

Preneed

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Preneed & Cremation

Go Hand in Hand

I will be the first to admit that I am a geek. I was a geek even before techies were cool, so I am a geek's geek. Over the past three decades, I have written a 500-plus page book as well as more than 400 articles about preneed. Within these writings the emphasis was almost always about prearranging a burial. It was focused as such because in the past cremation-seeking consumers didn't see the cremation expense as being a material one. Most people prearranging did so as part of an elder spend down. While the cremation rate today is about 40 percent nationwide, my analytical estimate is that 85 percent of all preneeds are for burial dispositions. The question is why?

We have come a long way in our understanding of cremation consumers. The Wirthlin Study sponsored by the Funeral and Memorial Information Council has taught us that only 11 percent of consumers want a direct disposition via cremation. We have seen similar results in National Funeral Directors Association consumer surveys. We all intellectually understand that cremation is the processing of the body and not the elimination of a service. So, why is it that if 40 percent of at-need services result in a cremation that 40 percent or more of prearrangements are not for cremation services?

In our own surveys that we perform for our clients, we find that cremation consumers do not know that they are any different from

burial consumers. When they use the funeral home building for a visitation they want to be treated as any other family hosting a visitation. They have the same expectations when using your facility for a memorial service. When a cremation consumer has a memorial service at their church, he or she has the same expectations of your service. The cremation decision does not change the expectations a family has of the funeral home's staffing, facility or support. Therefore, it should not matter if the funeral resulting in a cremation disposition was prearranged or arranged on an at-need basis.

Our surveys also ask people why they chose cremation. Here are our national findings, of those families asserting a reason that cremation was chosen:

- 70 percent say it was the deceased's preference.
- 11 percent say it was less expensive.
- 7 percent less cite grief or emotion with a cremation.
- 7 percent say use of space in cemeteries is dwindling.
- 2 percent don't want to be buried.
- 3 percent cite greater convenience.

The fact that seven out of 10 families are claiming that they chose cremation because it was the desire of the deceased is fascinating to me. The inverse is also fascinating in that 30 percent are choosing cremation for some preference of their own choosing. Understanding their choice is important for you so you can present yourselves to them in a good

light.

The results also tell me that 70 percent of all consumers have prearranged their cremation. They just haven't prearranged it with the help of the funeral home. These people are asserting their point of view directly with their family and friends, and you are not in the mix. I am not promoting that you can influence their behavior. I am saying that you are not an adviser to them, only a vendor. You would be better served to be the adviser.

I have seen what happens when the funeral home does not present itself to consumers as offering both burial and cremation. Look at the chart below:

Year	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Burial calls	200	205	200	195	200
Cremation calls	40	30	25	20	10
Total calls	240	235	225	215	210

Here is a firm that is buying essentially the same number of caskets a year, over the past five years. Look at how level its burial call numbers have been. However, look at the other line. Its cremation calls are and have been declining. It doesn't matter that this funeral home offers cremations – it appears to the general public that it is not cremation friendly. This funeral home operator goes to conventions each spring and brags about having a 90 percent burial rate compared to a 60 percent national average.

In the assessment of the above firm, we also found that of its cremation calls, five in 2010, four in 2011 and none for each of the past three years were prearranged. It doesn't take a genius to figure out that something in the firm's style, marketing or on-site presentation is not making cremation consumers feel welcome.

So I did something in preparation for my presentation to the owner. I borrowed a friend's cell phone and called the funeral home. I asked, "Hi. You served my family about 10 years ago. My mother is failing, and I want to come in and prearrange." The owner was on the other end of the phone, and he said, "That's great, when can you come in?" I said, "Maybe tomorrow. Mom wants to be cremated. Do you do that?" The owner replied, "Why would you want to cremate your mother? Don't you love her?" He then went on without pausing, "You said you buried your father. You must have loved your father more than your

mother!" He said more, but my answer was reached as to what was causing the loss of cremation business for this firm.

Recently, I led a session at a state convention with funeral home owners and mortuary school students in the room. I asked the owners, "How many of you will opt for cremation when you die?" Out of the 40 owners, not one hand went up. I then directed the same question to the 40 students. More than half raised their hands.

We are allowed to have a rift in our personal choices. However, if I owned an ice cream stand, I would have mint chocolate chip ice cream even though I detest it. Funeral homes have to remember they are not operating for their own desires but rather the desires for all they serve.

If you do not make people feel welcome for cremation at-need, you are obviously not going to make them feel welcome prearranging cremation. To me, that is a shame. If you don't get the call, you don't get to provide your unique ministry to the living or the dead. Isn't that why you came into this business in the first place? Isn't this more of a calling than a job? Yet, how can you expect to serve families into the future if you are failing so many now?

The biggest concern I see with cremation services is that funeral service providers offer to discount the price of rendering these services. We have the Federal Trade Commission-mandated Basic Nondeclinable Service Fee. This basic fee is to cover the minimum portion of your overhead in serving a family regardless of their choice of service or purchase of merchandise. If the General Price List states:

- Basic Nondeclinable \$A
- Removal \$B
- Transfer to crematory \$C
- Cremation \$D
- Sanitary care \$E

A direct cremation package (without container) should be \$A+B+C+D+E, but I see many funeral homes offering it for less. Does a removal cost less if a body will be cremated? No. It is just that whosoever made up the GPL before you did this at a discount so you continue to do that. This practice takes place in about 90 percent of all funeral homes.

We have the chance to educate cremation families in advance of need. There are about 230,000 families that chose cremation last year who in previous deaths of loved ones chose burial. New cremation decision makers each year are making decisions without your counsel. Since we know many are doing this for the first time, why are you letting them do so without knowing what their options are? Preneed allows the best of all worlds: People can make their choice of disposition known – and make that choice with you. •