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# Are You Future Ready?

## The importance of starting your personal brand right now.

By Welton Hong

If you’re reading this, you’re probably on your way to becoming one of the faces, if not the face, of a funeral home. And whether you become the most recognizable face of your funeral home or one of many, nearly everything you do is an extension – and therefore a representation – of the funeral home as a whole.

No pressure, right?

But my guess is you already know what a big responsibility being a funeral director is. Whatever drew you to the field initially probably gave you insight into how much weight this role can carry.

When you graduate, you won’t be just a funeral director, or eventually a business owner – you’ll be a guide, a source of comfort and potentially a well-known community member with influence. So whether you’re helping a family plan a service, chatting with someone at a community event or posting online, everything you do should reflect the values and compassion that define you.

This is why I’m a big champion of personal branding for funeral directors. As the name implies, personal branding means creating your own personal brand – the unique com-



ination of skills, experiences and personality that sets you apart. It’s how you present yourself to the world, shaping how others perceive you. If you’ve ever followed a dog or cat on TikTok or Instagram, watched a political speech or debate, or witnessed the cyclical rise and fall of a celebrity, you’ve already been exposed to the power of personal branding.

For a funeral director, this means showcasing not just your professional expertise but also your compassion, values and commitment to helping families during difficult times. Your personal brand is the story you tell – through your actions, presence and online persona – about who you are and why families can trust you. It’s what makes you memorable and relatable, giving families a reason to choose you over someone else.

Being the face of your funeral home isn’t just a title you earn after graduation; it’s a mindset you can start develop-



ing now. It's about showing up as you in every interaction, whether you're helping a professor with a project, assisting at a service during your internship or simply connecting with a family. The impression you leave today can shape the relationships you build tomorrow.

So, while it might be a tad too early to start building an entire marketing strategy for your future funeral home, it's certainly not too early to start building your personal brand. In fact, now is possibly the best time to decide what type of funeral director you want to be and how you want to be seen.

### STEPS TO BUILDING YOUR PERSONAL BRAND

Building your personal brand begins with understanding who you are and what you stand for. It sounds daunting, I know, but my advice is to reflect on what inspired you to become a funeral director and the values that guide your career aspirations. These core principles will form the foundation of your personal brand and help distinguish you from others in the field.

Sharing your journey, even as a student, can prove compelling. Whether it's explaining why you chose this profession or highlighting the lessons you're learning, your story resonates with peers, mentors and future clients alike.

And if you haven't done so already, establishing an online presence is essential. Post about your studies, share insights and connect with industry professionals on platforms such as LinkedIn or Instagram. Authenticity matters more than perfection, so let your true personality shine through in your content.

If you already have a prominent online presence, then it might also be time to reevaluate whether you're putting out the right message. While authenticity is important, it should come with a good dose of professionalism, too. Balance is key.

Beyond the digital world, immerse yourself in your community by attending events, volunteering, and engaging with local initiatives. These actions demonstrate you're invested in more than just your career – you're committed to the people you'll serve.

As you gain experience through internships or practice, take time to listen to families and learn from their stories. These interactions can provide invaluable insights and shape your perspective, becoming part of your personal narrative.

Sharing what you've learned through blogs, presentations or social media posts will position you as a thoughtful and knowledgeable contributor to the field. Staying genuine in all these efforts is crucial; sincerity builds trust and ensures your brand is both strong and enduring.

### THE BIGGER PICTURE

People choose a funeral home because they feel a connection. They want comfort. They want to trust the person who's going to guide them through one of the toughest times in their lives. That's where your personal brand comes in. It lets people see the real you – the person behind the title.

Personal branding is powerful because people trust people. Even as a student, sharing your story and showing who you are helps build trust and relatability. The earlier you start instilling trust in your community, the better.

Branding yourself also helps you stand out. Let's face it, many funeral directors offer similar services. Your personal brand is what will set you apart when you enter the field.

It also prepares you for the next generation. Younger families value authenticity. They're looking for someone real, not just another professional.

**Are you putting out the right message on your social platforms? While authenticity is important, it should come with a good dose of professionalism. Balance is key.**

When you build a personal brand as a student, you're laying the groundwork for a successful and impactful career. Families who trust you will recommend you. Communities that know you will rely on you. And, over time, you'll become more than just a funeral director – you'll become a symbol of care and compassion people remember for generations.

So, start now. Share your story. Show who you are.

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*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*



# Social Conversations and Self-Expression in the Digital Universe

By Edward J. Defort

It was late-night talk show host Conan O'Brien who first quipped that there is big consolidation afoot in the field of social media. He joked that Twitter, YouTube and Facebook were going to merge, with the resulting firm known as "You Twit Face."

One of the challenges social media brings to the table is not learning how to use it, which itself can be a challenge, but in which platform to invest your time. Facebook, Instagram and YouTube remain as probably the three most top-of-mind options. Fallen by the wayside is MySpace, which is still active but has been retooled to a shell of its former self. Apple's venture into social media on iTunes, called Ping, was designed to allow fans to connect with artists, but it failed to generate any buzz. There were other attempts, including ConnectU, VitalSkate, The Hub, Yahoo! Buzz and Friendster.

It's true that as the average age of a typical Facebook user increases, a new communication frontier emerges. If I am to go by the teenagers I know, it's that they have embraced the mini-reality series of Snapchat.

**Every generation has its own nuances to consider. But while the format and tone change, the purpose is still to effectively communicate information and ideas.**

Have you been contacted by your "text-door neighbor"? This is when you receive a text from someone whose cell number is close to yours. If your number is 123-4567, for instance, you might get a text from 123-4566 or -4568 or other nearby numbers.

Every generation has its own nuances to consider. Doesn't it seem like some people have their own language? I'm not talking just about millennials (although I still remember the crooked look I gave my niece the first time she used the phrase "on fleek" to me).

But while the format and tone change, the purpose is still to effectively communicate information, thoughts and ideas to a listening audience.

**H**ave you ever seen or read something that brings to mind something you thought was long forgotten? That happened to me while reading an article by Bill Ford, president and CEO of SESCO Management Consultants.

