after the increasing popularity of those videos. “After that came out, I had – I don’t know how many – Zoom calls with reality-TV people. So many!” he recalled. “They just came crawling out of the woodwork, with ideas ranging from, ‘Hey Victor, let’s follow you around your small town,’ which I didn’t want to do, to ‘Hey, what if we had a mortician-skills show where you were the judge?’ That was the wildest one. I’m not sure how you would ever put that on TV. There were reality-TV people everywhere.”

Sweeney also got messages and emails from fans, including prospective mortuary students. “I found myself in this

semi-distant mentorship role, which is kind of nice.”

Not all of the messages were positive, appropriate or solicited, however. “I get a lot of ‘sext’ messages – there are a lot of people who are real thirsty for me. I’ve had people calling the funeral home with a lot of very out-there questions. I’ve had people who are contemplating suicide ask me what I think happens after death, as if I’m some specialist on that... There are a lot of people on the internet that want to get into your business, so that is weird,” Sweeney admitted. “When you exude this ‘dad energy’ that I’ve got, it taps into the ‘daddy issues’ of many a person. So yeah, I get a lot of unsolicited advances, but that is what it is.”

Sweeney admitted he was a little overwhelmed with the attention. He was used to being seen by the 1,600 people in his town, where everybody knew his name, but nothing like this. During a conversation with a priest friend, Sweeney was given some advice: If you pursue this, if you pursue clicks and views, that’s all you’ll get back. If you pursue fame, that’s all you’ll get. If you pursue wealth, you’ll get that, but that’s it. There won’t be any other consolations that go along with it.

Sweeney took this advice to heart and turned down many opportunities he felt unsure about. But he does have some interesting projects in the pipeline. “I’m working on things I hope will be of value to more people than just myself. Isn’t that the heart of funeral service, though? To be of service to somebody else?” he asked. “If I’m just making videos for clicks or to generate passive income or whatever, that’s not terribly appealing.”

STAYING HUMBLE AND APPRECIATING REAL LIFE

As a small-town funeral director seen by tens of millions of people on the internet, it’s true that Sweeney has experienced something that most people will not. He says, however, these experiences haven’t changed his life in the long run.

“Everybody in my little area already knows me. I don’t ever get spotted in the wild,” he said. “Every once in a while,

I get someone’s grandkid who says, ‘Hey, I saw you on the internet!’ For the most part, I knew their grandma who I am burying, I already know the parents... it’s very rare that that has changed anything. But that’s one of the beautiful things about being in a small town – you know everyone; there’s this kind of trust that’s built into the whole thing.”

Unlike some “unique” funeral directors on popular social media sites such as TikTok, Sweeney’s personal Instagram focuses mostly on family, hobbies and faith. “When you work in the business – and I know everyone I’m burying and all the families I’m serving – [they need to] trust me implicitly to take care of their mother or father,” he said. “I can’t be like, ‘Hey, here’s me riding on a casket!’ or me doing goofy funeral stuff. I’m more beholden to the families I serve than to the faceless millions out there who want more content on the web.”

He added: “I’m a regular dude. I’m not important... I’m just another piece in this great big puzzle and I could disappear tomorrow and someone else would take my place. That’s been one of those thoughts that I’ve had that it could either be a terrible mind virus or, if you think about it like me, you think, ‘Oh, it’s okay. This is all icing on the cake.’ The fame or whatever you want to call it, it’s contingent. It’s not important. It’s secondary.”

For Sweeney, nothing is more important than the human connection and understanding that we are on this big blue marble for a limited time and it’s essential to make the most of it. “If you just connect with [families] in a very human way... we’re all going to die, you know?” he said. “I’m going to lay in a casket just like the other people that come through here. I think people like that; I think people like that you’re on their team. Or, as Charles Dickens talks about in *A Christmas Carol*, we’re all ‘fellow passengers to the grave.’ We’re all in the same trolley car, man.”

Tanya Kenevich is a freelance writer based in Florida who has covered funeral service since 2008.

THE DOULA AND THE DIRECTOR A Valuable Alliance

By Carol Milano

Among professionals helping people at the end of life, “There are often natural partnerships,” observes Matt Bailey, owner of Bailey Family Funeral Homes in Connecticut. “We’re all better off when we talk to each other. That’s important to me. Hospice and nursing home staff fit into that, as well as death doulas.”

While you’ve probably met people from local hospices or nursing homes, death doulas might be less familiar. Also known as “end-of-life doulas,” they work closely with clients nearing death, and often with their families. Funeral direc-

tors and death doulas serve the same population, with very specific but quite separate roles.

WHAT DOULAS DO (AND DON’T DO)

“I want to make sure funeral directors know that doulas have legitimacy,” declares Amy Cunningham, licensed funeral director and owner of Fitting Tribute Funeral Services



in Brooklyn, New York. “Doulas are non-medical and often work with a hospice, sometimes volunteering and sometimes paid. They’re different from a therapist or home health aide.”

