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ICCFA Magazine author spotlight

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MORE FROM THIS AUTHOR

► Educational information, including copies of this article, can be found at www.f4sight.com

► You can follow Isard on Twitter at @f4sight and "like" his page on Facebook.

MANAGEMENT

Cemeteries, even those that benefit from combination ownership, face more challenges than ever these days. Starting in this issue, Dan Isard and his team will be providing cemeterians with options, advice and answers in this column.

Cemetery Impossible

Does this cemetery need more developed property, or a better preneed sales program?

We are creating a column for cemeterians that shines a spotlight on a problem and then outlines a corresponding answer or solution. It will be similar to the business-fixing television shows where restaurants, hotels or bars undergo reconstruction or implement new business practices in order to become more profitable.

This column is written by the staff of The Foresight Companies. **If you have a question you want to be featured in this column, please send it to danisard@f4sight.com.**

Dan or a member of his staff will call you to get more information and a recommendation will be provided via this column, helping not only you but also others who are facing similar challenges.

Let's get started with our first fix.

The mission

I have a 40-acre cemetery and about 30 acres are not yet developed. The 10 developed acres are about 25 percent sold. Almost 85 percent of the sales are interred. My funeral home does about 100 cases a year and 30 percent of those cases are cremated.

How much more inventory should I develop and when?

Background of organization

The one-location, privately-owned cemetery has been owned and managed by a funeral home owner for the past 30 years. Though the funeral home and cemetery have common ownership, they are located two miles apart.

The town where they are located has a population of about 15,000. There is one other cemetery owned by the city and



in the surrounding county are two small church-owned cemeteries.

CI solution

Over the course of 30 years you have had almost 10,000 graves to sell and you sold about 2,500. That is about 80 graves a year, and is nearly even with your annual number of at-need funeral services.

Do you see what's happening here? In reality you do not have a cemetery, you have an extension service to your funeral home. That is not necessarily bad, but your cemetery is not being operated in a productive way.

The answer to your question addresses both your funeral home and your cemetery. You need to increase sales in advance of need. At the current rate of sales, you probably have about 7,500 interment rights remaining for sale.

At your historical sales rate of about 80 a year, that is almost a 90-year inventory. So, the answer to your first question of how much more inventory you need to develop is "none!" There is no need to develop any of the remaining acreage at this point.

To increase preneed sales, you need to implement a proactive preneed program at your funeral home and cross-train with cemetery sales. Have your salespeople look at existing funeral home preneed arrangements and make note of any that do not designate a place of interment. Contact those people and talk to them about your cemetery *now*.

Conversely, anytime there is a cemetery

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sale, you can make a funeral arrangement as well. Even if the funeral arrangement isn't funded immediately, having a plan in place still gets people thinking they are committed to your funeral home.

The situation you are describing is one of the most common situations we see. You're in a small town. Everyone knows everyone's business. The lines of market share are well demarcated, with the two funeral homes and the cemeteries probably having similar non-transferring markets.

One of the great advantages to owning a combination funeral and cemetery property is the financial strength of one impacts the other. We do not see fighting between organizations for the vault and memorial marker sales. This allows the owner to generate more profit.

I would encourage you to concentrate on advance selling because of the market's increasing shift from traditional burial to cremation. If your market resembles the average market in the United States today, with 40 percent cremation cases and 60 percent traditional burial, remember that is going to be changing in the future.

But if we get people to prefund and commit to traditional burial today, the odds are high that those consumers will not change their minds, even though many of their friends will convert to cremation.

Studies indicate that 58 percent of all U.S. consumers indicate a preference for cremation. So work to lock in a higher traditional burial number today.

If you can increase sales from 80 to about 120 a year, you will have achieved a 50 percent increase in sales. You still won't need to develop more property for a long time, so you will find revenue increasing dramatically with little additional cost.

You probably have thought of your cemetery as benefitting from the goodwill generated by your funeral home, but by increasing preneed sales your cemetery will actually be a marketing lead generator for the funeral home. 