Years ago, one social media mistake garnered widespread attention on both traditional and social media. It seems that a 30-year-old woman was fired for allowing her picture to be taken in front of a sign at Arlington National Cemetery that read "Silence and Respect." Unfortunately, she had posed as if she were yelling at someone and made an obscene gesture. Surprise! The photo found its way to Facebook and other social media ports, which means, of course, that it will never go away.

At one time or another, we've all said or done something we thought was going to be a laugh riot, only to have it fall flat. I understand that humor is subjective, and I suppose the actor here might have been going for a modern-day interpretation of the image of the guy leaning against a pole under a sign

that says, “No Loitering.” But this woman lost her job because of the complete disconnect between funny and shocking disrespect. Of course, we can’t be sure of her motives. Did she have illusions of the photo “going viral” and perhaps securing a mention on one of those cable TV shows that spotlight foolish behavior found on the internet? Who knows?

The woman did issue an apology, saying it was a “spur-of-the-moment total lapse of judgment” and that she “wasn’t reacting to the place, but was reacting to the sign.”

Reacting to the sign? Again, for the record, the sign said, “Silence and Respect” and “Arlington National Cemetery.” While I will accept the “total lapse of judgment” comment, I can’t see how she missed the cemetery’s name on the very sign she was mocking. Did she forget where she was?

One thing is certain – she wasn’t the first nor will she be the last to be terminated for such behavior. The internet is unforgiving, and if you have second thoughts about something you said or did online, you’re rolling the dice that no one took a screen shot.

While the issue of a company’s influence over an employee’s behavior in the employee’s off hours has been debated in many circles, this woman made the decision easy for her employer since she was on a company-sponsored trip. The woman’s photographer co-worker was also dismissed.

Not too many years ago, funeral directors could bank on

**A key to arranging conferences is to consider who is in the room and what their needs are for communication and input.**

the majority of end-of-life services being traditional funerals. Much has been said and written about baby boomers’ tendency to be more individualistic than previous generations. Looking down the road, could Gen-Xers and millennials be even more individualistic than the boomers?

**O**ne major key to getting the most from an arrangement conference for both director and family is to consider who is in the room and what their needs are as far as communication and input. Perhaps too often, people try to communicate with others without consideration of the type of language and presentation they are comfortable with. Perhaps too often, they are spoken at rather than spoken to.

*Edward J. Defort is editor of NFDA Publications.*



## Using Consumer Data to Drive Your Business Model

By Edward J. Defort

For the past five years, The Foresight Companies has conducted research to determine what consumers think about funeral service. The company has also augmented this study in recent years to include how the funeral service profession perceives consumers as well.

Doug Gober, a Foresight partner, presented this combination of research data during the 2024 NFDA International Convention & Expo in New Orleans, Louisiana, last autumn. Said Gober: “The most telling thing about all this work that we’ve done is the gap between us and the consumer, and how we think about what they believe.”

**In 2023, 55% of respondents were complimentary of the funeral service profession. Last year, that number increased to 60%.**

Talking about logistics, Gober said it took Foresight seven days to get 5,300 consumers to respond to the survey. On the other hand, it took 15 days to get 246 funeral industry “leaders” to respond.

Gober did offer some good news, however. Last year, 55% of survey respondents were complimentary of the funeral profession; this year, that number increased to 60%. Also showing gains in the eyes of consumers was the profession’s responsiveness to family and cultural traditions, which hit 68% and is up from 56% in 2023; responsiveness to problems and issues, up 7% from last year to 63%; and “going above and beyond” at 60%, also up 7% from 2023.

“As a result, dealing with special cultural and family traditions has become one of the profession’s key strengths,” Gober said.

Drilling down into the consumer view about professionalism, the scores tell the story. Just 56% said funeral directors supported the family after the service; honesty was put at 55%; providing tech-based products and services was put at 48%; and the ability to adequately meet a family’s budget was put at 41%.

“The professional ratings are not that good – they’re about the same as last year (73% in 2023 vs. 70% this year),” Gober noted. “The consumer’s assessment of funeral professionals is not as good as the ratings for the profession. There’s a difference between talking about ‘funeral service’ and ‘funeral service people,’ and it’s interesting that their ratings on these two things were not the same. You would think if they like you, they probably feel okay about funeral service.”

When he spoke about the consumer perception of professionals, it was interesting that their perception has declined slightly this year in a number of core areas: honesty dropped to 71%, down from 75% in 2023; responsiveness, down to 68% from 72%; supporting my family after the service, down to 64% from 68%; and ability to meet my budget, 59% from 63%.

“Now, it’s interesting that the profession went up when the professionals went down only slightly from each year, but if that were a continuing trend – and we’ve seen this happen now over four years – what’s that saying about the consumer’s perception of the business versus the consumer’s perception of you?” Gober said. “We have gone more and more away to the urban areas, where you might not know every family that walks in your door anymore, and we’ve gone further and further away into the movement of population to the big population areas. There are all kinds of statistics that support that’s happening in the United States, and it’s less and less likely that the people are connecting with you.”

But Gober said consumers are connecting with business in a good way, but they might or might not be somebody you’ve actually known. “If you’re in a small town doing 80 calls a year, you probably know every family that walks in your door,” he said.

Lower ratings for trust and honesty are not unique to funeral service. Consumer perceptions are trending down for many other professions. “[Consumers] do not believe that you are dishonest,” Gober said. “This really relates more to your online presence.”



In simplest terms, he said that if you don’t have your prices online, consumers think you’re hiding something. “If you don’t do it, your competitor’s going to do it, and you’re going to look silly if he does it right,” he said.

“Consumers’ [honesty rating] remains pretty good when it comes to our professionals (71%) but drops to 55% for the profession,” Gober added. “They don’t think you’re dishonest, they really don’t, but they do think that the business is a little shady.”

Turning to online behavior, 36% of people said they went online to research information about funeral service, the survey found. “There are people right now in your town standing in the hall at the hospital, their deceased relative is in the next room, and they have [a smartphone] looking up funeral homes,” Gober said.

What do they see when they get to a website about funer-

**I’ll repeat myself: If you post your GPL and think you’ve accomplished [providing online pricing information], you have failed.**

als or cremation? The survey revealed that 71% of consumers who have not previously arranged or purchased a funeral said they would go online to get information.

