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The Red (and Green) Flags to Look for on Your Job Search

By Welton Hong



No one likes being blindsided – not by a demeaning professor, micromanaging boss, terrible work culture or job benefits that don't benefit you much at all. That's why Rate My Professors and Glassdoor exist. At the very least, these sites can help prevent you from being caught off guard.

Now, those sites are super helpful when you're in college or considering working for a large, well-known corporation. But as a future funeral director, you can't always find extensive information about potential employers. And if you're not already in line for a specific position at a particular firm, I'm sure you've got at least a few concerns on your radar regarding your impending job search – and for good reason.

Choosing the right funeral home to begin or advance your career is a crucial decision that can significantly impact your professional growth and personal satisfaction. So, before you embark on that path, I'd like to equip you with a few red and green flags to consider before agreeing to your first job as a licensed funeral director.

Beware These Red Flags

I'll start with the red flags, aka signs that you should recon-

sider, or at least dig deeper, into working for a particular firm.

One of the first things to look at is the staff. Are there frequent staffing changes? High turnover can indicate underlying issues, such as poor management, low employee satisfaction or a toxic work environment. Ask about the average tenure of current employees.

Another potential red flag within the staff is a lack of diversity and inclusion. A funeral home that promotes diversity and inclusion within its staff and services is likely to foster a more welcoming and respectful environment for both employees and clients.

Next, don't forget to look into leadership. One big, waving red flag to look for is poor man-



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agement practices. Things such as excessive micromanagement can create a stressful work environment. Look for signs of trust and autonomy given to employees.

A more obscure but still important red flag involves inconsistencies in policies and procedures, which can lead to confusion and frustration. A well-run funeral home will have clear, consistent policies.

After reviewing the staff, you should observe the firm's business practices, an area that can reveal many red flags if you're paying attention. For example, lack of transparency is a potential red flag. If the funeral home is not upfront about its costs, services or treatment of employees, that could be a sign of deeper issues. Also, beware of pressure-sales tactics. Funeral homes that push the upselling of unnecessary services to families is a practice that reflects poorly on the ethical standards of the business.

Beyond reading online reviews, consider seeking feedback from community members or other professionals in the industry. Their insights can provide a clearer picture of the funeral home's reputation.

Another warning sign of a poor employer is outdated or poorly maintained equipment. Working in a facility with outdated equipment can hinder your ability to perform your job effectively and safely. The state of the funeral home's facilities can affect both employee morale and client perception. And an unpleasant or neglected environment is definitely a red flag.

Take notice, too, if there's an absence of training programs. If a funeral home doesn't offer training or support for continued education, this might suggest it doesn't invest in employee growth and development.

Understand that red flags aren't the only reason you shouldn't commit to a job – after all, it might just be a poor fit. But always ensure that the funeral home's values align with your own. This alignment can lead to greater job satisfaction and a sense of purpose in your work.

Green Flags: Positive Signs Of a Great Funeral Home

With the red flags out of the way, it's just as important to examine the green flags you should seek. Here are some positive indicators suggesting you should consider a funeral home as your next employer.



Positive reviews are a clear green flag. Look for consistently positive feedback from families.

Observe the firm's business practices, an area that can reveal many red flags if you are paying attention. For example, lack of transparency is a potential red flag.

The first area to explore is the business' reputation and presentation. One of the easiest green flags to find is positive reviews. Look for consistently positive feedback from families and clients. Check the online reviews, testimonials and any awards or recognitions the funeral home might have received.



Also, find out if the funeral home maintains membership in professional organizations, such as NFDA. This can be a positive indicator of its commitment to industry standards and practices.

An established history is another green flag. A funeral home with a long-standing reputation in the community often indicates stability and a commitment to quality service. Research the history of the funeral home, including how long it has been in operation and its standing within the community. A firm that actively participates in community service and outreach often reflects a genuine commitment to serving others, a core value in the funeral service industry.

As far as the presentation goes, the physical state of the funeral home can speak volumes. One that invests in modern equipment and technology is likely committed to providing the best service possible and ensuring its staff members have the tools they need to succeed. Clean, well-maintained and comfortable facilities are essential for both employees and clients.

That said, be sure to observe not only the brick and mortar but also the interactions among staff during your interview or initial visits. A supportive, collaborative team indicates a healthy work environment.

Another critical aspect of the funeral home to examine is its employee benefits. Don't be afraid to ask about paid time off, insurance and flexible scheduling. While the funeral service industry often requires long and irregular hours, the ideal funeral home will understand the importance of a work-life balance.

Look beyond traditional benefits, too. For example, a funeral home that provides mental health support, such as counseling services, demonstrates a commitment to the well-being of its staff. Dealing with death regularly can be emotionally taxing.

An especially beneficial green flag is the presence of expe-



rienced funeral directors willing to mentor newcomers like yourself. Such guidance is invaluable as you navigate the early stages of your career.

Other perks might include continued education and potential for career advancement. The best funeral homes encourage, and often finance, continued education for their staff. This can include attending industry conferences, seminars and workshops, or obtaining certifications. Inquire about potential career paths within the organization. A funeral home that promotes from within and values employee growth is a positive sign.

Remember, the best funeral homes are those that not only provide excellent services to their clients but also invest in the growth and well-being of their employees. Your first job as a funeral director sets the stage for your career, so take the time to find a place that will support and nurture your professional journey.

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It's All About Your Mindset

By Jay Dietz

In March, I had the opportunity to present to some of funeral service's future leaders at NFDA's Meet the Mentors Program. Along with two other guest presenters – Kenneth Howe and Jenni Bryant – I was blessed to spend time sharing some of my experiences in a keynote address. But the three of us also interacted directly with attendees during roundtable discussions, where we answered their questions and learned about their perspective on key issues. This article provides a summary of some of the main topics and ideas offered during my presentation.

WHAT'S YOUR MINDSET?

