

High Tech/ High Touch

7 ways technology can enhance your business

I have never consciously done this before in my life. I have ripped off the title of this article from another writer. Not the content of the article, just the title. John Naisbitt used this title as one of his 10 trends he identified in his 1982 book "Megatrends." If you still have a copy of the book, the words are the same, but I added the slash. It always bothered me that Naisbitt omitted it. Now that you have heard my confession, what does this have to do with technology and cemeteries? In a word: everything.

When you first think of technology and cemeteries, what comes to mind? OnStar in the graves? Video headstones? E-mail addresses that end in @heaven? Timesharing mausoleums in vacation resort cities? No, these sensational or wisecrack technology offerings are not what I am trying to educate you about.

I have overseen the operations of many cemeteries and valued or consulted on more than 500 of them. I have been inside cemetery buildings that had paper mites and airborne

allergens caused by their massive paper filing systems that took up thousands of feet of office space. To me, technology is the savior of the cemetery business. It affects all that you do, if you are willing to do it properly. Allow me to explain in detail.

Let me first get us all to agree upon a

common understanding of what a cemetery is and is not. It is not just a repository for the dead. It is a community yoking together many people who are not acquainted with each other during their lifetimes. It is a place of meditation and contemplation. From my perspective, it



is most of all a business.

Like all businesses, it has a need to generate leads for sales and have systems in place for providing services and installing merchandise. It is also an enterprise that must get maximum use of its staff and capital investments.



Some of this capital is used for the care of the business and some is to create saleable merchandise. Technology can enhance all business operating dynamics. In fact, technology can increase the profit to your business enterprise without any additional risk. I am going to demonstrate seven areas in which technology can be your best friend:

1. Marketing

Most cemeteries need to generate leads. In fact, leads plus the cost of sales is one of the single largest costs in running a cemetery. We all understand that websites can be employed to generate leads – if the website is

properly designed. However, most websites are not properly designed. Most are nothing more than “brochure-ware” (i.e., an electronic brochure). We don’t want to have a monologue with a possible consumer, we want to have a dialogue with them. A good website will captivate them and get them to ask questions. You can rarely sell someone who doesn’t talk to you.

With the speed of today’s computers we should use less text and more video to communicate our ideas. We can sell by using “live hosts” as opposed to boring people with long text paragraphs. We can have multiple pictures or even live shots from cameras in the cemetery. We can capture a video image of the 360-degree view from each garden so consumers don’t have to be on-site to make a purchase decision; they can do this online.

We can even let people buy online and not just based upon a salesperson being involved. They can pay online. They can sign in many states online. We can deliver the completed documents in a day or two.

2. Inventory Control

A cemetery is much more complicated to operate than a funeral home. Whereas a funeral home has a handful of caskets and urns for their inventory and the pricing of those might only change one time a year, a cemetery that has 10 gardens and four mausoleums might have as many as 50 different inventory offerings at wide price categories. We need to manage those inventory items.

Knowing when to begin selling in a new garden or when to begin selling or building a new mausoleum is a big decision. These are literally million-dollar decisions. Proper management software can help you understand the best time to do something and how to pay for it. If you keep a \$1 million

mausoleum on your books a year longer than you should that is a \$60,000 to \$80,000 cost. So, what to build and when to build are important decision points. Financial modeling done via simple spreadsheets can protect you from this fiasco.

3. Bookkeeping

Did you hear that Ebenezer Scrooge is dead? He might not be in your cemetery but trust me, he’s dead. So is his bookkeeper, Bob Cratchet. In days of old a business doing 500 contracts a year with their payables and receivables might have needed three full-time people doing their on-site accounting.

Today, it can be handled by one person with the right cemetery software, assuming their accounting software can be integrated with it. That may not sound like a big savings but with taxes, benefits and other costs, that is about \$80,000 to \$100,000 a year.

The bigger benefit of technology is not just the cost difference on accounting; it is the speed of getting the data under the control of the cemetery manager. In the days of Cratchet, a month’s bookkeeping wouldn’t be finished for about two or three weeks after the month. Then it would be sent to the accountant for their touches and returned to you about six weeks after the close of a month. How did we possibly operate a business like that? Now, if the month ends on the 31st, the business accounting can be done on the 31st. The bank reconciliation with online banking can be done by the close of the 31st, also. Real time, real fast, real accurate, real secure bookkeeping.