“If your idea of putting prices online is putting your General Price List [GPL] online, that is a giant mistake,” Gober said. “You have to have some kind of advanced degree to understand what the Federal Trade Commission [FTC] required us to do in a GPL. Hand that GPL to a consumer and have them tell you if they can understand any of the stuff that’s written there. Not a chance; it’s our verbiage, it’s FTC verbiage.”

Foresight found that consumers either Google “funeral homes in my area” or “cremation in my area,” or they go to a website that they already know. “Now here’s the interesting piece of this: almost none of them are going there to shop,” Gober said. More often than not, the two main reasons why people go to a funeral home website is to find price information or to find general information.



Not only will more people be going to funeral home websites in the future, but they will also be expecting to find more information during their visit. Gober noted that 71% of respondents looked for pricing information and 54% looked for general information.

In the future, 8 of every 10 visitors to a funeral home website will want pricing information. “I’ll repeat myself, if you put your GPL online and think you’ve accomplished that, you have failed,” he said. “There needs to be a picture so I can get a mental image of what is on your website. What does that verbiage mean?”

Gober used the phrase “cremation memorialization” as an example. “Everybody in this room knows what cremation memorialization is, but you can’t find a consumer... that knows what the heck it is. They have no idea what that means.”

“Whether the FTC actually gets around to requiring pricing online doesn’t matter,” Gober said.

Reviews will continue to play a major role in consumer decisions as 60% of consumers say they plan to read online reviews about your business. “Obviously reviews increase trust,” he said.

The survey found that consumer assessment of the profession’s current ability to deliver on technology calls into question the profession’s readiness. “This is not just talking about webcasting a funeral or some of those kind of things,” Gober said. “This is just your ability to create a decent website.”

## EDUCATION

When it comes to education, Gober said he was stunned when he saw the survey results. Foresight asked the same questions of both consumers and funeral service professionals. The survey found that 75% of the professionals said they are educating consumers about everything, but only 35% of consumers said they received an education. “Roughly 4 in 10 consumers say that they did not have enough information to make an informed buying decision,” Gober said.



So, Gober asked, when does funeral service education occur? Where do people learn about funeral service? Some attendees said in the arrangement conference, while others suggested online, while attending services, in seminars and at local libraries.

Gober also recalled speaking with a woman after a cremation focus group who’d picked up some things, such as the phrase “chain of custody,” from the TV series *CSI*. Another woman participating in the same focus group also heard the term “chain of custody,” but she had heard it in news reports about [uncremated] bodies being stacked at the Tri-State Crematory in Noble, Georgia, which took place some 15 years before this focus group! The sad truth, Gober added, is that whenever there is a news story about funeral service, it is usually not positive.

“More than likely, they’re getting a lot of information from somebody else who has had a cremation in their family in the last five or six years,” Gober said.

**The survey found that 75% of professionals said they are educating consumers on everything, but only 35% of consumers said they received an education.**

Does funeral service education occur online? “Maybe, depending on your website,” he said. “But, normally, how many consumers are really sitting around digging into funeral service education online unless they’ve got an imminent circumstance? Most people are not doing that. They’re going to find out information about you online when they have an immediate need.”

Does funeral service education take place during the arrangement conference? According to Gober, the challenge with the arrangement conference is that you can take any funeral professionals who are waiting on families and declare the success or failure of the entire transaction based solely on their communication skills.

“We’ve got a room full of people here and some of you are amazing at this,” Gober said. “In an arrangement conference, you have that innate skill to take somebody’s anxiety down through your verbal skill, and you can see the [family’s anxiety level drop] while you’re with them. You can visibly see it. It’s a gift, I really believe it’s a gift, and it’s why you stay in this profession [because] you’re great at it.”

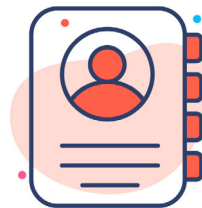
“And there are people back home right now waiting on families who are not so good at it, and I don’t know which day I’m getting who,” Gober continued. “Will they get the guy who is having a good day or a bad day?”

Also on the list of education opportunities are preneed conferences, family events and community events.

## HOSTS, GUESTS AND THE PUBLIC

Gober suggested dividing the people you do business with into three categories: host, guest and the overall community. Who are those hosts? “There are people in this room right now who believe they are the host,” said Gober. “You are not the host, the arranging family is the host,” he said. “If we were going to change one thing about our lives [due to this seminar], it’s to change that mindset.”

“You are the catalyst that puts this whole thing together for them,” Gober continued. “Here’s how we’re going to remember your mom; here’s what we’re going to do; here’s how we’re going to do it; here’s who’s going to be in charge of it; this is where it’s going to occur; and here’s the music.”



Normally, there are one to five family members who are the hosts. The guests are everyone who will attend. “The general community has never been through your door before,” he said. “The only exposure they might have had to your business is a drive-by. They’ve had no occasion to use your services. And that’s a bigger number

than any of the rest.”

What about the additional business potential available from the host? “Your next death call is a whole lot less likely to come from the arranging family than it is to come from those 100 people sitting in the chapel,” Gober said. “Statistically speaking, you’re a whole lot more likely to get your next call from the guest than you are from the host.”

Gober thinks it’s likely that on a reasonably regular basis, probably 70% of the people at a visitation and walking around in a funeral home don’t know the deceased. Instead, they know somebody in the family. They have no grief, but they do have sympathy. “There is never a better opportunity to tell them about your deathcare message than when they’re walking around in your place of business with no grief,” he said.

“We certainly want to do everything that we currently do to take care of the arranging family and the host,” Gober added. “But we almost ignore these people.”

How do you communicate with those people visiting your funeral home? How about message boards? Flat-screen TVs are inexpensive, and Gober suggested placing flat screens

**The biggest potential audience – and the most overlooked – is the people attending visitations and funerals.**

on the walls everywhere, especially in the bathrooms. “You might have a picture of a duck up there or something. Take the picture of the duck off the wall and put a flat screen up and put pictures of every cool thing you’ve ever done on a rolling video,” he said. “It might have music – it doesn’t need the spoken word on it. There’s a crowd of people running in there occasionally. They can’t hear anything that’s being spoken on the video. Just play pictures so that when I’m walking around in your place of business, not only am I going to see what you’re doing for [the at-need] family and how you chose to help them, but I’m also going to get a little picture of all the other cool stuff you might have done.”

