

# Bridging the Gap

An illustration showing two men in dark suits and yellow ties standing on two separate teal stone arches. They are leaning towards each other, holding a large teal rectangular block that fits into the gap between the two arches. The background is a light blue gradient.

The synergies between funeral service and hospice are stronger than their differences, so let's work together to form a new business relationship for the benefit of the families we both serve.

**A year ago**, I was doing office work at our funeral home in South Carolina when the phone rang. It was a hospice nurse calling on behalf of a family, and she asked for pricing on cremation. I offered to help in whatever way I could. During our conversation, one of my questions to her was, “Does the family want embalming?” There was a pause, a stuttering and then the response: “Well, I don’t know. I just want to give them the basic charges and then I’ll let them know there are additional add-ons.” I then did what I believe most of us do. I tried a mini-education session but ultimately gave her what she wanted – our fee for cremation only, no services.

I hung up the phone, processed the conversation for a few minutes and then went to my parents (my bosses), fired up and completely bewildered by what had just happened. Has this ever happened to you before?

I am a problem solver, but I could not find a solution. If I said, "Why don't you come in with the family and meet with us? It will give you and the family an opportunity to see the facility and for us to discuss options with the family." Would that have resulted in a different outcome? Probably not. Whatever had led this hospice worker to believe that simply getting prices was the best way to service a family was already done – funeral service had already lost the battle. The person I talked to was doing exactly what I would have done – try to help a family the best way she knew how.

The more I thought about the incident, the more I realized that I was responsible for this family being underserved. I wish I could blame hospice – it would be easier – but I had to stop and take a look inward. It's not about what hospice is doing but rather what I am doing as a funeral director, what we are doing as a funeral home and what funeral service is doing to make sure this type of situation does not happen.

Here are a few data points to consider. There are approximately 2.5 million deaths per year in the United States, and 42 percent of those deaths happen under the care of hospice providers. The average hospice stay is 64 days, ample time for a trusting relationship to develop between hospice and the family. On the other hand, the average time between when you will serve a family (the time from when one spouse dies to when the second spouse dies) is 10 years. The 2014 NFDA Consumer Awareness and Preferences Survey showed that only 19 percent of people have made pre-arrangements. Drawing some general conclusions from these statistics means that I, as a funeral director, am in control of the funeral discussion with 19 percent of people and hospice is in control of about 42 percent. The issue is not with hospice, it is with funeral service.

The solution is to change our business model and build relationships with the families we serve. Here are three primary ways we can do this. First, we need to decrease the time between interactions with families, or rather increase the interaction and continue to foster the relationship. The second is to educate. We certainly need to continue to educate hospice and collaborate with national organizations, but a critical element is to educate the consumer as well. And third, we should strive to make the time of overlap between hospice



and funeral service more than just a few days.

Here is an average timeline: The death of one spouse occurs. ... A little more than nine years pass. ... Hospice is called in to be with the family for a little more than two months before the second death occurs. ... The funeral home is called.

More than 76 percent of funeral home owners believe aftercare services are completed within three months of a death, which leaves some 3,600 days between your professional interactions with a family.

We certainly cannot impact the frequency of deaths within a family, but we can impact the frequency of touch points. By touch point, I mean any interaction between us and the customer in which we can exchange information, provide service or handle transactions, such as initial call, arrangement, first viewing and family follow-up. Hospice care claims an average of 64 days with the family during its service period and 365 days of bereavement care for families following a death. What do we do?

Funeral service needs to redefine aftercare and outreach. Aftercare has become synonymous with information packets and memorial services. But that is not enough. There are six levels of aftercare: global, large, midsize, boutique, one-on-one and reverse programming. We should be doing something at each level. Activities such as annual remembrance programs, grief awareness and educational events should be open to anyone since there is greater value when we provide these activities to anyone in need within our community. Start simple with things such as newsletters, blogs and phone calls. The important thing is to start a program and keep doing it until you get a superior program in place.

In addition, we have to get outside our comfort zones and educate people about deathcare. In recent years, it has become even more evident that if we do not provide the facts to consumers, they will find information elsewhere. More than 50 percent of people do their pre-arranging online between the hours of 10 p.m. and 3 a.m. If the only voice they hear comes from a hospice website, a do-it-yourself or other such resource, then that is what they will use to make their decisions. It is not someone else's job to give them funeral advice, but if we are absent from the table, where do we think they are going to get their information?