4. Communication

I recently met with a client and he complained about his ground staff

being lost much of the time. He said, "I gave them cell phones, but we have terrible cell reception out here." It didn't take long to see that their staff was less accountable knowing the cell coverage was bad. For about \$500 you can create a cell phone amplifier on your property to increase the effectiveness of all cell phones. You can also change to data phones with text messaging and let the text messaging go via 3G or 4G. Or, you might just hire people that work hard and answer their phones even if it is a bad connection.

The cost of these super phones used to be expensive, but today the costs are low enough to be able to outfit your staff that goes around your property and on outside sales. You can update changes in services and arrivals.

E-mail used to be a big thing to give staff. Today, most websites come with 25 e-mail addresses as part of their packages. You can give your staff the ability to use e-mail to

communicate between themselves and families and each other. Of course, the business owns the e-mail and retains the right to read any e-mail sent via its system.

5. Staffing

Hiring is more complex than ever. However, today we can have people complete job applications and take employment screening tests all via the Internet. We can also check backgrounds within minutes and for a very nominal cost.

When employees drive company cars we can now equip the cars to allow us to track where the car goes. I have had clients who learn their vehicles and staff have wandered to establishments that the client didn't want their logo-marked vehicles to park at.

There are so many basic human resources issues in today's world of operating a cemetery. Something as simple as logging in and out used to be

via a clock punch but today can be done virtually. In fact, your entire HR department can be a virtual department to coordinate hiring and firing.

6. Revenue

A cemetery has the obligation to manage its price setting for its inventory. Different inventory offerings will be changing in price at any time. They don't change on a year end. Technology can help you capture the proper timing of those price changes and increase some last-minute sales.

I subscribe to the pricing philosophy that a cemetery is a supply-and-demand pricing environment. Every time I sell a certain percentage of an inventory object I should raise my prices on the remaining inventory by that same percentage. Since there might be competitive inventory priced around the point of any one inventory unit in the cemetery, as I raise the



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prices on one item to keep parity I must raise the prices on the remaining alternatives. If you think that is complicated to write, imagine how complicated it is to implement! Technology can do that for you.

In fact, not only can technology help you manage your price increases, it should also manage your marketing. Imagine you are going to raise your price of interment rights when you sell off 10 percent of the remaining interment rights in one garden. When you hit about 80 percent of the 10 percent sale initiation point you can then get a mass mailing out to those people who have considered buying in that garden. Let them know that there are active sales in the section and the pricing is anticipated to rise in the next 90 days. The price they may have anticipated will be increased by 10 percent. Now, you have an additional sales incentive without having to force salespeople to call anyone.

Revenue is enhanced so much by

the ability to manage your various trusts. As a young lad I used to walk with my father to the stockbrokers office to read a ticker. Now without getting up out of my chair I have instant pricing on stocks and bonds and all the financial information on any bond issuer, for free. Yes, getting that extra half of a percent and cutting costs of management are easy to do.

7. Communicating with Families

Too often we just assume that our phone lines only dial out for sales calls and receivables collections. We need to communicate with our families. There is so much that a 21st century cemetery can and should talk about.

We can create digital newsletters that are high quality in graphics and content and distribute them via e-mail. We can invite people to subscribe to our list for distribution.

Today we have social media such

as Facebook and other tools to reach out to families in real time about key subjects. We can alert people to programs, which will increase the quantity of attendees. We can blog and get our point of view across, which is going to be favorable to our business interests. We can contradict TV or newspaper stories that are not aligned with our point of view.

We can create memorials in our virtual cemetery that can be visited 24 hours a day, regardless of weather or the visitors' ability to travel. We can post pictures of gravesites covered with flowers that we sell the family even if the family cannot visit the grave. All we have to do is think of it, and we can do that.

The high tech world gives us so many chances to hide and be distant, but the creative and proactive cemetery business is going to embrace the chance to communicate and touch the families that are entrusting us with the stewardship of their loved ones. v

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- ~ Beautification of Grounds
- ~ Control over Memorial Decorations

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