The video should be playing in the arrangement conference office. “When someone escorts the person in, you just leave them in there with that rolling video,” Gober said. For example, a picture of a bagpiper might appear and that photo will cause an arranging family to think of music.

Returning to his initial question about where funeral education occurs, Gober said, “The biggest potential audience, and the most overlooked audience in funeral service today, is the people attending visitations and funerals,” he said. “What are you telling them when they’re in your place of business with no grief?”

“If you have a 30% market share in your particular market, then statistically speaking, seven of every 10 people that walk in your front door belong to somebody else,” he added.

Years ago, a trend developed at visitations. Families would

come to the arrangement with boxes of pictures. Maybe they were told in advance to bring them, but where did they learn about the memory board? “From attending a service at a funeral home. That evolved quickly from the memory board now to these amazing tribute videos we can do that also have music and moving pictures and all the cool stuff we can do,” Gober said. “Funeral education has an opportunity to work at its height with the funeral guest, taking advantage of those you didn’t advertise to or do anything to get them there.”

Gober said a director’s professional responsibility is that people know more about the deceased when they leave than when they walked in. “If they don’t, you have failed at your basic mission as a professional today,” he said. “Your responsibility is to do everything possible to tell me the story.”

Looking at cremation, the survey found that 53% of respondents are more likely to select cremation than they had been a few years ago, up two percentage points since last year.

Gober noted a Cremation Association of North America statistic that found that in three states – California, Washington and Oregon – more than 900,000 sets of cremated remains sit on closet shelves.

Here’s Gober’s message on cremation: “This morning, people are walking out of funeral homes all over our country, and all over the world, with either a plastic or a cardboard box under their arm,” Gober said. “Did any one ask them the question, ‘What do you intend to do with your mom?’”

“That is part of your responsibility when it comes to cremation,” Gober said. “Cremation is not final disposition. What is done with the cremated person – that is final disposition.”

In conclusion, Gober underscored the value of the research: “Doing this research puts us in a position to understand a little bit more each year about what [consumers] want.”

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*Edward J. Defort is editor of NFDA Publications.*



## “I’ll Just Remember Them The Way They Were”

The importance of educating families about keeping the guest of honor around for the funeral.

By Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

People frequently say to me, “I’ll just remember them the way they were.”

Of course, those of us in deathcare should not be surprised by this reflection. After all, many people have never been taught why to consider keeping the body that animated life present before and during the funeral.

As people question the value of funerals, part of your role must involve theming everything you do with information, education and choices. Why? Because a general trend we have witnessed is that for a substantial number of people, the presence of the body at the funeral has become not only optional but even undesirable.

This article reviews some of the historical wisdom surrounding the presence of the dead body during the funeral. I hope the content helps you enhance your capacity to educate families when questions come up related to this important topic.

As you know, the initial funeral element is that of the visitation, historically called a “wake” or “viewing.” The term “wake” comes from the Middle English waken meaning “to be awake” and “to keep watch.” It was often customary for the family and primary mourners to keep a round-the-clock vigil over the dead body. The body was kept in their home, often on display in an open casket in the parlor. Mourners took turns sitting with the body, 24 hours a day, to offer prayers, pay their respects, receive friends, and comfort one another. Essentially, they were, in part, saying hello on the path to goodbye.

But in those days gone by, the “guest of honor” wasn’t just present at the visitation. The body was the focal point of the entire funeral process – from the procession into and out of the church to the procession to the cemetery through to the committal. The body never left the family’s sight – or heart.

Yet in recent decades, the trend has been toward body-absent ceremonies, which can seem more like parties than authentic funeral experiences. Historically, we understood the essential, universal need to honor and affirm the life of the person who died with the body present throughout the entire funeral process. Now the guest of honor is often missing.

**Regardless of your faith in the soul and the afterlife, the body of the loved one is still precious. It’s the body that animated life!**

We seem to be forgetting what many have known since the beginning of time. Throughout human history, clans and tribes revered and stayed present to the body until it was laid to final rest. In fact, cultures the world over have demonstrated a passion to recover the “fallen warrior” and dignify the death by bringing home the body.

Of course, it is important to note that we should always be respectful of exceptions. For example, not all faith communities find it appropriate to spend time with the body. In Judaism, for example, families sit shiva without the presence



of the person who died. In addition, there are times when the body has been traumatized and an “appropriate memory picture” is not available to be viewed. In situations such as this, other steps can be taken to help families with the lynchpin need of mourning – acknowledging the reality of the death. Obviously, this is one of the main functions that having the body present serves.

Have you ever heard people say, “Well, it’s just a shell”? In my experience, this is often an attempt to render the body irrelevant and make it disposable. Regardless of your faith (or lack thereof) in the soul and the afterlife, the body of the person who died is still precious. The body still very much represents the person you love. This is the body that animated life! Doesn’t this person deserve to be accompanied or seen through to the end of their days on Earth, which includes the disposition of his or her body?

Of course, I don’t need to tell you that a dead body is not the same as the person we loved. No matter your spiritual beliefs, it is clear to anyone who spends any time at all with the dead body of someone they cared about that the soul no longer resides there. But when we are grieving, the mind seeks proof. So, if we are fortunate, we see the body, we touch the body, we spend time with the body... and our minds, which so very much want to deny the truth, cannot help but begin the process of acknowledging the reality of the death.

Bereavement originates from the word “reave,” meaning “to be deprived of” or “to be forcibly robbed of something.” When we experience the death of someone loved, we are indeed forcibly robbed of something very precious to us. But for a short time – a few hours or days after the death – we



have the opportunity to still be with the person who died, in the form of the dead body, even as we have no choice but to begin to take leave of them.

Thus, not only is the dead body “proof” for our logical mind, but it is also a means of transition for our searching heart, which so much yearns to still be with the person. We can be; in a way that can feel uncomfortable and painful in the moment but, ultimately, can prove helpful and healing.

And what of the common objection, “I don’t want to remember them that way”? My experience suggests that the image of the person in death does not become the lasting image in the mind of the survivor. While the sight and presence of the dead body meets the cognitive need to verify the death, that very image usually fades and it is the living memories that are everlasting.

I’ll never forget the 102-year-old woman who entered a funeral home to attend a friend’s funeral. The funeral director was greeting guests as she arrived. The elderly woman took his arm and said, “I’ve never been to one of these before!”