To begin, we reviewed an insightful piece by author Seth Godin titled "The worst person on our team." In this article, he focuses on the importance of trying to improve the sub-standard behaviors of your own team members when your business isn't experiencing optimal performance. Our nat-

ural tendency is to focus on the worst player on the opposing team (our competitors, the direct-cremation consumer, or that rogue hospice nurse, for example), rather than implementing the necessary change to our own team. The latter allows us to represent to the consumer all that is good in funeral service.

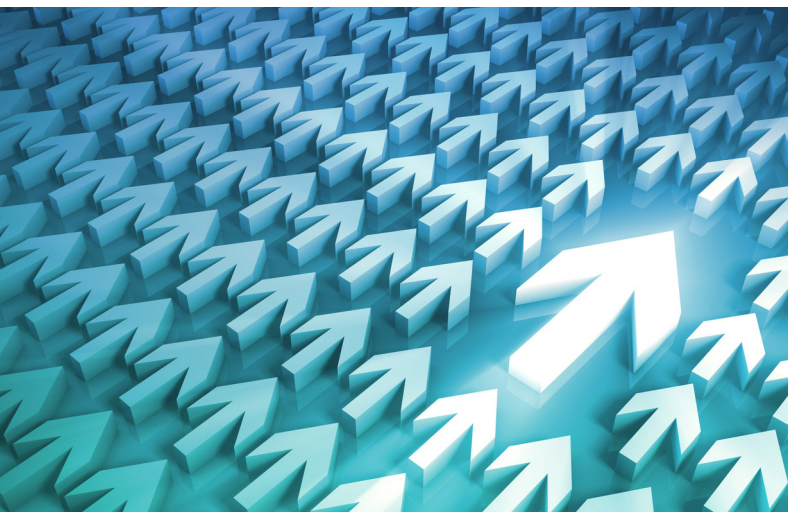
Godin's article aligned perfectly with the content I was sharing that day on adopting a "growth mindset" as we continue to face the never-ending need to adapt and change to meet the needs of today's consumers, employees and the public.

In an effort to link the pending presentation to their reality, we completed an exercise where attendees were told to identify three things about their current job that they would like to see changed. They were then asked to consider a series of qualifying questions about their changes and to pick the single, most impactful change of the three based on the following considerations:

- What is the goal of the change?
- Who would the change impact/benefit?
- Whose help is required to see the change happen?
- Who would be your "moneyballers" (those who will likely experience early success)?
- Who would resist your proposed change?

Following that exercise, participants were asked how many of them had proposed meaningful changes to their organizations. Only three of the attendees indicated that their proposed change had been implemented, and all three were tied to the improved use of social media or livestreaming. Unfortunately, these are not exactly cutting-edge topics any longer.

That brings up the question: Why are funeral homes typically so resistant to change? The answer: Because it's *difficult*



In witnessing others' success, a fixed mindset will feel personally threatened. A growth mindset will be inspired to grow in their own development.

and necessary for growth, but it can be scary, painful, exciting or fun, depending on the scenario. The reason we often struggle with change, however, is that it can cause uncertainty, threaten our competency, disrupt our routines and create a very real fear of failure. This is where adopting a growth mindset can completely change the game for each of us.

So, what is a growth mindset and how does it compare to a “fixed mindset”? With the latter, you believe you were born with a distinct set of skills and abilities, and because of those skills and your personal experiences, you have a finite list of things you can accomplish. (This does not mean you can't be successful, but it can limit the ultimate level of success you experience.) Because of your past successes, however, you often feel even more afraid to embrace change the later you are in your career.

A person with a fixed mindset often thinks he or she is either good at something or is not, period. They often get frustrated when tasks get difficult and past approaches aren't working. They do not appreciate constructive criticism from others, and they see failure as proof that they are personally “no good.” They frequently look to place blame on others, and they often refuse new approaches because they think, “We've tried that before, and it didn't work.”

Those with a growth mindset, on the other hand, believe they've learned and developed their skills and abilities through experiences and the correlating effort they put into those situations. They have a desire to learn and develop themselves and others. They embrace challenges with persistence, perseverance and grit to achieve their goals.

Next, we focused on whether this new generation of funeral professionals has the grit to be successful. I am certain they do if they find themselves in environments where their ideas are considered, and their voices heard. People with a growth mindset often believe they can learn anything they want to, and they rarely give up due to frustration. They welcome constructive criticism and believe that their failures also provide their greatest learning opportunities. They celebrate other people's successes and try to use those best practices to improve their own work for families. They love a good challenge and rarely let past failures prevent them from trying again with an adjusted approach.

In direct comparison, when faced with a challenging project, a fixed mindset wants to prove itself, whereas a growth mindset wants to improve itself.

When new opportunities present themselves, a person with a fixed mindset will often avoid the situation while a growth

mindset will wholeheartedly embrace the opportunity.

When faced with a significant obstacle or barrier, a fixed mindset will often stop while a growth mindset will find a way to persist by continually trying new approaches until they succeed.

When receiving feedback or criticism, a fixed mindset will ignore the input or defend themselves, while a growth mindset will learn from the feedback and grow in their own development.

Finally, when witnessing the success of others, a fixed mindset will feel personally threatened whereas a growth mindset will be inspired to grow their own capabilities.

While this all makes sense and sounds easy, being fully aware of our own “fixed behaviors” can prove incredibly challenging for almost anyone. This is why working as a team is such a great idea. Holding each other accountable and expanding the number of fresh ideas will always prove successful – *eventually*. If you approach your work and life in this mindset, you will be fully prepared to answer the door when challenges come knocking, which they most certainly will.

We work in a very challenging field, and the families we serve deserve our very best day after day. If you try to manage all those daily challenges alone, you will eventually feel overwhelmed, frustrated and burned out. With a team of growth-mindset people working together, however, there is literally nothing that can prevent you from experiencing success every day. Not only do you win when this happens, but your customers also benefit from this reality.

