

THE ROAD TO RECOVERY

By Erin Whitaker

For many in funeral service it feels as though our profession is at a crossroads. It is as if you are standing at the intersection of *Business Prosperity and Helping Those Who Grieve*. With all the changes going on in funeral services, can you travel both roads?

I admit I have thought about this a great deal. What drew me to funeral service is the difference I can make for people and the challenge of running a family business. Over time, the business side becomes harder — how to set prices, what do consumers want, do I have the right staff, how do I gain market share? I found myself asking, “Are the two roads diametrically opposed?” Once I took a step back, I realized the answer is actually quite simple: effective aftercare programming.

Aftercare is defined as the care, treatment, help, support or supervision given to people after any form of treatment or service is completed. It is at the heart of every funeral service as it provides care for those who have lost a loved one and helps foster a safe and healthy grief journey. It is a natural extension of the funeral and, although financial gain is not the motivator behind aftercare, when done effectively and consistently, the business can benefit as well.

Aftercare has a wide definition within funeral service. Some think of it as the care extended to the immediate family following a service. Some consider aftercare to be the large programs held for all community members to



attend. Some think it is done in-house, and some would say it is best outsourced. I define it as all of the above. It is the ongoing continuous programming you do to all members of the community — mourners and supporters of the mourners — through a variety of outlets.

Key points to remember:

1. Aftercare is timeless. There is no end to when you can offer these services to your families. In fact, you should offer them in perpetuity. Education and experience tell us that grief is a personal journey and that there is no time frame. Yet, when asked, 75 percent of funeral directors say that aftercare occurs within the first three

months following a death. But in that amount of time, a person may not be ready for the benefits of aftercare programs, but they may be in six months, a year — or maybe years following the death.

At my family's funeral home, our annual service of remembrance is a perfect example. Every year I see people attend who have experienced a recent death. I also see family members who experienced a death several years back, but they are just now emotionally ready to come. I see people who come to support a spouse or a friend — perhaps because they are hurting for their friend, or perhaps because there is a wound in their hearts as well. We do not know the reason, but we do know they need the support, and they are

getting it from my funeral home. This leads to my next key point.

2. Aftercare is not just for the survivors but also the supporters of the survivors. Often we design our programs and offerings for families we serve — the immediate survivors. But as the expert in death and dying in your community, you should open your doors to all your community members. Whether you served them at the time of death or not, everyone who experiences a death may benefit from your program. Give them what they need. Again, you are building relationships and getting people into your facility at a time other than the emotionally charged event of a funeral or service.

We have a Valentine's Brunch for widows and widowers each year. What we finally realized is that people remember Christmas, birthdays and other major events, but they often forget about Valentine's Day. We have had people attend we did not handle services for, and in fact they would not be considered our primary market, yet they had a need and we offered support. In a time where consumers struggle to understand what makes funeral homes different, give them the answers. It is your care at the time of need and after that makes you different!

3. Aftercare is not a preneed lead generator. Aftercare programs must be done purely for the altruistic intent. If it is done for financial benefit, people will see the selfish goal behind it. Do it for the right reasons, because your care extends beyond the funeral. I know how important those special moments are between you and someone grieving — the silent squeeze of a hand, the wink of an eye, the hand on the back saying, "You are going to

be okay; I am going to be with you through this." These are my soapbox moments where I could talk for hours about why I love being a part of funeral service. Now imagine that moment followed by this: "And if you make your plans now, I'll give you the limousine at no charge." Don't do that. Do not taint the intimate moments of caring for someone with business. Your aftercare is not about getting the next lead.

4. Aftercare is performed throughout a wide variety of mediums. You can do this through the utilization of your website and social media by allowing your families to connect with you when they need it. You can have large community events or smaller group events at your facilities. You can provide support through education, and of course you can do one-on-one events where a staff person follows up with the immediate family. Some components of a good aftercare program must be done in-house, and there are components that can be outsourced. The key is to have a variety of outlets and resources so that you meet the needs of all in your community.

My focus up to this point has been primarily along the path of helping those who are grieving. How do we also walk the path of business prosperity? The irony and the beauty is that when aftercare programs are defined, effectively

implemented and performed with the caring and compassion as they were intended, a natural benefit is your business success. All those headaches that keep you awake at night such as case count, revenue per call and accounts receivables will improve organically.

It sounds too good to be true, I know. But when I look back at what has built my business's reputation, what has made a difference in my community, what has increased staff morale and what has had an impact on our bottom line, it has been doing what we do best — providing ongoing support to all who are grieving.

Yes, sometimes the answer really is right in front of us, and occasionally it is even an easy answer. Aftercare is where the passion of caring for others and business success intersect. It is the old *Field of Dreams* adage: "If you build it, they will come." *M.M.*

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