The funeral director was quite surprised. Was it even possible that a centenarian had never attended a funeral? So, he asked, “This is the first funeral you’ve been to?”

“No,” she chastised. “Of course I have been to funerals. But I’ve never been to one where the person who died wasn’t there. Where the hell is he? Does he have something better to do than be at his own funeral?”

My hope is that the next time a family says, “I’ll just remember him the way he was” or “It’s just a shell,” you will

**Not only is the dead body “proof” for our logical minds, but it is also a means of transition for our searching hearts.**

reflect on this article and help them better understand the value of having the body present throughout the funeral process – whether open-casketed, closed-casketed, or as cremated remains.

Remember, a meaningful funeral is not about denying death but befriending it. Let’s not quickly dispatch the bodies. Let’s treat them with the reverence and respect they deserve. Most of all, let’s remember the value of the need to say hello on the pathway to goodbye.

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## The Funeral Director’s Emergence as Bereavement Counselor

By David R. Penepent, Ph.D.

The COVID-19 pandemic undeniably impacted numerous businesses worldwide, and the funeral industry was no exception. The virus significantly affected funeral services due to the surge in mortality rates and restrictions on gatherings.

A deeper examination, however, reveals that COVID-19 might have also accelerated a preexisting shift in consumer perceptions regarding the value of traditional funeral services. This period of crisis prompted many to reconsider the necessity and format of conventional funeral practices and

**The way in which the funeral industry has fallen short is in its response to evolving consumer needs, particularly in the context of ritualizing the cremation process.**

raised the question of whether the changes seen in the industry were a direct result of the pandemic or a reflection of evolving attitudes toward end-of-life rituals.

Prior to the pandemic, cremation statistics demonstrated a significant shift in consumer attitudes toward final-disposition methods, particularly in favor of cremation over traditional burial. During the past 30 years – excluding the “Bible Belt” states, where traditional burial practices remain more prevalent – the rate of cremation has more than doubled. Currently, on average, nearly 60% of consumers choose cremation.

This trend reflects a broader change in societal values and perceptions, in which many people seek more personalized and cost-effective options for honoring their loved ones. The rise in cremation rates indicates a departure from conventional burial practices and highlights a growing preference for alternatives that align more closely with modern lifestyles and beliefs.

The way in which the funeral industry has fallen short is in its response to these evolving consumer needs, particularly in the context of ritualizing the cremation process. Traditional funeral services often include elaborate ceremonies and rites that help mourners connect with their grief and find closure. As more consumers opt for cremation, however, the industry has not sufficiently adapted to offering meaningful rituals and options that address the emotional and psychological aspects of the grieving process. By failing to innovate and provide comprehensive services that cater to those choosing cremation, the funeral industry has missed an opportunity to help families create significant and healing experiences. This gap underscores the need for the industry to evolve and better support the diverse needs of its clientele in a changing cultural landscape.

The cultural shift correlates with a broader societal trend of declining church attendance, which has led to the closure of many religious institutions. Historically, churches and religious communities have played a central role in providing answers to the fundamental funeral question, “What happens after death?” Each religion has developed a theological understanding of the afterlife, incorporating rituals designed to help families and friends cope with the grief and emotional separation that death causes. Such rituals serve to bridge the physical and spiritual worlds, offer hope to the

bereaved, and reinforce the belief in a future reunion with the deceased. This mitigates the fear of death for those who integrate faith-based practices into their psychological and moral framework.

Despite this, the decrease in church attendance and the subsequent decline in religious influence have contributed to the evolving practices surrounding death and mourning. As fewer people participate in traditional religious rituals, the funeral industry faces the challenge of providing alternative ways to help individuals navigate their grief. The importance of ritualizing the cremation process becomes paramount in this context.

Without the structured support of religious ceremonies, it is essential for the funeral industry to create meaningful, secular rituals that fulfill a similar purpose. These new practices must address the emotional and psychological needs of the bereaved, helping them connect with their loss and finding a sense of closure. By offering personalized and thoughtful options for memorializing and honoring the life accomplishments of the deceased, the industry can ensure that cremation serves not just as a means of final disposition, but also as a significant part of the healing process for those left behind.

When the majority of consumers regularly attended church, the role of funeral directing was primarily logistical. The funeral director’s function involved transporting the deceased from the place of death to the funeral home for preparation, in accordance with the specific rituals of each religion.

The next steps included transporting the human remains to the location of the religious ceremony, followed by the committal at a final resting place. During this process, religious leaders, such as priests, ministers, imams, rabbis or shamans, played a crucial role in guiding the bereaved through their grief by providing spiritual understanding and comfort about the afterlife. These religious figures helped ease the psychological burden of the bereaved, framing the closure ceremonies not as an end, but as a transformation into the theological understanding of the afterlife.

**It’s essential for the funeral industry to create meaningful, secular rituals that fulfill a similar purpose to religious ceremonies.**

Involving the bereaved in these ritual processes was essential for their healing. The ceremonies provided a structured way to cope with loss, making the sting of death a part of the life cycle and connecting the living with the afterlife. By participating in these rituals, mourners could find solace in the belief that their loved ones were transitioning to a

better place, which provided a sense of hope and continuity.

Today, as society moves away from regular church attendance and traditional religious practices, the funeral industry faces the challenge of recreating these comforting and transformational experiences in a secular context. There is a current shift in the role of the funeral director toward developing new rituals and ceremonies that honor the deceased while addressing the emotional and psychological needs of the bereaved, which is crucial for helping individuals navigate their grief in the absence of traditional religious frameworks.

The problem in the funeral industry during the past 30 years has been the attitude of some funeral directors regarding cremation as a means of final disposition. When consumers selected cremation because the deceased was non-religious yet spiritual, then the funeral director would assume they planned a direct-cremation with no services.

But being spiritual has many meanings – it often indicates a belief in a supreme being without formal association with any church. In the past, many funeral directors would select from a short list of “Rent-A-Ministers,” who could provide generic, non-liturgical ceremonies to fulfill this perceived religious need. As we enter the second generation of unchurched people, however, these generic affiliations with religious denominations are no longer sufficient to fulfill the consumer’s bereavement and psychological needs.