MANAGING YOURSELF THROUGH CHANGE

The first step to successfully managing change is learning how you naturally react when faced with this reality. There are four basic steps involved. First, get real about your emotions. No, this does not require a couch, a box of tissues and an hour-long session with a therapist. This requires simply realizing your natural, internal emotional reaction when faced with change. Do you feel stress when this happens? Does it come from your lack of current knowledge on the topic? Is it because you've failed in the past? Whatever the reason, all I'm suggesting is that you become aware of your-



First, learn how you naturally react when faced with change. Second, actively tell yourself that you *will* embrace a growth mindset. It reminds you that you can learn new things that will help you experience success.

self and take time to breathe and put things in perspective.

Second, actively tell yourself that you *will* embrace a growth mindset. This prevents you from spiraling when the scenarios listed above start to play out. It reminds you that you can work with others to share ideas, identify what strengths each person brings to the table, and that you can learn new things that will help you experience success.

Third, seek to learn the full “why” of the needed change. In other words, if this change is realized, what is the improvement or outcome that is desired or expected? For those in funeral service, ask yourselves what effect your true goal would have if implemented. Would it improve your customer’s experience? Would it enhance the employees’ experience? Would it bring necessary revenue into the business that allows for future success? If the “why” has true value, then embrace the challenge and start winning.

Finally, focus on what you can control. There are certain things in life that would be easier if we didn’t have to deal with gravity or the IRS, as examples, but we cannot change those realities. There are a myriad of things we can control, however, if we are willing to do the work needed to realize success.

Again, this is where working with a team can prove very beneficial. Various skill sets, connections and resources open a lot of options when it comes to solving challenges. If you consistently follow these four steps, you and your team will continue to experience victory – and winning simply never gets old.

LEADING OTHERS THROUGH CHANGE

Managing yourself during times of change can be difficult enough, but leading a team through change is a whole new kind of challenge. While most of the attendees at NFDA’s Meet the Mentors Program weren’t yet team leaders, they soon will be, so we spent a little time preparing them for that future reality.

I compared leading a team through change to eating an elephant: you must do it one bite at a time. You, the leader, must first fully embrace a growth mindset from the very beginning. In doing so, you will then find that you bring the

same behavior out of others. It’s like putting on your own oxygen mask before assisting others.

Remember, your team is watching you through the entire process. It’s time to manage the process with a consistent approach. First, review your current situation and be honest about what needs improvement. (Yes, this requires an admission that your business isn’t perfect, and that’s okay.)

Second, focus on targeted areas of improvement necessary for your organization to realize the outcomes mentioned earlier regarding the experiences of your customers, employees and the public.

Third, set specific goals for improvement, including a definition of what success looks like. In other words, ask yourself: “If we are successful implementing this change, we should expect X to result.” This answer might involve improved customer surveys, greater revenue, growing market share, a higher percentage of families selecting services, or a million other possibilities. Determine your key performance indicators and then share them with the team. Make sure you’re measuring the best metric possible to determine success.

Fourth, create a step-by-step plan and begin executing that plan. This is where the team’s involvement is critical. Give ownership of specific initiatives to individual team members. Not only does this create accountability, but it also results in personal investment in the process and pride in the outcome.

Lastly, regularly meet with the team to review results, and have individuals report on their area of responsibility. This creates natural accountability for all team members, and it allows the team to make necessary adjustments in real time for the success of the project.

PARTING THOUGHTS

We wrapped up our Meet the Mentors presentation time by walking through a couple of real-world examples our company experienced, explaining what was successful and what ended in failure.

Ultimately, I left this year’s NFDA event encouraged about the future of funeral service. Why? First, there are some wonderful young professionals working beside us who have a passion for funeral service. Make sure you set them up for long careers marked with great success.

Second, helping the bereaved as they begin their long journey of grieving and adjusting to a new reality will always be a valued service, as long as we stay relevant to those in need. This biblical truth remains: “It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting.” It is our responsibility to ensure that the bereaved have access to a house of mourning that meets their various needs. The only way to continually realize this into the future is to constantly look inward, challenge our status quo and, where appropriate, implement change.

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EMPLOYEE TURNOVER AND RETENTION

Why They Leave and Can You Encourage Them to Stay?

By William E. Ford

Few would debate that high employee turnover is a bad thing. Aside from the obvious costs of recruiting and hiring, businesses also incur the costs of training new employees.

In addition, there are “hidden costs” that can prove even more significant. Such costs include poor customer service, the need for rework, unfocused management, poor employee morale, and the potential loss of both customers and good employees.

Why do employees leave? The usual assumption is that people depart because they have found a better-paying job. A recent SESCO survey, however, indicated that this might not be the case. The survey asked employees which factors were most important in the decision to leave their jobs. Twenty-six percent said their perception of managers being inept was the primary motivator for quitting. Managers were cited for poor communication; being overly critical and petty; taking credit for their employees’ accomplishments; being unclear in giving directions; rudeness and a general lack of support; and performance feedback.

The next significant factor in the decision to leave was “no career growth potential” (13%). “Inadequate compensation” was tied with “poor training program” and “inadequate performance appraisals,” both at 7%.

What measures can be taken to reduce employee turnover? Listed below are some SESCO strategies that will likely reduce turnover in most organizations.

Paying competitive wages is important but is not the only method to improve retention, nor is it a guarantee.

Hire the right people: Better decisions on the front end of the employment relationship will bring positive results. Pre-employment assessment tools and behavioral-based interviewing can help an organization make better hiring decisions.

Ensure internally equitable wages: Paying competitive wages is important, but it is not the only method to improve employee retention, nor is it a guarantee. Employees must know that their position and performance reflect an equitable system of compensation. Do not hire over, or too close to, existing employees.

Integrate for success: The first few weeks of employment are the most critical to lay the foundation for long-term commitment. A well-planned orientation program demonstrates commitment to a new hire.