“We spend more time at home with the client, while they’re living,” explains Diane Button, an end-of-life doula in California’s San Francisco Bay area. “I help people who were just diagnosed deal with a range of difficulties, including emotional struggles and whether their life has meaning. Before death, we process those emotions and work on a life review – where someone wants to be when they die, what they want the final days to be like. For instance, do they want others to be there, or music to be playing?”

By law, doulas are not allowed to enter the arena of the funeral business, emphasizes Button, who also serves as an instructor at the University of Vermont Larner College of Medicine’s End of Life Doula Professional Certification program. “I see our work as very distinct from a funeral director. It’s a different kind of care. Doulas know to stay in their own lane.”

To Teri Anderson, a doula in Franklin, Tennessee, end-of-life doulas are “trained, compassionate, non-medical companions who provide emotional and practical support for people near death, and their caregivers. Our job is to journey and support people through the dying and grieving process. We also provide bereavement care and work with healthy young people who want to live a good life and preplan.”

“A death doula can address spiritual and emotional support aspects by helping to facilitate those family conversations at end-of-life,” Bailey feels. “For example, they can help a grandchild adjust or find a way to say goodbye. It could be very valuable for our clients if they’ve had that kind of conversation already. When someone coming in on the worst day of their life is asked those questions for the first time, it’s much better if the family knows what Mom wanted.” Some people can’t say whether a parent preferred burial or cremation, he finds, or if a veteran wanted a military funeral.

Families that have received nurturing care trust their doula to refer them to a like-minded funeral director.

Cunningham works with several New York City doulas, describing them as “soulful, compassionate end-of-life workers. They hold the hand of the next of kin and help a family talk about how their loved one wishes to be remembered. Doulas are marvelous at organizing a musical playlist or an obituary and can help the family design a more meaningful transfer out of the house. They have lovely ways of putting a family at peace, so it’s a nice thing when I come on the scene.”

POTENTIAL COLLABORATIONS

Seven years ago, Bailey arranged to meet with a nearby death



doula whose name he’d come across. She soon referred a client, who had died in a hospice facility. “She might have referred them because I could have been the only funeral director she actually knew,” he notes. “Back then, death doulas were very new and very foreign to a lot of people.”

“I’ve gotten good referrals from doulas,” says Cunningham, “in the same way I meet families through hospice social workers. It’s nice to be introduced by someone the family trusts, who gets people aware of the need to plan. Doulas are liaisons to the community. One might call and say, ‘Let me tell you about this family. I think you might be the right funeral director.’”

She’s had numerous referrals for cremation or green burial by a doula who’s “already set the mood for me. She’s gotten to know the family and can tell me more about their healthcare journey – the ‘inside story.’ When I come to plan the funeral, the family already feels good about the nurturing care they got from their doula, and trusts the doula to refer them to a like-minded funeral director. Doulas can select the type of funeral home this family wants. For instance, the lowest prices or cremation service with a chapel service or a burial. Doulas I work with have knowledge of local funeral homes.”

Several funeral directors have attended Button’s University of Vermont classes. “They’re considering how to incorporate doulas into their work. Some think about a need for greater awareness in their business, where they spend time with people at such an emotional turn in their lives – after a death. How can they be more present for clients or understand the emotions better? Doulas want people to talk about the end of life in advance, and so do funeral directors.”

A death doula could supplement a funeral home’s offerings,

Button maintains. As a community activity, a doula can offer a program about end-of-life care or advance directives, or a death café session. “If I wanted to expand my business, I would approach funeral directors to open a conversation about what we could do together. This could be a win-win by adding more compassionate care to both our industries,” Button adds.

“We can help a funeral home with empowerment for widows or widowers who come in after a spouse has passed, or with imminent care, or visitation for the bereaved,” says Anderson. “We could be a greeter or usher at a funeral home, or possibly a spokesperson for them.” A funeral director told her, “People who are not religious might need an unbiased celebrant companion – a peaceful presence to help them host and conduct the funeral and rituals. I’m ready to serve in whatever way the funeral home needs, behind the scenes.”

A doula involved in aftercare, says Cunningham, can be “a blessing to the funeral director. They manage aftercare better than we do because we move quickly to the next case. Funeral directors need to see that for a firm with 360 degrees of care, we can’t do it all! We can use paraprofessionals to supplement and soften the services we offer. I’ve never had a doula stepping into a funeral director role.”

“A funeral celebrant is not trained to do grief work in a clinical format,” Bailey observes. “Funeral directors focus on what they think is important, trying to understand each family’s needs. However, personal biases can influence even the most skilled. Death doulas, who support people at the end of life, must also ensure that their personal views don’t overshadow meeting the family’s needs.”