The new role of the funeral director is evolving to meet such changing demands. As traditional religious affiliations decline, funeral directors are increasingly stepping into the role of celebrants, offering personalized and meaningful ceremonies in a more secular context. This shift requires funeral directors to develop skills in creating customized rituals that honor the deceased and support the emotional and psychological needs of the bereaved.

**As traditional religious ties decline, funeral directors are also increasingly stepping into the celebrant role.**

By embracing this new role, funeral directors can provide services that resonate with the spiritual, yet non-religious, beliefs of modern consumers. They must also be attuned to the diverse ways people understand and cope with death, and thus facilitate ceremonies that offer comfort and closure. This approach not only addresses the practical aspects of disposition but also fulfills a critical need for meaningful, transformative and spiritual experiences during the grieving process.

The new role of the funeral director needs to be viewed as that of a “bereavement counselor,” a term that might evoke concern among some funeral directors due to potential liability. It is essential to recognize, however, that their training



equips them with the knowledge and skills necessary to support grieving families effectively. Formal training in mortuary science programs includes education on grief work and the specific bereavement needs of consumers. Such training ensures that funeral directors are well-prepared to offer meaningful support during the grieving process – beyond just managing the logistics of funeral services.

A crucial part of this training involves understanding the distinction between sympathy and empathy. Sympathy involves feeling sorry for someone who lost a loved one, whereas empathy comprises developing a deep understanding of the complex grief experience the bereaved might be feeling. Funeral directors must practice empathy, for it enables them to connect with the bereaved on a more profound and personal level, providing the emotional support and guidance necessary to help them navigate their loss. Empathy fuels personal connections between the practitioner and the client family.

By adopting the role of bereavement counselor, a funeral director can offer comprehensive care that addresses both the practical and emotional aspects of death, ensuring that families feel supported and understood during one of the most challenging times of their lives. This holistic approach to funeral service is increasingly essential in a society in which traditional religious frameworks are less prevalent, and the need for personalized, empathetic care is more significant than ever.

#### **A FUNERAL SERVICE SCENARIO**

To help illustrate the funeral director as bereavement counselor concept, consider the following scenario.

Judy died in her apartment and, a few days later, she was discovered by a neighbor. Judy had a mental illness and because of this condition, her brother and his family were estranged from her for several years. In fact, being present to make his sister’s arrangements was the first time he would see her since the estrangement.

During this time, Peter stated, “I don’t want to do this... I was not close to my sister, but I know I have to do it because it’s the right thing to do.”

The funeral director took this opportunity to be a sounding board for Peter and his wife. He asked Peter open-ended questions that led to Peter explaining the nature of his relationship with his sister. Finally, after 40 minutes of sharing thoughts and feelings about her, the funeral director said, “You are doing the right thing making these arrangements for your sister. No matter what she has done in the past, this is a time for you and your family to forgive her and say good-bye to her in a respectful manner.”

Then the funeral director shared a personal story on how he was separated from his sister, and he used her death as an opportunity to forgive and heal from the pains that created such estrangement in his relationship. The funeral director then suggested that Peter and his wife sit down before the burial and write a letter about their feelings to bring to the committal service.

On the appointed day, the funeral director led the service, and Peter, his wife and his daughter assisted him in carrying the casketed remains to the grave. It was raining but instead of wiping off the metal casket before the service commenced, the funeral director left the raindrops on it. After the committal prayers, Peter’s wife read a beautiful letter stating why their relationship had deteriorated. A healing sentence at the end of the letter said, “We love you. Rest in peace.”

At that point, the funeral director handed the letter to Peter and directed him to place it on top of the rain-dropped casket. Within minutes, the paper absorbed the water, and the ink began to blur and grow illegible.

To conclude the services, the funeral director said, “Now is time to say goodbye to your sister. The pain and tears that were shared in life now go with her in this sign of love and forgiveness.”

**Professional funeral service training equips them with the skills and knowledge necessary to support grieving families effectively.**

Then, with the assistance of the funeral director, Peter, his wife and his daughter symbolically lowered the casket into the grave with two straps placed at each end. The lowering device did all the work, and the straps and the family participation helped facilitate the physical and emotional letting go of their grief and pain.

#### SCENARIO ANALYSIS

Funeral directors direct, the bereaved grieve. Never cross that line! This is a deeply rooted tradition in funeral directing and, for the most part, one that should be followed. The bereaved come to the funeral director for advice and guid-

**This shift requires the commitment to continuous learning and empathy to ensure that the services offered are both relevant and deeply comforting.**

ance, and if funeral directors are unable to separate their emotions and conduct themselves professionally, they could be perceived as ineffective.

Part of empathy, however, requires being able to sit with and experience some of the pain the bereaved are experiencing. A compassionate funeral director needs to be able to listen attentively and to possess a genuine concern regarding the feelings of the bereaved. The word “compassion” means “to suffer with” and, while maintaining professionalism, the funeral director needs to demonstrate a willingness to meet families where they are at in the grieving process and guide them to closure of the death event.

In the previous scenario, the funeral director listened to the bereaved tell their story and express their feelings. Part of funeral directing is to ask open-ended questions to learn information about the nature of the relationship. This serves to develop an understanding of how best to advise the family toward an appropriate path to closure and healing.

In addition, the funeral director then shared his story, which was short and relatable. Sharing personal grief experiences, especially when healing is involved, can help a family on their journey toward closure.

The important factor for the funeral director/grief counselor to consider is to only present options so the family can choose what they feel comfortable with for their grief work. What might work for one will not work for all. That is dependent on the bereaved’s own comfort level, which must always be honored and respected.

#### FINAL THOUGHTS

In conclusion, the evolving landscape of the funeral industry demands that funeral directors adapt to the changing needs and preferences of modern consumers. As traditional religious practices decline and cremation rates rise, funeral directors must embrace their roles not only as facilitators of final disposition but also as empathetic bereavement counselors. By understanding the intricate complexities of grief and providing personalized, meaningful ceremonies, funeral directors can better support the emotional and psychological needs of the bereaved.

This shift requires a commitment to continuous learning and empathy to ensure that the services offered are both relevant and deeply comforting. As the industry moves forward, the ability of funeral directors to balance logistical

responsibilities with compassionate care will be crucial in helping families find solace and closure in their times of loss and need.