Some organizations have found that a mentoring process is also very helpful. A co-worker or manager is assigned to each new hire, and the mentor’s role is to help the newcomer reach a comfort level within the new work environment. This rapport and relationship building can be a key element in putting the new employee on a track for success in the organization.

Phase-in training: Rather than throw a new employee into several weeks of job-specific training right away, just start with the basic, essential training. As the employee gains experience, offer further training in recognition of his or her growth.

Provide growth opportunities: Employees today are taking ownership of their careers and recognize the need to refine and upgrade their skills. Accessible and relevant training increases the likelihood that turnover rates will decline.

Motivate: Assess the underlying motivators for work beyond the paycheck. Provide recognition, and design strategies to reinforce what matters most.

Enlist problem-solvers: When possible, invite employees

Why Most New Hires Fail

A recent study reported that 46% of newly hired employees will quit within the first 18 months of employment and only 19% will remain long-term.

Contrary to popular belief, however, technical skills are not the primary reason new hires fail. Instead, poor interpersonal skills dominate the list, flaws that many of their managers admit were overlooked during the interview process.

The study also found that new hires fail because:

- 26% can't accept feedback

- 23% are unable to understand and manage emotions
- 17% lack the necessary motivation to excel
- 15% have the wrong temperament for the job
- 11% lack the necessary technical skills.

While the new-hire failure rate is distressing, it is not surprising that 82% of managers reported not being trained in the interview process or in implementing necessary assessment

tools to properly screen applicants.

Sources indicate that turnover per full-time employee costs an employer:

- *Hourly, non-exempt*: half of the employee's annual salary
- *Exempt, professional*: two times the employee's annual salary.

High turnover is a serious symptom of a lack of systems and training in a company's screening and hiring techniques. Fortunately, causes can be easily detected and cures readily developed and implemented.

to help solve company problems. A shared approach creates ownership for employees in the organization's success.

Make rewards count: Rewards should be immediate and personal. Receiving a bonus check at year-end might mean less than smaller, frequent payouts. In addition, a personal note usually means more than a generic award.

Recognize longevity: Employees appreciate an employer who honors long service.

Improve communications: Tell employees periodically about the advantages of employment with your organization. Utilize employee-opinion surveys and benchmark competitors. Demand that good communications be a priority for all managers, and measure their progress.

Respect employees: Loyalty, like respect, is a value that appears to be reciprocal. People do not necessarily commit to an organization; they commit to co-workers and culture. Employees are most content when they can become an integral part of their work community.

Train management: Ensure that management, especial-

ly the front line, is well trained and understands the importance of their leadership role.

Focus on the exit interview: Knowing why employees leave is instrumental in understanding turnover. Tracking the reasons for departures might uncover patterns that, when addressed, will help stem further turnover.

These measures have been successful in reducing employee turnover. While each one might not be appropriate for every organization, any company will find some of them practical and beneficial. Implementing these measures can reduce the high costs of employee turnover and assist in the retention of a productive, loyal and satisfied workforce.

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Mental Health and the Funeral Director

By David R. Penepent, Ph.D.

Professional funeral directors are challenged every day as they navigate the loss and grief of others. Over time, this continual exposure to negative emotions can have a significant impact on their own emotional well-being. Though they might be perceived as pillars of strength, funeral directors rarely receive public recognition for the vital role they play in supporting others during times of grief. When death disrupts the fabric of relationships, funeral directors sacrifice their own needs to tend to the needs of others.

Addressing the mental health needs of funeral directors

and deathcare providers can be taboo, unfortunately – a topic best left unspoken in public discourse. Still, the silence surrounding this issue has contributed to a range of personal struggles within the profession, including divorce, substance abuse, mental health crises, and even suicide. It is time to break the silence and shine a light on the mental health challenges that professional funeral directors face.

STRENGTH AND POISE ABOVE ALL ELSE

Early in their professional careers, many funeral direc-



tors receive sage advice from their mentors: “Funeral directors direct, the bereaved grieve. Never cross that line.” Such words, deeply ingrained in the profession, set the boundaries for their role.

Funeral directors uphold their image as unwavering pillars of strength, always available to provide compassionate support to the bereaved and to maintain a facade of composure at all times. Behind this facade, however, lies the reality of human vulnerability. When the doors close and the spotlight fades, the true human experience emerges. Despite an outward image of strength and poise, funeral directors struggle with their own emotional complexities and vulnerabilities.

In my experience as a professional funeral director, I have encountered and wrestled with such emotional complexities. Many of my colleagues would agree that among the most challenging cases to navigate are those involving children. The anguish of grieving parents – each seeking answers as to why such a tragedy occurred – presents a particularly heart-wrenching scenario.

In such cases, offering words of solace to the bereaved often feels inadequate, for the loss of a child defies the natural order of life, though the harsh reality is that death spares no one, no matter their age, race, gender or nationality. In spite of the instinctual belief that babies should be shielded from death, its indiscriminate grip serves as a stark reminder of life’s fragility. In such moments, funeral directors must summon their strength to set aside personal emotions and swiftly offer guidance and support. This duty demands not only professionalism but also a deep sense of empathy for the anguish of those in mourning.

During my tenure managing a funeral home in central New York, a poignant memory was etched in my mind. On a somber afternoon, a young mother and father arrived at the funeral home. As we entered the arrangement room together, a heavy silence enveloped us, punctuated only by the sound of tears streaming down the mother’s cheeks. With steadfast composure, I initiated the conversation, as she whispered repeatedly, “My baby is gone. My baby is gone.”

Her husband stood by her side, offering what solace he could in the face of her profound grief, and explained: “Our six-month-old baby died of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, and we need to lay him to rest in our family plot.”

When the day of the services arrived, the family gathered

for visitation and a service at the funeral home. The minister spoke words of comfort, providing a glimmer of solace amid the darkness of grief. Throughout these final rituals, the parents drew closer to bidding their final farewells to a cherished child they would never see grow.

