

Aftercare & Outreach

Completing the Service

By: Dan Isard, MSFS

I discovered the benefits of Aftercare and Outreach programming by accident. I had a client that was selling his business in the early 1990's. As I did my appraisal of the business I found that his Average Revenue/Call was almost 25% higher than the regional average. I also discovered his cremation services had a very high casketing rate, more than triple the rate of other funeral homes in his area. I further learned his Accounts Receivable were half of what was normal; his case count was increasing; he was writing preneed contracts more than other similar sized funeral homes; and, his staff was very happy. I did not know what he was doing differently to get these results.

He explained to me that he was not a funeral director but a social worker. He was doing social work programs that extended the level of service beyond the interment. We went over the many different programs he was creating and traced the root of his growth and success to these programs. I had seen some of these programs at other funeral homes. However, for the first time I was now drawing a direct business result to a particular program, which heretofore I was not aware of. I learned that the altruistic series of programs we called Aftercare or Outreach Programs had a direct business result.

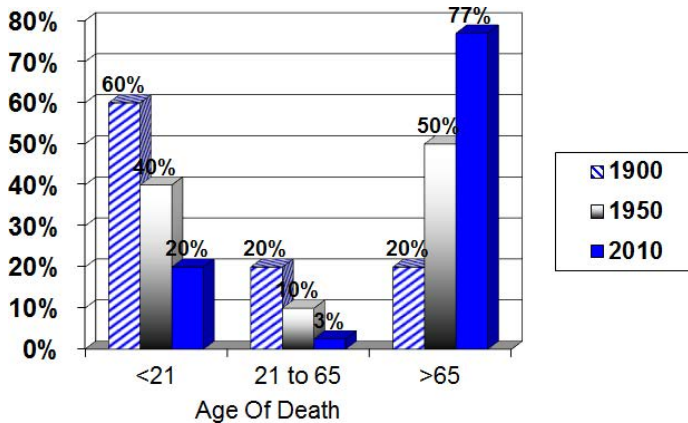
For the last 25 years I have watched and witnessed funeral homes that use Aftercare and Outreach Programs ("A/O") to any degree have traceable business benefits. The more programs they do, the better the business effects. When I became aware of this, I felt I had two missions:

- **Finding the reason that these programs have a business effect,**
- **Become the Johnny Appleseed of A/O, spreading the word about the benefits of these programs for funeral homes and the families you serve.**

I discovered the reason these programs work to enhance a business. I also discovered how not to use these programs to enhance a business. I will spend the balance of this article explaining the reasons these programs have a direct business result. I will also try and motivate you to get involved in the OGR initiative we are supporting to bring A/O programming at some level to all OGR firms. Hopefully this article, the February webinar and Erin Whitaker's presentation at your Annual Conference will motivate you to embrace this mission.

WHY THESE PROGRAMS ENHANCE A BUSINESS

If we were watching a movie set in the old west, invariably there would be a gun fight and there would be an “undertaker”. The funeral business of the old west is still the mentality of many funeral home owners today. It is a focus on getting the dead where they need to be and the living to support the mourners. The problem is that the funeral business of today has turned totally upside down. If you study the mortality records from 1900, 1950 and 2010 you will see the largest reason why this business has changed.



In 1900, of the total deaths 60% were under 25; 20% were between 21 and 65; and 20% were over age 65. By 2010 those numbers had changed dramatically; of the total deaths, 20% were under 21; 3% were between 21 and 65; and 77% were over age 65. The deaths under age 65 are down dramatically. The deaths that have the most crying are the minority of services now. The majority of deaths are those over age 65. These are lives that have been actualized. We even adapted a phrase for these funerals. Rather than calling them “funerals” we often refer to these services as “Celebrations of Life”. There is much less crying at these funerals. We are not dealing with a child who has not experienced life. We are not dealing with the death of someone who has dependents, or was taken from us during their prime. We are dealing with someone who lived a full life.

