



# THE END GOAL MEETING CONSUMER NEEDS

*Erin Whitaker*

**I**n speaking to a colleague recently, the topic of entrepreneurship came up. He remarked that successful entrepreneurs make a decision and do not second-guess themselves. They choose a path and move forward with guts and gusto. Shortly thereafter, I received a call from my sister, who is a regional sales director. A few minutes into our conversation, I made a comment that ended with the phrase, “There is hope.” Her response was, “In the world of sales, hope is not a strategy.” It was barely 8 a.m. and already my mind had been challenged by two poignant thoughts.

As I drank my coffee, I reflected on these conversations and how they relate to funeral service. Most of us do not see ourselves as an entrepreneur or salesperson. However, the truth is that we are both. As business owners, we are responsible for developing a business plan and acquiring the necessary resources to carry out the plan. We are fully responsible for the success or failure of that plan. In addition, it is our responsibility to educate consumers on how we provide value with our services and to meet their needs. Are you actively working on your business and marketing strategies or are you employing a strategy of hope?

# **The 2015 NFDA Consumer Awareness and Preferences Survey can help you gain insight into consumer thoughts and motivations to strengthen your firm's business and marketing strategies.**

So how do we do this? How do we know which direction to move with confidence? How do we create a successful business strategy rather than “hoping” we survive into the future? As these questions went through my mind, I realized the answer was right on my computer screen. I was working on my presentation for NFDA’s webinar on the 2015 Consumer Awareness and Preferences Survey. The power of the survey once again rang in my ears.

A principal reason to survey is to gain insight into consumer thoughts and motivations. Surveys provide a communication channel in which consumers feel safe sharing personal facts, opinions, attitudes and behaviors. The very purpose of

the Consumer Awareness and Preferences Survey is to ask consumers about their opinions and attitudes toward funeral service. I am going to highlight a few key points from the survey and show you how to incorporate these findings into your business and marketing strategies.

**L**et’s dive right in and address one of the most sensitive points in funeral service today – pricing. Many of us fear that today’s consumers are price motivated and that the number of price shoppers is increasing astronomically. We worry that if we are not the low-cost provider, especially with cremation, we will lose calls. But the survey revealed something quite different. Almost 90 percent of respondents called just one funeral home at the time of service. Sticking with the trend of the past three years of the survey, of the 10 percent who called multiple funeral homes, only 5 percent said price was the reason. Furthermore, when asked why they chose the funeral home they did, only 8 percent of respondents said price was the reason.

Are we grossly letting our fears overshadow what consumers are telling us? It does not mean consumers do not have price restrictions or a budget. In fact, the survey tells us the second most important attribute consumers want in a funeral director is sensitivity to their budget. What this means is that simply lowering prices is not going to get you more consumers.

The survey shows there’s still a fair amount of misinformation (or no information) about funeral service. While more than half of respondents prefer cremation if planning their own funeral, 60 percent of those don’t know you can view an unembalmed body prior to cremation.

“No religious preference” is the second

largest religious selection of respondents. The importance of having a religious component to a funeral is decreasing, yet 62 percent do not know what a celebrant does. Who will conduct these funerals?

Prearranging and prepaying warrants education as well. Consumers indicated that prearrangements are not a priority or they have not thought about it, yet 93 percent say it is important to talk about your funeral wishes. And of those who have prearranged, “selected a funeral home” was the second lowest prearrangement made.

So how do we continue to keep the focus on our service rather than allowing ourselves to become a commodity? How do we grow our market through avenues other than acquisition? How do we market effectively to the consumer (educate and promote our services) and provide quality service to support our marketing?

Marketing is about building relationships that are mutually beneficial, and to do that, we have to understand how to motivate consumer behavior. If you keep in mind the reasons consumers choose your funeral home and the gaps in funeral service knowledge, a number of marketing strategies will present themselves and you can utilize them to grow your business.

**T**ake advantage of technology and social media in order to get more people to know you. Identify programs and events you can hold at your facility to bring people in on a more frequent basis and at non-emotionally charged times. This will foster the feeling that they know you, and it makes your facility more convenient. Empower your staff to represent you in the community, not just through service clubs but through seminars, community events and, again, social media.

By implementing a comprehensive af-



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tercare and outreach program, you can establish and maintain relationships not just with families you serve but the community at large. Face-to-face opportunities through seminars and workshops, as well as online contact through social media, blogs and websites will help you create the familiarity that consumers want when selecting a funeral home. This will also give you the opportunity to educate consumers about funeral service. You open yourself up for people to know you while building your reputation as the expert on deathcare and grief in your community.

The survey is a great tool to use in staff training. What can you improve? Are your arrangers trained on how to educate consumers about options? Are they trained to spend adequate time discussing a family's budget? What is your dress code for various roles within the firm? You must help your staff know what is important to the consumer and give them the skills and techniques to meet those needs.

These are simple but effective strategies we can implement with the resources we currently have in our businesses. It is our responsibility to educate consumers on our services and our solutions to their needs. We cannot blame them for not differentiating our services from a direct-disposition firm if they do not know what service options exist. In this year's survey, we see again that consumers choose funeral homes based on a few major points: previous experience, familiarity with the funeral director, location, convenience and reputation. Therefore, our marketing strategy should be designed to build from of these points to drive consumer behavior.

**A**s you strengthen your market share through marketing efforts, it is important that you don't lose sight of the end goal, which is to meet the needs of your consumers. The 2015 NFDA Consumer Awareness and Preferences Survey gives us insight on important factors within our business operations. Take these responses and gauge your current staff performance against consumers' needs.

The survey is packed with information we can use to help us develop and implement successful business and marketing strategies. The information on consumer preferences and opinions gives us guidance for operational improvements and expectations of pricing. If you currently implement a family follow-up survey in your business, you will now have the insight from a broad perspective as well as on a local level. It's a one-two punch. Without second-guessing, you will know which path to choose and go forth with guts and gusto.

With all of the changes in technology impacting consumer preferences and access to information, we can no longer "hope" that our consumers know the value of the funeral, "hope" they know our firm better, "hope" they know we have higher quality services, "hope" they choose us. As they say in the sales world, "Hope is not a strategy." But surveying is. ★

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