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MANAGEMENT

Being aware that our social and cultural backgrounds affect our views is the first step to improving our interactions with others.

Becoming aware of differences so we can work to bridge them

Today, critical thinking is needed in the workplace more than ever before. Teams and individuals can learn how to think more effectively and consequently get better results.

Of course, changes or improvements in the way teams think do not happen overnight. For such a transformation to occur in a funeral home, crematory or cemetery, a team must learn to think together; this requires good listening skills.

Through a coherent review of various cultures, I have identified several positions or opinions. One of those positions is the way society imagines that race is not a factor in decision-making in social groups.

The fact is, we are separated by cultures, ideologies and individual distinctions. As a case in point, let's reflect on something we see in urban America. You will not find Latino gang members and African-American gang members coming together as one social group; it simply does not happen.

However, we are seeing more interracial churches around the country, based on and dedicated to the belief that we are all one big family unified by God.

And in many parts of the country, the staffs of mortuaries and cemeteries are

diverse, weaving unique, colorful ethnic patterns.

We are innately sociocentric as well as egocentric. We fall under the sway of dominating social groups. We find ourselves in conflict with members of groups whose experiences and attitudes differ from our own.

Do we allow this to affect how we view some of the families we serve? How we view some of our colleagues or employees?

If your ideology is totally different from that of a family you have been called on to serve, are you truly providing them with the best service you possibly can, or are you falling short due your differences, perhaps due to a desire to limit your interaction with them?

In February 2009, we all witnessed a speech by then newly appointed U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder. In the opening of his speech, he stated that we are a nation of cowards because we do not socialize with other races during our time away from work, evenings and weekends.

Some found his delivery to be pompous, arrogant or offensive, but his message should have raised our consciousness of these divisions and how they affect our society.

We all have to consciously work on

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**ICCFA Magazine
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► He is an expert witness, speaker and consultant on funeral service issues.

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developing the ability to think beyond the social groups we belong to, to understand other people better. We must work to be confident that when we are using critical thinking in making decisions that we are considering the cultural and social differences of our staff and team members, as well as of the families we serve. □

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by ICCFA Magazine columnist
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ICCFA Magazine author spotlight

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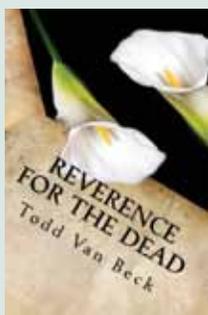


MORE FROM THIS AUTHOR



✦ Van Beck will present "Dueling Funerals," about the funerals of Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis, at the ICCFA 2016

Convention & Expo, April 13-16, in New Orleans, Louisiana. See page 102.



►Van Beck's new book is "Reverence for the Dead: The Unavoidable Link." (See page 77 for more information.) The book addresses in detail the ethical standards of caring for the dead and the ethical consequences

of not doing so. It can be ordered at www.amazon.com.



►ICCFA University 2016 will be held July 22-27 at the Fogelman Conference Center, University of Memphis, Memphis, Tennessee. Van Beck is a dean and professor. Curricula and registration information will be available in the spring at www.iccfa.com/events.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

As funeral and cemetery professionals, we need to establish trust and respect between ourselves and our client families. Merely saying "you can trust me" isn't the way to do it.

The keys to service: Trust

The funeral experience can easily be viewed as sacred, and because it possesses sacred overtones, the quality and character of the funeral professional is of profound importance. Because of this unique situation, a pressing question is what do we bring with us as funeral professionals, inside of us, about us, that may help or hinder (or even not affect) bereaved clients? This is indeed a tough question to tackle.

The funeral professional ought to bring to the funeral arrangement and funeral experience as much of ourselves as we possibly can, stopping, of course, short of the point at which this may negatively affect the client family or deny them the help they need.