The role of the funeral home is now to facilitate a dialogue with the mourners. It is to help the dependents of the deceased learn to survive without the deceased.

The business model of the past was to build a large building to house several visitation rooms and a chapel for services. Is it any wonder that visitations are down for these funerals? As people outlive their community, is there any question as to why many families elect graveside interment instead of chapel?

When we focus on the holistic issues associated with the support of the living, and have frank discussions about death, we are promoting the new business plan. That is what the various A/O programs provide. When you speak the language that the families need and want, they talk to you. They talk to you for At Need funerals and Preneed funerals.

When you study why families choose your funeral home, as we do through our family follow-up surveys, we learn there are four main reasons. These are:

- **Previous service from your firm that was acceptable 40%,**
- **Know an owner or employee of the business 30%,**
- **Location is convenient or desirable 25%,**
- **Price was a consideration 5%.**

A/O programs promote all four of these. For those families you have served before, A/O promotes that relationship. It reminds families you are their funeral home. When you and your staff promote A/O programs, you meet more members of the community. So, the second largest reason is accomplished. When you house these programs at your facility, you demonstrate your facility is convenient and show off your largest capital asset.

As to price, this is interesting. People that say they chose a funeral home due to price are not cheap, but frugal. Frugal means they need to see the value before spending the money on something. When families see your outreach

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and continued service to them, they tend to see greater value.

The reality is that A/O is good for the funeral home and good for the consumer on all levels.

WHEN THESE PROGRAMS BACKFIRE

When this same client that opened my eyes to Aftercare was interviewing buyers, we met with Loewen Group. The client tried to explain Aftercare to Mr. Loewen who thought it was great and said, "We will install Aftercare in each location and it will generate preneed leads. In fact our preneed salesman in each location will be in charge!" My client said, "No, Aftercare is an altruistic service.

Preneed is capitalistic. It is akin to having the wolf watch the hen house!" Ray did not get it. Funeral homes that implement Aftercare programs just to sell preneed do not get the positive results because they are not doing it for the right reasons.

Don't get me wrong; people attending various Aftercare events will want to talk about preneed and advance planning for cemeteries. However, when you lead with this message people will not see the purity of your offering. It is much akin to having a family follow-up survey that is really a lead generating program for preneed. You cannot mix altruism and capitalism.

The other reason these programs fail is because funeral home owners lie to other funeral home owners. I had a client do a Holiday Help program for the first time. He had 15 families represented by the 25 people attending.

He made every mistake you could imagine in promoting the event and then decided not to do another program. I asked him why he was pulling the plug. He explained that a friend of his, another funeral home owner who unbeknownst to him was a client of mine, told him that he drew 200 people to his first program. This was an exaggeration. It was an exaggeration by about 150 attendees! Furthermore, the funeral home owner doing his first program was an 80 call firm and his friend owned a 200 call firm. Of course, the larger firm would have more attendance! Today, we don't tell other funeral homes lies about how many bronze caskets we sell in a year, we find other ways to brag. A/O programs build up over time.

There is nothing wrong with this. Do not try to live up to exaggerated visions.



The last reason these things fail is because we are afraid to ask for help. If you look at a recipe in a cookbook, you can get only so far in making this a chef worthy meal. But by watching a video, you can learn technique and learn more from those with experience. There are ways in which you can get better results on these programs. We are prepared to teach you those things in the seminars we conduct for OGR. Please allow us a few minutes to teach you these subtle techniques that make a program go from good to great!

In summary, remember, there is one thing you can do to increase case count, revenue per call, preneeds written, and reduce receivables. It takes commitment. Try it and see the increased appreciation of your families, community and staff. The recompense will be great!

To learn more about A/O programs, be sure to mark your calendar for these upcoming OGR events:

February 19 Webinar | April 24 Annual Conference | June 16 Regional Workshop, Staten Island, NY

www.ogr.org/events

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