When we reached the gravesite, a heartrending scene unfolded. The father, carrying the small cherub casket, led the procession toward the grave, as the mother and her parents followed closely behind. I walked alongside the father, offering silent support. When he arrived at the graveside, he carefully placed the casket on its stand, and the minister commenced his committal prayers. Locked in a tender embrace, the parents gazed upon the vessel containing their beloved child’s remains.

When the prayers were done, I softly approached the father, offering him the opportunity to participate in laying his son to rest. Though he initially declined, the father’s resolve wavered as his wife urged him to assist me. Her determined look led him to acquiesce. Together, we removed the artificial turf and plywood covering the grave, revealing the stark reality of the earth below.

As I stepped into the three-foot grave, I accepted the child tenderly from the father’s trembling hands. The chill of the earth seeped into my bones as I gently placed the casket on the dark brown earth below.

In the moment that the father lifted me from the grave, tears of raw emotion finally flowed freely down his cheeks. Pulling me into a tight embrace, he whispered a heartfelt thank you. After a brief hug, I guided him to his wife’s waiting arms. As they embraced and shared their grief and support, they slowly made their way back to their car, united in their sorrow, yet strengthened by the bonds of love and compassion.

In the moment the father helped me from the grave, tears of raw emotion finally flowed freely down his cheeks and he whispered a heartfelt thank-you.

STOIC, BUT AT WHAT COST?

Funeral directors shoulder the weight of emotional burdens such as this every day, facing the raw grief of families and individuals navigating profound loss. The constant exposure to intense emotions takes a toll, leading to emotional exhaustion and a deepening sense of empathy as they bear witness to the pain of others. Funeral directors often find themselves grappling with their own emotional well-being, susceptible to feelings of depression when they absorb the sorrow that surrounds them, as the demanding nature of

their profession adds another layer of stress to their lives.

The pressure to maintain composure and professionalism in the face of such profound sorrow can feel overwhelming, yet the notion of stoically hiding one's emotions can be detrimental in the long run. Human beings are inherently social creatures, designed to connect and empathize with others. The role of professional funeral directors necessitates forming brief-yet-meaningful relationships with grieving individuals, providing them with the empathy and emotional support so desperately needed during a time of loss.

Attempting to shelter or suppress emotions not only undermines the fundamental aspect of human connection but also hinders the funeral director's ability to effectively fulfill his or her role. The most adept funeral directors understand the importance of entering the emotional space of empathy, embracing the sadness alongside those they serve.

By immersing themselves in the depths of grief, funeral directors gain insight into the unique needs of each individual and can offer a genuine glimmer of hope amidst the darkness. It is through this profound connection and understanding that they are able to provide solace and comfort to those in mourning and to guide the bereaved through the most challenging moments of their lives.

Nonetheless, the continuous exposure to such intense emotions, coupled with the expectation to remain stoic and composed, can gradually erode the mental well-being of funeral directors. The constant immersion in grief without adequate avenues for processing and expressing their own emotions can lead to a sense of emotional isolation and detachment.

Over time, the suppression of personal feelings and the weight of carrying others' burdens can escalate into chronic stress and ultimately manifest as depression. By neglecting their own emotional needs and perpetually prioritizing the needs of others, funeral directors risk sacrificing their mental health, which highlights the importance of recognizing and addressing the toll of emotional labor within the profession.

The inability to find respite from the emotional demands of the job can have profound consequences on funeral directors' mental well-being.

OTHER CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

The demanding schedule of funeral directors, characterized by long hours and relentless dedication, can also take a significant toll on mental and emotional well-being. Because they often extend their workdays well beyond the conventional 9-to-5, funeral directors commit themselves to providing unwavering support to grieving families, even on evenings and weekends.

This dedication comes at a cost, however, for the constant juggling of responsibilities – from managing funeral arrangements to addressing personal family matters – can lead to feeling overwhelmed and burned out. The pressure to maintain professionalism and composure in the face of such intense emotional strain further exacerbates the challenges funeral directors face, creating an environment ripe for the development of depression and other mental-health concerns.

Often dubbed as “last responders,” funeral directors are typically the unsung heroes of society, receiving little to no recognition for their vital role in crises. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, funeral directors found themselves on the front lines, risking their own well-being to transport and care for the deceased, often in the absence of grieving families.

Even though they were the backbone of support during a national emergency, their tireless efforts often went unnoticed, overshadowed by accolades bestowed on other “first responders.” While politicians and public officials lauded the bravery of front-line workers, the professional funeral directors who provided compassionate care to the deceased were rarely acknowledged, leaving them feeling overlooked and undervalued.

This lack of recognition is a pervasive issue and can lead to a sense of disillusionment and unfulfillment. The absence of recognition not only undermines the dedication of funeral directors but also contributes to feelings of social isolation and loneliness as they question the significance of their role and the value of their contributions. Funeral directors might question whether their efforts are truly appreciated, prompting them to reflect on whether the sacrifices they make are indeed worthwhile.

Social isolation is a prevalent challenge faced by funeral directors, stemming from the demanding nature and emotional tolls of the profession. The intense emotional demands of the job often leave funeral directors with limited time and energy for social activities or to maintain quality familial relationships outside of work. When they are constantly immersed in grief and loss, they might struggle to switch off from the emotional intensity of their work and engage in meaningful interactions with friends and loved ones. As funeral directors deal with the disconnect between their professional obligations and their personal lives, this isolation can deepen feelings of loneliness and exacerbate the risk of depression.

The inability to find respite from the emotional demands of their work can have profound consequences on the mental well-being of funeral directors. As they navigate the complexities of grief and loss every day, the lack of social support and meaningful connections outside of work only compounds their feelings of isolation and despair. Without a strong support network to lean on, funeral directors might find themselves trapped in a cycle of loneliness and depression, further highlighting the need for greater recognition and support for the invaluable contributions they make to society.