FINDING A DOULA

The United States has no national certification requirement for death doulas. To find a qualified doula in your area, ask a reputable hospice if they work with any.

You can also visit the professional directories of two major organizations providing respected certification training. Both the International End of Life Doula Association (inelda.org) and the National End of Life Doula Alliance (nedaalliance.org),



maintain current online lists of qualified professionals who have completed their courses.

If you locate several in your area, invite them to a coffee hour for doulas at your funeral home. Give a tour, explain your services, tell them about your approach, and see who reaches out, recommends Button, author of *Dear Death: Finding Meaning in Life, Peace in Death, and Joy in an Ordinary Day*.

Then, during an interview: “Ask about training and which areas they specialize in. Would they do community outreach? What do they think they could bring to your funeral home? Some doulas are amazing when it comes to doing classes,” Button notes. “I’d want to choose a doula willing to get out and integrate with the community, which they often do through churches, retirement communities or community-education programs.”

Bailey would especially scrutinize educational qualifications. “I’d want to hear some serious preparation, lasting longer than a webinar or brief online sessions, such as certification from a larger institution,” he says.

Sharing Bailey’s concern, Cunningham reports seeing substantial progress in training during the past decade – “But there’s still no certification. Interview the person well, just as you would anyone else! Make sure someone you consider has professional boundaries. How many cases can she manage at the same time? How much experience and what type of training has this doula had?” Cunningham also checks an individual’s social media to get the tone of what they’re posting.

“I think funeral directors would do well to listen to end-of-life doulas and find out what they offer in terms of spiritual, emotional support. Try someone; see if it works for you,” Cunningham suggests. “I have not personally had a bad experience. Doulas have a way of feeling things very deeply. They keep a different pace and help us care for each other. They take time, they’re gentle, and they often have a view of death that’s holistic and beautiful. They keep me honest, and help me savor the beauty of this work.”

Carol Milano, Brooklyn, New York, is a freelance writer who has covered deathcare for more than 25 years.

“A doula involved in aftercare can be “a blessing to the funeral director. They manage aftercare better than we do because we move quickly to the next case... We can use paraprofessionals to supplement and soften the services we offer.”

From the Editor's Desk

Don't Let the Chips Fall

As the summer days were rolling toward their end, I was charged with the less-than-monumental task of putting together the menu for my family's annual Labor Day backyard bash. Key to the timing of doing the required shopping is making sure you're not hungry or thirsty – conditions that cloud decisions and directly impact quantity.

New to the menu this year were cheesesteaks rolled inside of pretzels. While not standard barbecue fare, it was one less item I had to cook.

The supermarket can be a very intimidating place, with its oh-so-many choices. This always leads me to recall exchanges I had regularly with my dad while I was growing up. I would go into the pantry and select a box of cereal for my breakfast. Upon inspecting my choice of Cocoa Krispies, my father would ask, "What's wrong with the Cheerios? You don't like them anymore?" I would point out that I still liked them but that, some days, you just felt like Cocoa Krispies.

And this was not a one-off conversation. The next day, I would select Cheerios, and he would ask, "What's wrong with the Cocoa Krispies?"

I never really knew whether he was simply being a contrarian or just busting my chops. And so I decided to remedy the situation by making my breakfast ritual one-half bowl of Cocoa Krispies and one-half bowl of Cheerios. If a third or fourth variety of cereal was on the shelf, I would pour in smaller portions so that each type was represented in my breakfast bowl.

Fast-forward to today. As I left for my local supermarket to stock up on items, I was handed a list that included a number of things, one of which was potato chips. Okay, I sighed to myself, I thought I was making the selections? I know how this goes. I would select the potato chips and upon my arrival home, someone would say, "Why did you only get those chips? I know you like them, but does anyone else?" It has gotten to the point where the potato chip question has become its own shopping experience, as I would fill my cart with nothing but bags of potato chips – enough, I assure you, to keep me crunching well into autumn.

Making choices that can easily be amended is still daunting, so I really understand the tightrope funeral directors walk when trying not to overwhelm families in the arrangement conference with too many choices. I also understand the value of "every family, every option, every time." My examples in the grocery store are silly, but there is a point. If I agonize about what flavor of potato chips to buy (and I know I'm not the only one) and wonder if I missed something, what am I going to be like when I have to make choices in an arrangement conference that will be final?

I'll be going back to the market next week, and the week after that, but in an arrangement conference, we have to live with the decisions we make forever.

Ed - Edward J. Defort
- Editor

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13625 Bishop's Dr.
Brookfield, WI 53005-6607
800-228-6332
609-815-8145
nfda.org

Editor

Edward J. Defort
(edefort@nfda.org)

Managing Editor

Dawn M. Behr
(dbehr@nfda.org)

Contributing Editor

Chris Raymond
(cjraymond@nfda.org)

Graphics

Brooke Krishok
(bkrishok@nfda.org)

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