

Roundtable

By Lauren Moore

Advance Sales Roundtable



Daniel M. Isard



Paul White

Preneed isn't just for funeral homes. Cemeteries can certainly benefit from boosting their advance sales – but it's not an easy task, especially with the rise in cremation. We spoke to Daniel M. Isard, president of The Foresight Companies, and Paul White, vice president of client development and marketing with Funeral Services, Inc., who shared their thoughts on best practices for making advance sales.

What are the top three things cemeterians can do to boost or improve their advance sales?

Isard: The key to selling for a cemetery is to have a formal program that keeps bringing people on site, not just to participate in an interment program. Therefore:

Cemeteries should engage in aftercare and outreach programs such as Easter sunrise services, Earth Day,

balloon releases and other giant outdoor programs. They should also compensate salespeople a higher commission for leads they generate on their own, and a lower commission for those that deal with walk-ins to keep them active in generating leads, and they should track inventory. As inventory is decreased in an area, raise prices. Let those on a reservation system for a site know that prices are going up. If they go up in one area,

they need to have parallel increases throughout the cemetery.

White: Today, with the growing popularity of cremation, it is more important than ever to educate people on the need for permanent memorialization in a cemetery. The first step is to advertise and promote the importance of memorialization by incorporating this message into all sales and marketing efforts.

Second, cemeteries really need to recruit people who are self-starters and who can deliver this message to potential consumers. All sales start with motivated salespeople, so it is important to find and train the right ones.

Third, cemeterians can develop new types of programs and seminars to educate people and promote advance sales. These can even be held right at the cemetery and include tried-and-true sales techniques from other fields. I have worked with funeral service professionals who have hosted events such as health fairs and blood drives to attract potential consumers. I know other cemeterians who have launched special promotions and tactics such as space giveaways using buy-one-get-one-free offers.

When it comes to advance sales, I have seen that traditional marketing has proved to be less and less effective. From a historical perspective, advance sales really began to ramp up during the 1940s,

“In a relatively short period of time, consumer attitudes have shifted dramatically and cemetery advance sales have suffered.”

- Paul White, vice president of client development and marketing, Funeral Services, Inc.

mainly through door-to-door sales. By canvassing neighborhoods and knocking on doors, cemeterians generated interest among consumers. The other primary method has been telemarketing, picking up the phone book and calling people. Unfortunately, we now live in an era where people are reluctant to open their door to a stranger. As for using the telephone to reach potential consumers, both the do-not-call registry and caller ID have really hampered telephone prospecting. As the tried and true methods of lead generation of the past fade away, we are seeing an increase in campaigns created to educate the public and improve advance sales.

What are some of the biggest obstacles cemeterians face when it comes to advance sales?

White: The rapidly rising rate of cremation and the lack of awareness of the need to memorialize a loved one's cremated remains are the greatest challenges facing cemeterians. People have come to think of cremation as the final form of disposition; they are scattering the remains or taking the remains home in an urn. There is a need to educate consumers about the kind of permanent memorialization a cemetery can offer.

Another factor is the growing number of national cemeteries. Right now, the country is burying more veterans from World War II and the Korean War than at any time in our history. With that, there has been a big demand for burial spaces at national cemeteries because they are provided for free. If there is a national

cemetery even within a couple of hours of where a person lives and if they are set on casket burial rather than cremation, it is almost a no-brainer for them. It is very difficult to compete with free.

Isard: Three things: hiring good salespeople, relying upon walk-ins and not using all staff to look for leads. The grounds crew generally comes in contact with more people than any other employee. They need to be thinking that someone could be a current or future buyer and get a salesperson on site ASAP.

What are some of the best avenues for marketing advance sales?

Isard: Eighty percent of all sales are made to people with friends and family interred on site. So keep people coming back to pay their respects via outreach programs.

Do something different. Employ the community to flag the cemetery around national holidays, and that keeps a site relevant. The Scouts are a great resource for this.

White: Group seminars and presentations have become the go-to marketing method for funeral professionals, not just cemeterians. As mentioned earlier, the techniques of the past just are not working anymore, so health fairs and other events can be very promising. These tactics support the education-focused strategy that communicates the permanent memorialization a cemetery can offer in response to the rise in cremations.

In addition, running newspaper inserts with incentives such as free space may prove fruitful. Of course, the

real secret is continuous prospecting, follow-up and pure salesmanship.

How is cremation affecting advance sales?

White: It is having a profound impact. As cremations rise, fewer and fewer individuals are turning to cemeteries. In a relatively short period of time, consumer attitudes have shifted dramatically and cemetery advance sales have suffered. Some cemeterians are combating this shift by offering memorial gardens, which are areas designed for cremated remains that offer permanent memorialization in a cemetery.

I have also seen cemeteries convert full-size mausoleum spaces into niche spaces. I am aware of one cemetery that has subdivided unsold inventory, placing up to 30 urns or other containers of cremated remains in a single, full-size mausoleum crypt and listing the names of the individuals on the crypt's front panel. For this cemetery, a \$3,000 space is now generating more than \$36,000 in revenue. These slight changes to a cemetery's product can help keep it current with consumer trends and flexible to-market forces.

Memorial gardens and education-focused marketing are distinct ways some cemeterians are rebounding from sluggish advance sales due to a rise in cremations.

Isard: No body, no burial. However we have to look at the new model for selling when dealing with cremation consumers. In a burial case, the consumer must make decisions about caskets and interment within 36 hours usually. With cremation more sales can be made post funeral service than before. The cremated remains go from being an asset to a liability over 10 years. Keep selling to cremation families as they will buy inurnment options if they are marketed to. Same thing with selling urns and jewelry. •