

Not Another Survey!



I eat at a restaurant, buy clothes at a store, have my roof repaired and use an app on my phone, all of which results in everyone asking me to take a survey!

What is it these people do not understand? I guess they do not understand me, or my satisfaction with their work, or how I chose them or a myriad of other questions – and they want me to help them learn. Well, when my left brain explains it to my right brain, it makes sense. In fact, it makes so much sense I don't know why everyone isn't doing it. Allow me to let you peek between my ears and learn what The Foresight Companies does when it administers a family follow-up survey.

I have worked with our clients to administer surveys and interpret the results for more than two decades. In the 1990s, we looked at paper surveys. Today we use electronic surveys that can adjust as the

customer records his or her responses. I cannot believe how easy and simple the process is and how fast we get the results tabulated.

Consumers actually like to take surveys. We have found that 40 to 60 percent of all electronic surveys we send out are answered. With paper surveys, the result was 25 to 35 percent. Consumers like to have a say in rewarding good behavior, or hope to correct bad behavior. They appreciate a way to complain about problems or thank the staff in a constructive way. This helps to foster a means of customer loyalty, which every funeral home cares about.

For us, we think the ability to spot trends is the most important part of surveying. We find out what people really think and how it has evolved

when comparing a survey between two different points in time. Opinions change. Do you want to operate behind the times, or ahead of them? The only way to protect your knowledge is to stay current and then, by looking over the past responses, predict the future.

If your cemetery was designed more than 20 years ago, your master plan is probably out of date. In order to redesign your developed acreage, you need to know what your consumers think today. Most of your interments were made based on ideas that were contemporary 8 to 20 years ago. Your sales today need to be the ideas of today or, better yet, the future. Your community is unique. Don't rebuild your master plan based upon other towns. Ask

questions of your consumers. This is what a survey does.

Cemeteries should do consumer follow-up surveys for all the right reasons. If you go into your sales records, I think you will find that 70 to 80 percent of your customers bought interment rights on your property because they have close friends and family interred there.

Unlike funeral homes, when the surrounding neighborhood changes, cemeteries are not portable. You need to change your mentality as consumers see your property differently. You might be wise to sell the cemetery or change pricing in advance of a population shift. Once we predict the future, there are many choices for amending your business.

A survey has a series of predictable steps or phases. Our survey interaction with your consumers goes through five phases (only four of those phases involve the consumer). Cemetery surveys are different from any other type of consumer interaction survey.

Phase One: Who are you? When we work to create a customized survey for a cemetery, we get some data from the cemetery before we send the survey off to the consumer. We get data about the interment choices the consumer made. I would not send a burial family references to cremation, and vice versa. I would ask different questions of a family that just had an interment that was prepurchased than a family that made at-need arrangements. I want to send the survey to all arranging family members. Different family members provide different answers and points of view, based upon age and residence location.

Phase Two: Observational questions. There are simple points, such as the property: Was it clean, comfortable, and well maintained? Then there are deeper issues, such as the ground condition: Was it accessible via walking? As we get older these matters are more important. Nothing can be worse than having the funeral and not

being comfortable on the property.

Phase Three: Were your expectations fulfilled? In a cemetery, there is an expectation of solemnity and a park-like setting. Regardless of the area outside of the fence line, the interior must provide serenity. You can even question people with an iPad on-site by going to the families that are paying their respects.

Phase Four: The tough questions. Nothing is more sensitive than the price questions. For example:

What were the total expenses of the funeral you selected?

a) About what you thought it would be

b) More costly than you thought it would be

c) Less than you expected

In addition, families have options within your community. When comparing your property to others you may want to ask:

If you did not choose to inter your loved one's remains at our property, what other cemeteries did you consider (check all that apply):

a) Whistle Mountain

b) Meadowbrook

c) Garden of Heaven

Then let the magic of the electronic survey begin with a follow-up question:

Based upon the previous question, please indicate by placing a No. 1 next to the property you think is most comparable to ours, then No. 2 and so forth.

Your survey will display all the properties the participant checked in the previous question and will now present them for ranking.

Phase Five: Interpret the data. This is the biggest issue. Interpreting the data is complex. In the days of the paper survey, you would read the responses and pass them along to your staff. No one tabulated the results. Now, we tabulate multiple data points.

Tabulation is critical. Just getting one survey and reading it is a waste of time. Many times cemetery owners are searching for positive feedback from families. However, I am not

looking for positives. I am looking for objective information.

It is one thing to get back 100 surveys asking, "How was the upkeep on the property?" with a 90 percent positive response rate; that is great, but I need to know more. First of all, we cross-tabulate the results with data given on the price of the interment. Was the result different for ground burial, rather than columbaria or crypt interment? Was the result different based upon consumer spending?

Typically, we divide a cemetery into multiple financial categories – the opinion of the family spending \$10,000 would be more influential than a family spending \$1,000. Therefore, if the above question had a 95 percent positive response rate for families spending \$10,000 or more, it would be weighted more heavily than a 90 percent across-the-board result.

But the inverse is really more important. For example, let's say that in 2013 only 2 percent felt the property upkeep was unsatisfactory in my \$10,000-plus survey range. Then in 2014, that number increased to 5 percent and in 2015 it is up to 7 percent. When that happens, I have some repairs that need to be made. With an electronic survey I can re-survey those negative families and learn what they would like changed in my building. You can't do this with paper surveys.

For the cost question stated above, it is important to understand the results based upon other factors. For example, what amount did the family spend? We have seen that those that spend in the lower range within a funeral home tend to be dissatisfied with their interaction. Perhaps they are dissatisfied with their own choices and we should not be surprised by these surveys. But if this was an old-fashioned paper survey I could not correlate the results, so all negative replies would be equally weighted.

Cemeteries are not passive businesses. They need to be progressive, have updated marketing plans and always know the pulse of their buyers. •