In addition, mortuary science education must adapt to this changing professional climate. Curricula need to focus on developing practitioners with strong oral and soft skills, enabling them to effectively fill the role of bereavement counselor. This includes training in active listening, emotional intelligence, and effective communication to ensure they can support grieving families with empathy and understanding.

Furthermore, it is crucial for future practitioners to be emotionally and psychologically balanced themselves, for this stability allows them to address the concerns of the bereaved without becoming overwhelmed by the emotional weight of their work. By fostering resilience and self-care practices, mortuary science programs can prepare students to manage their well-being as they provide compassionate care to others.

Additionally, future funeral directors must develop a working knowledge of various religious practices to accommodate the diverse needs of the communities they serve. Understanding different cultural and religious rituals surrounding death can enhance the service provided, ensuring that each ceremony is respectful and meaningful.

Such a comprehensive approach to education will not only

produce better practitioners but also ensure that the funeral industry evolves to meet the modern demands of empathy, cultural competence and personalized care. By equipping funeral directors with these essential skills, mortuary science programs can help bridge the gap between traditional practices and the evolving expectations of today's bereaved families.

Embracing the shift toward providing comprehensive options and professional bereavement counseling services is crucial for the future of funeral directing. In failing to adapt to changing consumer needs, the funeral industry risks devolving into nothing more than a disposal service for human remains. By evolving to meet the diverse and personalized needs of today's consumers, the industry can continue to offer meaningful, compassionate support during times of loss. This transformation will ensure that funeral directors remain relevant and essential, helping families navigate their grief with dignity and care while honoring the memory and life accomplishments of their loved ones in a way truly reflective of their lives and beliefs.

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## Using a Milestone Anniversary to Connect With Community

By Jenny McClanahan

Celebrating a funeral home's milestone anniversary provides a legacy moment and an incredible opportunity to connect in gratitude with the families your firm has served.

Think of it as a heartfelt "thank you" letter to your community. It's about reflecting on your role in their lives, showing appreciation for their support and emphasizing your ongoing commitment to them. Here's how to get this right, striking a tone that hits the mark and leaves a lasting, positive impact.

### THE PROPER TONE

When crafting your message to the community, start with gratitude. You don't want to wave the "look at us" flag but in-





stead shine a light on the people who have trusted you during some of their most vulnerable moments.

Let your message reflect sincerity, compassion and respect for the role your firm plays in the community. While it's the firm's milestone anniversary, it's not about the business's success but about the relationships you've built along the way.

### HOW TO EXPRESS YOUR GRATITUDE

**Personalized Thank-You Messages** Send personal thank-you notes or emails to families you've served, recognizing the trust they've placed in you. A simple gesture such as a handwritten note can mean a lot in an age where everything's digital. It reminds folks that you care deeply about the individuals who make up your community.

**Give Back.** One of the best ways to show gratitude is by giving back. Consider partnering with a local charity or organizing a small event, such as a community remembrance ceremony. This approach emphasizes your role as a supportive, community-focused organization rather than a service provider looking for attention.

**One of the best ways to show gratitude is by giving back, which emphasizes your role as a supportive organization rather than a service provider looking for attention.**

**While it's a milestone anniversary, it's not about the firm's success but the relationships you've built along the way.**

**Community Involvement.** Highlight the people and businesses in your area that help you do what you do. Local florists, caterers, counselors, ministers and hospice organizations – show them some love with simple shout-outs on social media, a handwritten note, or even on your website. It reminds people that your work is about collaboration and that the whole community is part of the process.

### WHERE TO SPREAD THE MESSAGE

**Social Media.** Create social posts that reflect your values. Consider a team photo, behind-the-scenes shots of your staff working with care, or small stories about memorable moments in the community. A video message from the owner or staff thanking the community for its trust and partnership can go a long way. The key is to be real, not overly polished.

**Email Campaigns.** A well-crafted email can be a fantastic way to share your message. Send a note that is heartfelt and sincere, reflecting on your years of service and expressing thanks. Make it personal. People respond to feeling seen and appreciated, not just blasted with generic content.

**Local Newspapers or News Outlets.** Write a small piece for the local paper focused on gratitude. Share your thoughts on what being part of the community means to you, without making it too self-promotional. You could even submit a press release to local media, positioning the occasion as a reflective milestone rather than a traditional anniversary "celebration."

**Direct Mail.** A simple postcard or letter that thanks the community for its continued trust can have a meaningful impact. It's personal, it's tangible, and it doesn't feel intrusive like some other marketing channels might.

The bottom line is that your firm's anniversary is actually a milestone for the whole community. It's a chance to show that your funeral home is a committed, thoughtful part of your area. Acknowledge the relationships you've built and show genuine gratitude for the trust placed in you.

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*Creative director Jenny McClanahan is the visual storyteller behind @need Marketing. Using her intuitive sense for refining and strengthening brands, she helps forward-thinking funeral homes make a lasting impact in their communities. [atneedmarketing.com](http://atneedmarketing.com)*

# Business 101: Competing With Lower Prices

By Glenn Gould

Nothing starts a business owner's heart racing like a competitor advertising lower prices for the same service or product. Because this fear is so traumatic, it can actually cause an owner to imagine unreal losses. In addition, any perceived change in business will be attributed to the new competitor.

As such, before implementing any strategy, it is necessary to quantify the extent of the damage caused by the discounter. Fortunately, there is a foolproof means for accomplishing this in funeral service.

Record the names of price shoppers to determine how many your firm actually loses. Have a pad of forms at every phone to record the caller's name and any additional information available, including the name of the deceased. This effort will often determine minimal, if any, losses to the low-price provider.

On the other hand, there are times when the discounter's threat is real. We recently had a client suffering from declining volume because many of his services are over the top with custom music, etc. He began tracking price shoppers and realized he was only getting two of every 10, so he introduced a discount package just for them. Within a month, the firm got eight of 10 price shoppers and increased sales by \$100,000 compared to the previous month.

If the challenge caused by a low-price provider is bona fide, begin advertising flexibility in your prices on local cable or social media. For example, you might say: "Our staff does not set the price of a funeral; you do based upon the services you select." In addition, advertising cremation will signal your sensitivity to price and flexibility in pricing and services to the community.

Next, get your staff active in the community because you need residents to become comfortable with them. Give consumers an opportunity to discuss price with you and your staff, and prepare responses regarding flexibility and lower-cost options.