Funeral preplanning is an excellent opportunity to educate consumers. However, just like aftercare, we have to redefine preplanning. It is not simply writing down people's wishes when they walk into our firm. Preplanning is about those families that are looking for our advice

on what and how to prearrange services either for themselves or loved ones. We have their captive attention – they are talking to us by choice. These consumers are looking to us for answers as well as options. It is a great opportunity to explain the value of funerals, why we have visitations, the different spheres of relationships (family, friends and friends of the family), why viewing the body is important and the many options available for personalization. When done effectively, it is a Q&A time where we, the expert, get to discuss funeral service with full, undivided attention. Yet again, most funeral homes have a passive preneed program and miss this critical opportunity to reach 81 percent of the population!

If you are uncomfortable or unsure of how to proceed in talking about death and the value of funerals, there are resources available. For one, NFDA's mission is to "inform, educate and advocate to support members in their mission to provide families with meaningful end-of-life services..." FAMIC has created the *Have the Talk of a Lifetime* program and accompanies it with a presentation al-

ready built for use. The important thing is that we do have support, so get in the game – start telling families about options before death occurs.

The biggest challenge we face is figuring out how to interject ourselves earlier on in the timeline of care so that we are a part of those final days and not just the final step. Many of our firms at one time had an ambulance service and we used to blend life and death in our daily work. Some said we had ulterior motives. Are we succumbing to that same pressure as it relates to hospice?

Funeral directors know as well as anyone that a life is about celebrating and cherishing moments, and we intimately know that there are worse things than death. It is time we blur the lines between funeral service and hospice as it relates to the end-of-life continuum. Hospice has begun the process by offering bereavement services for at least a year. What are we doing?

The family benefits most when there is a natural transition from one agent of care to another. Imagine family members gathered in the home talking and sharing

and both hospice care providers *and* the funeral director are present. What if hospice agencies and funeral homes worked together to create video tributes capturing all of those moments during the final days along with the pictures that tell the story of a lifetime?

I saw a post on Facebook by NFDA that asked, "How many families have you had request being involved in the preparations of their loved one?" Does hospice not become an extended member of that family in many situations? Why are we not including hospice in the invitation to be a part of the preparations (with the family's permission)? If we want people to understand the value of funerals, we must involve them in the act and make it meaningful. I ask you, what else can we do to bring the work of hospice and funeral service together for families?

The look inward was hard and the solution harder. I cannot blame anyone else; it is something I (and we as funeral service) have to do proactively. Next time, instead of the hospice nurse calling and asking for cremation prices, I plan to be with the family, learning who they are and explaining options to meet their needs. Hospice will not need to call me because I will make sure the relationship has been created and the education provided. Whenever possible, I want to be a part of the life as well as the death.

I know that both hospice and funeral service strive every day to care for the families they serve with the highest levels of quality and integrity. Our synergies are stronger than our differences. Let us put aside our differences, whatever they may be and however deep they may be, and let us fix our business relationship. Let's turn the mirror inward and ask what can we do to be better for the families we serve. Together, with hospice, let's meet the vision of a world where individuals and families facing serious illness, death and grief will experience the best that humankind can offer. Let's do the impossible for all those we serve. ✦

*Erin Whitaker, CFSP, CPC, is a business and financial advisor with The Foresight Companies LLC, a Phoenix-based business and management consulting firm for the funeral and cemetery profession. She is also a licensed funeral director and embalmer. Whitaker can be reached at 800-726-0168 or erin@f4sight.com.*

With Professional Partners,  
I finally have as much  
**PURCHASING POWER**  
as the consolidators.



What could  
**YOU**  
do with  
that kind of  
**clout?**

Professional Partners is an alliance of independently owned funeral homes that have joined forces to boost their purchasing power. As a result, our members **save up to 30%** every year. To top it off, membership is absolutely FREE.

NO MEMBERSHIP FEE. NO CATCH. NO STRINGS ATTACHED.



Professional  
PARTNERS

Discover what Professional Partners can do for you.  
For more information or to sign up online, visit [ProfessionalPartnersOnline.com](http://ProfessionalPartnersOnline.com)  
or call for more information, 855-318-1965.