The toll of social isolationism on funeral directors can sometimes lead to negative coping mechanisms, such as turning to alcohol, using drugs recreationally, or engaging in other vices. Faced with the overwhelming emotional burden of their work and the absence of meaningful social connections, some funeral directors might seek solace in substance abuse as a temporary escape from their reality. Relying on such unhealthy coping mechanisms, however, only serves to exacerbate feelings of loneliness and despair, ultimately perpetuating a cycle of self-destructive behavior.

Furthermore, funeral directors are not immune to the trials and tribulations of family life, which can become amplified in the midst of social isolationism. When experiencing normal family matters, such as conflicts or challenges, funeral directors might find themselves feeling even more isolated and abandoned. The inability to share their burdens with loved ones, or to seek support during difficult times, can intensify feelings of loneliness and reinforce the sense of being emotionally adrift.

Despite being regarded as one of the noblest professions in society, the emotional toll funeral directing takes on the human psyche should not be underestimated. The constant exposure to grief and loss, coupled with the isolation and lack of recognition, can chip away at the mental and emotional resilience of funeral directors. Left unchecked, these internal struggles can lead to a downward spiral of despair and depression, which highlights the urgent need for greater awareness and support for the mental health and well-being of those who dedicate their lives to serving others at a most vulnerable time.

DYNAMIC CHANGE NEEDED

The stigma surrounding mental-health issues presents a significant barrier for funeral directors in seeking the help and support they require. In certain communities or cultures, discussions about mental health are met with disdain or are outright taboo, further exacerbating feelings of shame and isolation for funeral directors who struggle with depression. The fear of being judged by peers, or facing potential professional repercussions, might deter them from reaching out for assistance, thereby leaving them to suffer in silence and prolong their emotional distress.

Moreover, the reluctance to openly discuss mental-health concerns within the funeral industry perpetuates a culture of secrecy and denial that can hinder efforts to address mental well-being. The pressure to maintain an image of strength and composure, coupled with the fear of being perceived as weak or incompetent, creates a toxic environment in which individuals feel compelled to conceal their struggles instead of seeking help. As a result, funeral directors might continue to struggle with their mental health in isolation, further perpetuating the cycle of stigma and preventing them from accessing the support and resources they desperately need.

There is no shame in seeking professional psychological help to navigate the complexities of the funeral profession and to address personal family issues. In fact, recognizing

The toll of social isolationism on funeral directors can lead to adopting negative coping mechanisms.

the need for support and actively seeking assistance demonstrates strength and resilience. Funeral directors shoulder immense emotional burdens in their line of work, for they are regularly exposed to the raw grief of families who are experiencing profound loss.

These experiences, coupled with the demands of managing personal family life and the toll of social isolation, can significantly impact a funeral director's mental well-being. By acknowledging the challenges they face and proactively seeking professional help, funeral directors can take crucial steps toward maintaining their emotional resilience and overall well-being.

Despite their commitment to serving others in their time of need, funeral directors must also prioritize their own well-being to prevent the erosion of their mental health. The relentless workload and emotional burden they carry necessitate the implementation of effective self-care strategies and the cultivation of a supportive work environment. This includes setting boundaries, practicing stress management techniques, and engaging in activities that promote relaxation and rejuvenation. By acknowledging the challenges they face and seeking appropriate resources and support, funeral directors can better navigate the inherent stressors of their profession and safeguard their mental health.

Additionally, seeking support from colleagues who understand the unique challenges of the industry can provide valuable validation and camaraderie. That said, it is equally important to recognize when additional assistance is needed from mental-health professionals, who can offer specialized guidance and support tailored to the individual needs of funeral directors. They can help professionals navigate through difficult emotions and develop healthy coping mechanisms.

By addressing emotional concerns openly and proactively, funeral directors can break the cycle of stigma surrounding mental-health issues within the profession. Seeking professional psychological help is not a sign of weakness but rather a proactive step toward self-care and emotional well-being.

Through collaboration with mental-health professionals, colleagues and support networks, funeral directors can cultivate resilience, enhance their coping strategies, and manage the emotional challenges effectively inherent in their professional and personal lives.

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Inside the 2024 NFDA Consumer Awareness and Preferences Survey

By Deana Gillespie and Edward J. Defort

Connecting with consumers is key to sustainability for funeral directors, but getting inside the customer's head becomes more challenging every year for professionals looking to stay ahead of the curve when it comes to memorialization trends and preferences. There's only one sure way to find out what someone wants – ask them! And NFDA has been doing just that since 2012.

NFDA recently conducted its 13th annual Consumer Awareness and Preferences Survey. With each iteration, the association builds a deeper database that helps separate trends from aberrations, ultimately reflecting greater statistical significance and a higher level of reliability.

Analyzing the data from the 2024 survey revealed some discernible shifts in consumer attitudes, particularly in the areas of online shopping and arrangements.

The study's main objectives:

- Measure consumer awareness and perceptions about funerals, and funeral goods and services, to help professionals improve the quality of service they provide by learning more about consumer attitudes toward funeral service trends.
- Track changes in consumer awareness and preferences since 2012.
- Learn more about consumer attitudes toward new trends in funeral service, prearranging and prepaying, as well as consumer awareness of NFDA initiatives.
- Whenever possible, to compare results to previous NFDA Consumer Awareness and Preferences surveys.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted March 13-18, 2024. Survey invitations were emailed to an online consumer panel consisting of Americans age 40 and older.

A sampling method was utilized that was designed to generate a good representation of different racial/ethnic groups:

- 764 surveys obtained from the general population (primarily White)
- 148 from the Black/African-American population
- 155 from the Asian population
- 159 from the Hispanic population
- 1,226 completed surveys returned (includes other races not listed above).

Results for all respondents are projectable within a range of +2.8% (with 95% confidence). Please note that consum-

ers who participate in online panels are typically higher-than-average internet users with higher incomes and higher education levels.