Run ads that communicate your firm's history, e.g., "When

**If the challenge of a low-price provider is bona fide, begin advertising flexibility in your prices on local cable or social media.**



**Understand the role your website plays in securing business, too. Consumers are most likely to visit you first virtually.**

my great-grandfather started this business, he promised quality services at a fair price. And 150 years later, that remains our priority."

It's important that you understand the role your website plays in securing business, too. Price-shopping consumers are most likely to first visit you virtually. Including a price estimator on your website, or posting a price list, will communicate your flexibility in pricing, as well as rank your firm higher on Google searches that mention price.

The first impulse when competing with a discounter is to open a competitive discount firm with lower prices. This is the most expensive strategy with the greatest risk, however. There is insufficient volume in many markets to support an additional firm, and families that trust your brand will be tempted to select your low-cost provider. In addition, incurring the cost of a new facility – with its additional staff, advertising, etc. – makes this strategy very expensive.

Instead, negotiate with the family. Determine what is most important to them, such as a particular facility, or a date for the ceremony. If your firm operates multiple facilities, offer to hold the service at an alternative location, or an afternoon service versus a morning one at a lower price.

*Glenn Gould co-founded MKJ Marketing and is a frequent presenter on funeral service marketing at seminars and conferences. [mkjmarketing.com](http://mkjmarketing.com)*

## ORIGIN STORY

# Resilience, Grit And Vision

By Shelby Jones

*Editor's note: "How did you get into that?" It's the question often heard when someone finds out we're in funeral service. Sometimes it's asked with genuine interest, while others might simply have a morbid curiosity. Be that as it may, almost everyone enjoys a good origin story. Here, Shelby Jones, a funeral service student driven by a singular vision, offers her story.*

My name is Shelby Jones, and I come from Oak Cliff, Dallas, Texas, a community that taught me resilience and grit. As an only child raised by hard-working parents, I learned early on to pursue my goals with determination. Though life initially led me to a career as a special education teacher, I felt called to serve others on a deeper level, which led me to the funeral service profession.

From a young age, I've been drawn to the concepts of death, remembrance and legacy. Where others see darkness, I see dignity and purpose. My vision is to create one of the largest woman-owned funeral homes in the country, a space that welcomes all – regardless of faith, nationality or identity. I want to provide a sanctuary where life is celebrated and every family feels respected and understood.

As a student in mortuary school, I've faced unexpected challenges. Finding a firm that aligns with my morals and values has been difficult, especially as someone who looks different and comes from a unique background. I embrace these challenges, however, knowing they are shaping me for the future.

Mortuary school is more demanding than I anticipated, but I enjoy the opportunity to grow and push myself. It's preparing me to bring my vision to life.

My journey is rooted in faith. I hold on to Psalm 37:4: "Delight yourself in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart." With God's guidance, I believe I can build a

**Finding a firm aligned with my morals and values has been difficult, especially as someone who looks different and comes from a unique background.**



**My vision is to create one of the largest woman-owned funeral homes in the country, a space that welcomes all.**

legacy that uplifts my family and community, honoring the sacrifices my parents made to give me a strong foundation.

This path is about more than business; it's a calling to comfort people during their most vulnerable moments. Drawing from my experiences as a teacher, I bring empathy, patience and a deep respect for each individual's story. I aim to create a family legacy that inspires others to pursue their dreams, no matter the obstacles.

Building this funeral home is no small task, but I am ready for the challenges ahead. With hard work, faith and resilience, I will create a space that embodies compassion and inclusion – a beacon of hope for all. This is my purpose, and I am honored to follow it.

*Shelby Jones is a mortuary science student with a passion for creating compassionate, inclusive funeral services. Drawing from her background as a teacher and her faith-driven resilience, she is determined to build one of the largest woman-owned funeral homes in the country.*



*From the Editor's Desk*

## Full of Baloney

With a houseful of friends and relatives over the holiday season, conversations flowed fast and furious. At one point, my cousin, Alison, asked me about any recent travels, and I shared that my latest journey was to New Orleans for the NFDA convention.

There is always a segue that steers post-dinner conversation to funeral service. This year, there was also the discovery of NFDA's "Have the Talk of a Lifetime" cards in the drawer near the candle lighters. After my explanation about trying to keep family stories alive and that maybe such stories could be used during a tribute or memorial for a loved one, Alison opened the box and began scanning the cards. She fixated on one that asked, "What is the scariest thing that ever happened to you?"

Right away, the rest of us knew we were in for a treat since my cousin always begins her best stories with, "Oh my God..." The scariest thing that had ever happened to her, she said, took place in kindergarten, courtesy of the teacher in charge of the class. According to Alison, the teacher would use fear on the 5-year-olds to get her desired results. She'd warn the children that if they weren't quiet, she would go to their homes at night and put dead cats in their garbage cans. Other threats were made as well, and the teacher became a very scary figure in the children's eyes.

As part of the daily routine in this kindergarten class, the teacher insisted she inspect the children's lunchboxes at the conclusion of recess to make sure they had eaten everything they'd been given. Well, every day, my aunt would prepare a bologna sandwich for my cousin's lunch (which is what started her absolute disdain for bologna, but that's another story).

As the story went, one particular morning, my aunt must have been distracted during lunch preparation because she inadvertently put the whole pound of bologna in my cousin's lunchbox. At lunchtime, Alison unpacked her lunch and found a pound of bologna for her midday meal. Fearful of dead cats being placed in her home by her teacher, my cousin began to force-feed herself the entire deli offering meant for her and her two sisters over the course of several days.

Meanwhile, back at home, my aunt was wondering what had happened to the bologna. When Alison got home from school with tears flowing, she explained to her mother what had happened to the lunch meat. The story ended with my aunt grabbing my cousin by the arm and setting a course for the school for a discussion with the teacher.

Alison turned to me and told me I should feel free to tell that story at her wake. I promised I would and that I would also place a log of bologna in her casket just before it was closed. She replied that she is planning to be cremated and did not want anyone in the vicinity of the crematory to think she was made of pork roll.

Hearing the house roar with laughter is a memory I will cherish, plus now, I have yet another "Cousin Alison" story to share. Thank you, "Have the Talk of a Lifetime," for keeping these memories alive.

*Ed.* Edward J. Defort  
- Editor

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