

## Thought Leader

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# Why Funeral Directors Should Engage in Aftercare

**I would like to explain, in 1,000 words, why funeral directors should engage in aftercare. If I were a contestant on the show, “Name That Tune,” I would tell you I can name that tune in one word: “Because.” Now, I have about 980 more words to elaborate.**

**B**ecause you are the most knowledgeable person on death, dying and grief adjustment. There may be some your equal. Usually those who are promoting themselves as your equal are *not* your equal. Most ministers only deal with one or two deaths among their congregants in a typical year. The average funeral director makes 80 to 100 or more arrangements a year. You do in one year what typical ministers do in their entire professional careers.

*Because funeral service professionals are caring people.* There is an old Jewish proverb that says, “You know the deceased was a good soul when the funeral director cries at the funeral.” You want to help families. You sacrifice your personal time and often your profit to serve others. No other profession gives something away to a family of a deceased child. The hospital charges for its efforts. Even the casket company will charge

you to supply a baby casket. But you, the good souls of the community, are there for that family because you care. You empathize.

*Because it is good for your business.* We do not just get the dead where they need to go and the living where they need to be for a funeral service. We should not abandon a family at the side of the grave. We should not go 10 years between the time of one service to a family and the next.

*Because it will cut down on receivables and bad debt.* Studies we have performed show that funeral homes with any level of aftercare program have lower receivables (as measured in “days of sales”) than firms without aftercare. That means you get paid quicker. Those same studies show that firms with aftercare programs have less bad debt write-off than others without such programs. Families that have limited means want to pay you because they



know you are helping them.

*Because companies with solid aftercare programs get more preneeds written than the typical firm without an aftercare program.* With solid follow-up programs families see your commitment. They see the funeral as worthwhile. They recognize it to be a valued expense they will have to underwrite, and therefore, they are often motivated to do it in advance. This locks in your market share, which means your future and a family’s future are both brighter.

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*Because companies with solid aftercare programs tend to have more services chosen by families.* The move to cremation is not the problem with this profession. The move to do away with visitations and chapel services is a much larger threat. You can stay in business doing 100 percent direct cremation calls, but you cannot stay in business if you have a 20,000-square-foot building with three visitation rooms and two chapels and parking for 90 cars that sits empty. Aftercare gives people the chance to feel the funeral was a good decision and therefore worth the price paid. We call that “having value.” You want to be a business in which people see value in what we do.

*Because the way we die is different from a century ago.* In 1900, almost 60 percent of all deaths occurred before age 21. Funerals were sad events. Futures were being buried. People were never given the chance to mature and live their potential. Today, 79 percent of all deaths occur after age 65. Today a funeral is not a funeral rather, as we all have learned to say, “a celebration of life.” We look back at what someone accomplished. We bury a person who lived a full life. There is still sadness – but it is of missing that person – not wondering what they might have been. Aftercare helps you provide the tools to help the survivors live without the contributions of the deceased to their family unit.

*Because this enables you to differentiate yourself from your colleague down the street.* Glenn Gould has done surveys that show (and I am paraphrasing here) that about 65 percent of all consumers think there

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is no difference between funeral homes. Aftercare is a way to demonstrate that difference. Don't just tell people, “Oh, we care more” or the lame anachronism “We embalm better.” How do you create a scale of caring? How does a family compare your embalming job to your competitor? Do we have both firms embalm the deceased and then the family can choose which they want to use? No, we must get real. We must put our actions in the cycle of what people need. They can respect you for creating a system to help people, one on one or in a small group or in large group events, heal.

*Because aftercare doesn't cost anything.* What does it cost to hold a meeting at your funeral home where a local locksmith talks about household security? Coffee costs \$5, cookies cost another \$5. So for \$10 and two hours of your time you can help educate about 10 people that are suddenly living alone. What would you rather do with \$10? If

you'd rather put another 1-square-inch advertisement in a church bulletin, then please stop reading this essay already!

*Because it is not about you.* Too many funeral home managers and owners think that they are the center of attraction at a funeral. A funeral director should not be noticed at a funeral. You are more like the conductor of a train as opposed to the conductor of an orchestra. One is the center of attention and one is not observed.

Make it about what is best for your families. They are the ones paying for your experience and guidance and using your assets. They are the ones that don't want to be the center of focus at that moment, but fate overrode their modesty. They are the ones that need to recover from this undesired event. They are the ones that need help, and it doesn't end at the edge of the grave.

I could have stopped at “because” ... but my heart wouldn't let me. ❖