THE OVERVIEW

As in past surveys, NFDA asked consumers about a wide variety of topics, including shopping for a funeral home, planning for a funeral, why they chose one funeral home over another, social media, religion, clergy, celebrants, green funerals, body donation, preneed, cremation and memorialization.

The most notable observations in this survey wave include the consumer shift to online shopping and decision-making. An increasing number of consumers shop online, and more than two-thirds of them (67.4%) visited a funeral home website when they planned a funeral or memorial service – a 17.7% increase since 2022.

Significantly, 37.4% of those consumers made all of their arrangements online – a hefty 12.5% increase since 2022 – and 40.8% started the arrangement process online but followed up with a funeral director.

In describing their online experience, 60.4% of respondents thought the online planning process was a good experience but felt they still needed a funeral directors assistance. This is an increase of 13.2% over 2023. Nearly one-third (31.7%), however, were satisfied with the experience and were able to accomplish everything they wanted online.



An increasing number of consumers shop online, and more than two-thirds visited a funeral home website.

34.4% said their first interaction with a funeral home was online – a dramatic increase of 20.8% over 2023.



Underscoring the shift in consumer buying habits, 34.4% of respondents said their first interaction with a funeral home was online – a dramatic increase of 20.8% over last year.

Further, 19.5% of respondents would prefer to make funeral prearrangements online versus speaking directly to a funeral director.

INCREASED USE OF FUNERAL HOME WEBSITES AND FACEBOOK

The 2024 survey pointed to the increased usage of funeral home websites and Facebook pages. This year, two-thirds of consumers have visited a funeral home's website, primarily to look for an obituary, price information, information about planning a funeral or to look for funeral/memorial service options.

Staying with the online theme, when selecting a funeral home, more than half of respondents said online reviews solidified their decision and/or steered them toward a particular funeral home (up 14.5% since 2023).

Facebook remains the most dominant of the social media platforms, with 92.3% of respondents reporting they have used Facebook, and 70.9% stating they use it daily or several times per week.

Nearly half of those surveyed (47.9%) who use Facebook have visited a funeral home's Facebook page, primarily to look for an obituary.

One of the most dramatic changes over the years is in the number of consumers who have used the services of a funeral home they found on Facebook. This year, 33.9% who use Facebook said they have used the services of a funeral home they found on Facebook, which is nearly double the 17.6% reported in 2022.

INCREASE IN FUNERAL HOME SHOPPING

Almost half of consumers (48.3%) called/visited more than

one funeral home when they planned a funeral, which is up 17.7% since 2022. Of the consumers who visited or called more than one, 57.7% did so to compare prices and 52.7% to check availability.

Of the 57.7% who compared prices, 49.6% obtained pricing information directly from the funeral home, and 31% obtained it by phoning the funeral home. Most respondents (70.3%) felt it was "easy" or "very easy" to obtain pricing information.

The main reason respondents chose a particular funeral home was because of availability (17.6%), an existing relationship with a funeral director (16.0%) or affordable price (14.4%).

THE GPL AND ITS IMPACT ON CONSUMER DECISIONS

Of the respondents who contacted more than one funeral home when planning a service, 71.2% said they received a General Price List (GPL). Another 15.3% did not remember receiving one, and 13.5% said they did not receive one.

That said, NFDA's latest survey also offered this confounding answer to a GPL question: Almost all respondents (94.5%) felt that the GPL was helpful and easy to understand.

As the Federal Trade Commission mulls over revisions to its Funeral Rule, NFDA's survey respondents seem to favor one of the likely outcomes of the review process – 78.2% of respondents feel it should be mandatory for funeral homes to post their prices online.

Underscoring that point, the survey found that when selecting a funeral home, 59.2% of respondents stated they would be much more likely to engage the funeral home if it had its GPL posted online.

RELIGION AND VENUE

A religious component is still an important part of a funeral for most consumers. Half of respondents felt that having a re-

More than half said online reviews solidified their decision and/or steered them toward a funeral home.





Almost all of the 2024 respondents (94.5%) felt that the GPL was helpful and easy to understand.

religious component as part of a funeral was “very important.” When asked about affiliation, 57% of respondents identified as Christian, while 18.2% had no religious preference.

About 4 in 10 respondents (41.9%) felt it was “very important” to have the body/cremated remains present at a funeral.

This year, 62% of respondents reported having attended a

funeral at a location other than a funeral home or place of worship. Furthermore, 56.1% of respondents have attended a funeral where a non faith leader presided over the service, up significantly from 40.2% in 2022.

LIVESTREAMING

One of the most immediate, tangible affects of the COVID-19 pandemic was the rise in the livestreaming of memorial services. Almost one-third of respondents would arrange for friends/relatives to participate in a funeral/memorial via a streaming service.

PREARRANGEMENTS AND PREPAYING

Contrary to at-need shopping tendencies, when making prearrangements, 80.5% would prefer to make those arrangements by speaking directly to a funeral director. However, only 10.2% have actually made prearrangements in writing with a funeral director.

Just over a quarter of respondents (26.4%) have prearranged and prepaid for their funerals. The main reasons include to guarantee the prices of products and services; to spend down their estate to become eligible for Medicaid; and so survivors won't have to pay for arrangements.

*Deana Gillespie is NFDA senior research manager.
Edward Defort is editor of NFDA Publications.*

Providing Light In the Darkness

By Pamela Reidy

Like many soon-to-be college graduates, Nicholas Zecco gets excited when he talks about his vocational aspirations. Unlike his fellow classmates, however, he rarely receives an enthusiastic response.

While his peers are aspiring lawyers and accountants, Zecco's decision to become a funeral service professional is typically met with remarks such as, “Oh, that's morbid. How depressing and sad.”

Despite such awkward responses, he remains confident and eager about his chosen profession. He recalls, “At one time, I was almost embarrassed to say I worked at a funeral home. Now, I embrace the opportunity to become a full-time funeral professional, with hopes of guiding people into the light at a time when their world is so dark.”