Feeling within ourselves that we genuinely wish to help a bereaved person as much as possible and that there is nothing at the moment more important to us—this, I believe, is a priceless ideal for all funeral professionals to embrace.

This ability to feel within ourselves is a critical asset for every funeral interviewer to possess, particularly in such complicated times when people's abilities and skills to connect with each other are eroded by cynicism, faceless communication and suspicions of others which seem to increase every day.

As the great thinker Alvin Toffler once said, "As technological skills go up, people skills go down." Interesting thought for the year 2016.

What we are exploring here is what could easily be called the high substantive funeral service ideals. Most of us (myself included) simply cannot realize immediately what this encompasses, but this is never a good reason not to try to delve into what makes a great funeral director versus what makes a run-of-the-mill director.

When the customer/family perceives that we are doing our level best (this is the invisible and silent key), it means

something to them, and proves helpful. If nothing else, they will probably take away from the funeral interview and experience the feeling that we as funeral professionals may be trusted and the conviction that we respect them.

This is important. Without this feeling, the standard, old-style "funeral arrangement" procedure probably will get finished, but little that is really positive or of a lasting impression will be accomplished.

Merely saying the words, "I can be trusted" and/or "I fully respect you" will not help if the bereaved client does not sense it to be true. I think this establishing of trust and respect is what those who teach and write in the field of personal relations are most often referring to when they speak of "contact," "good rapport," "good relationship" and "connecting."

Because of its critical importance in this "connecting" process, trust is something we must work relentlessly to gain—and to keep.

The real good news is that funeral professionals have ample statistical evidence to back up the premise that in general, funeral people do connect with people in a trusting and respectful manner.

For years, the Gallup Poll has asked the American public to rank the top 10 most ethical and honest professionals in their communities, and funeral directors have always been included in the top 10. I find it interesting that the people I've run across who are most skeptical about this statistic are funeral professionals themselves!

The experience of trust has a powerful and ever-present, intangible aspect to it, determined most by the simple, old-fashioned human interest you and I take in what the client family is saying and by the understanding we show them about their feelings and attitudes.

We communicate this—or the lack thereof—constantly, by diverse and frequently subtle nonverbal cues that the

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client family may be more aware of than we ourselves are.

Of course, our facial expressions reveal a great deal—we all know that. Our gestures contribute to the picture, supporting, denying, confirming, rejecting or confusing. Families hear the tone of our voice, and they decide whether it matches our words or whether they whisper, “Sham, phony—beware!” Nearly everything we do or leave undone is noted and weighed.

And so we come back to this: What of ourselves do we bring to the funeral interview and experience? Oddly, we are the only known in the entire funeral equation. We cannot do anything about our bereaved client families; they are who they are.

But we can always do something about ourselves. We can always be aware and sensitive to continually improving by expanding our creative horizons, but also by being lifelong students of our beloved profession, digesting and embracing absolutely everything and anything that has something to do with funeral service.

Here then are some common-sense suggestions, or guidelines if you will, which will help you connect with families in trust and respect, in and out of the arrangement conference:

- First, funeral professionals are people who are easy to talk to.

- Second, funeral professionals offer people something to do.

- Third, funeral professionals give people ways to express feelings.

- Fourth, funeral professionals give people something to hold on to.

- Fifth, funeral professionals give people something to believe in.

Also:

- Communicate; never cross-examine.
- Maintain a genuinely friendly and interested attitude. This takes work.

- Abstain from revealing your own attitude.

- Keep your personal problems out of the funeral interview.

- Avoid a patronizing or scientifically detached attitude.

- Avoid gossiping or revealing confidences.

- Avoid getting rushed or giving the impression that you are pressed for time.

- Attend exclusively to the client by blocking out all outside interferences.

- Be alert to detect what the client is expressing and feeling.

This list is not complete, but as with all life-skill improvements, it provides a beginning. Look it over; memorize it. See if your connection with bereaved families in terms of trust and respect becomes deeper. It’s worth the time and effort. □

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