It was a personal experience that paved the path to Zecco's career decision. In 2018, when his beloved grandfather passed away after years of declining health, he witnessed firsthand the impact funeral service professionals made on his family's healing. From the moment they arrived at his home to



take his grandfather into their care through the preparation meetings and the funeral celebration, Zecco felt something special was happening. “It was in the church at his funeral that I had my epiphany,” he remembers. “It was as if no one else was there except me, the casket and the funeral service professionals. I knew, at that moment, I was being called to something special. I have come to appreciate my calling as a chance to help tell a person’s story.”

Zecco describes the work this way: “When funeral service professionals start a journey with a family – whether a death occurs at home, a nursing home or hospital – we begin a relationship in a moment that is raw; a moment when someone is having the worst day of their life. We begin immediately embracing their pain by taking them and their loved one into our care.”

He adds, “From there, we provide solace and comfort in every action, from preparing the body to telling a life’s story through obituary writing, social-media posts, calling hours, visitation, family gatherings, celebrations, memorial services and bereavement sessions.”

Zecco began working in funeral homes at the age of 16, assisting with parking cars, setting up the rooms, and other secondary tasks. He has worked in three different funeral homes and says, “I am honored to enter a career in which I have met so many caring, competent professionals.”

“Compassion,” he concludes, “is the core value of every funeral service professional I have worked with. I want to be a part of that.”

The way we ritualize death is rapidly changing, a fact that doesn’t discourage but instead interests Zecco. “I want to help people grieving a loss – especially my generation, whose fear of death impacts their choices for honoring loved ones.”

For eons, the ritual of honoring the dead has been practiced in nearly every civilization – their traditions shaped by ethnicity, religious belief and cultural norms. All of this is rapidly changing. Zecco sees a great opportunity for helping people who are facing the death of a loved one but feel unsure of how to tell their story and celebrate their life. He says, “The relationship a family has with their funeral director takes place at a significant and intimate time in their lives. I am always pleased when I greet a new family with the customary handshake and, as they leave, it turns into a hug. People are yearning for guidance and help; it is a privilege to offer it.”

Not only is the manner of death rituals changing, but so too are the demographics of people entering the funeral

“When [we] start a journey with a family, we begin the relationship in a moment that is raw... and we immediately embrace their pain.”

“I want to help people fear death less, especially... my generation, whose fear of death impacts their choices for honoring loved ones.”

service profession. The National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA) reports that 89.2% of funeral homes are family owned and operated. The majority of funeral directors are second or even third generation. Zecco, however, is among an increasing number of young people who are first-generation funeral service professionals, a fact of which he is proud.

Similarly, the number of women entering the profession has changed. In their blog on gender dominance, NFDA cites a steady increase in its female membership since 2004. Moreover, the American Board of Funeral Service Education reports: “In 2017, nearly 65% of graduates from funeral director programs in the United States were female.”

As funerals transform into celebrations of life, memorials and personal rituals, the basic attributes and skills of a funeral service professional remain the same. A funeral director needs to be compassionate, sensitive and understanding, with an eye for detail and the ability to remain calm under pressure. Good management skills are also necessary.

Zecco had a chance to explore these attributes in a self-designed independent study titled “Funeral Service Management,” which he completed at Assumption University. His study also included grief psychology, bereavement, and the daily routine of a funeral service professional.

As one who has worked as a non-professional in the industry for years, he eagerly looks forward to an apprenticeship, attendance and graduation from mortuary school, as well as a lifelong career in funeral service. He looks forward to “the richness of relationships beyond the daily tasks” of arranging dates, times and locations of services, setting up flowers and transportation, managing team members, explaining funeral laws and completing required paperwork or advising families on final disposition.

“My prime motive is to help people,” he concludes. “I want to help people fear death less, especially those in my generation.”

When asked how he will measure his success as a funeral service professional, Zecco said, “I will be successful when I have helped people break the barrier of fear, knowing that even for a short period of time, I was a light in the dark walking a family through their first days of grief, helping them tell their story, establishing the kind of relationship that assures them I will be there for them for years to come.”

Pamela Reidy is director of community education at Miles Funeral Homes in Holden and Sterling, Massachusetts.

From the Editor's Desk



It's a Two-Way Street

Days after receiving Jay Dietz's article about his experience at this year's NFDA Meet the Mentors event, I found myself reflecting on it still. It brought to mind when I first started in journalism as a part-time reporter covering municipal council meetings and there was no one available with space under their wing to take me on as a mentee. Well, there was a guy who kept a fifth of vodka in his desk drawer, but his idea of a "mentee" was someone to run to the liquor store to fetch a refill.

Instead, I went to the meetings and hoped that something had happened to write about. When I returned to the newsroom, the smug veteran reporters were typing up their reports. They often took coffee breaks in the middle of writing their stories, thereby preventing late-arriving reporters from having access to a terminal, which was crucial to meeting the deadline for the daily paper.

Not that I was picturing some wise old owl perched on a bookshelf dispensing nuggets of wisdom like birdseed, but a little direction would have been super.

It wasn't until I started in funeral service that I discovered co-workers who actually took time to offer context to a story as it was being assigned, helpfully pointing out where the copy could be improved.

There are teachers, and there are mentors. The terms can be interchangeable, but not always. A good mentor will not only be proficient in book knowledge but also in areas not covered in school, such as how to deal with a diva reporter who monopolizes the computer terminals when you have a deadline.

The mentor/mentee relationship is a two-way street – both have to put in the work. A good mentor wants someone to challenge them, to keep them on their toes. Being a mentor is about patience, about nurturing that spark of potential in someone else. It's about tough love and pushing someone to be their best self, even when they'd rather be binge-watching reality TV.

Mentors are crucial for professional growth, especially in a time when attracting top performers is more challenging. The funeral service profession needs more people who can teach, inspire and maybe, just maybe, find someone who demonstrates a willingness to learn and grow.

Ed - Edward J. Defort
- Editor

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