



**CONSUMERS
(AND COMPETITORS) ARE
WATCHING**

Your funeral home having an informative, customer-focused, strong online presence is no longer a choice. **IT'S A MATTER OF SURVIVAL.**

BY JEFF HARBESON

For those of us old enough to remember, *The Jetsons*, a 1960s cartoon we watched on Saturday mornings before going out to play, was about a family living in a futuristic utopia. Robots, holograms and other wild inventions provided a whimsical glimpse of life in the future.

Fast-forward to 2017 and some of those contraptions have been made manifest in our daily living. Now, there are still those funeral professionals who scoff at the insertion of technology into our business. However, as more and more of the families we serve rely on technology for gathering information than ever before and are outpacing our adoption of “newfangled ideas,” we might just be positioning our business toward extinction.

How can the funeral business embrace technology and serve “the Jetsons”?

Rather than jump on the “you’re not doing it right” bandwagon, I will instead provide an overview of how a funeral family relies on and uses technology.

Sixty-two percent of all consumers in the United States shop at least once a month using the internet. Consider that the average person plans a funeral about once every seven years – odds are they will initiate their planning online.

If this notion still seems far-fetched, consider your own personal shopping and research habits. When considering the purchase of an item, more than likely you begin with a Google search and initiate your own form of research. I don’t bet often, unless it’s on a golf course, but I believe that the majority of you reading this article do not get in your lead car and travel from store to store for comparative research. Interestingly, 78% of consumers purchasing a product online do so without physically inspecting the product.

I can hear the naysayers now: “Well, they can’t buy a funeral online!”

Not so fast. Keep reading.

I don’t think I have to convince anyone that traditional media, such as newspapers, television and magazines, are in decline as sources of information. Consider the placement of obituaries in local newspapers by families now versus 10 years ago. In fact, print newspaper advertising revenues have declined more than \$25 million over the last 10 years; just 23% of Americans say they had read a print newspaper the previous day.

Why, you may ask? On average, 60% of online shoppers like to receive an incentive or promotion before making their purchase. Seventy-seven percent of those consumers also study Facebook advertising to form their opinion before making a purchase. Technology has replaced what was an iconic staple in our daily lives. But wait, there’s more!

If fewer consumers are getting a newspaper, ordering magazines or watching television, how in the world are they making decisions? Overwhelming, they use smartphones, desktop computers or tablets for their research, shopping and news collection. Do you do the same? If you answer this question honestly, you’ll find that your behavior for such activities does not differ from the families you serve.

Let’s get back to the question of how a funeral business can successfully use technology to connect with consumers.

We’ll begin by exploring the technology that’s already in place and utilized by early adopters in our profession. The foundational technological product of the funeral industry is the computer. This single invention continues to improve service to families, profitability and operations of every funeral home. Yes, there are still firms that do not use the full capabilities computers offer, but I believe – or at least have high hopes – that each rooftop has a computer somewhere on its premises.

I have been in heated debates over paper arrangements versus digital arrangements with several funeral directors. The argument I’ve heard is that using a tablet or digital arrangement platform is outright blasphemous to some because typing is impersonal. However, I challenge all who enter such a discussion with me to share how their eye contact stays with the informant when writing and if anyone else can read what was scribbled on the paper. Yes, it is possible to type and not look down at the keyboard.

I recently visited my physician, and that uncaring professional had the gall to use a tablet to collect information during my visit. How impersonal! If Dr. Wang whipped out a clipboard and had a pocket protector full of pens, my confidence in him would certainly have declined.

Thousands of funeral service professionals successfully combine the use of a computer with internet technology. In fact, it’s making their jobs easier and providing better communication with the families they serve. And providers have introduced new platforms of communication to our industry, including a collaborative platform that allows families to make practically all of their funeral decisions from the comfort of their own home.

Once again, I know some readers are thinking: “That’s not a good service trail.” On the contrary. Consider that most families we serve are geographically spread. Why *can’t* choices be made online rather than wait until everyone is collected in the arrangement room?

Additionally, if all of the data for the death certificate are collected before a family arrives for arrangements, wouldn’t that provide more time to create a more meaningful tribute to the life lived? From an operational standpoint, how much time is wasted at funeral homes because the information on a death certificate is wrong? I can attest to the fact that this segment of online funeral service is alive and well with many providers. Guess what? Families prefer to talk about their deceased loved one’s memories and how to create the funeral of a lifetime than to waste time on data collection.

Warning: Hold on to your suspenders because the caserole is getting ready to hit the fan. I’ll state, as a matter of fact, that I have been shot at, bombed and gassed in my life, so if what you read from this point forward makes you mad, then so be it. *There are actually people who do not like to visit funeral homes.* There, I said it. Go ahead

and call the Federal Trade Commission and fuss, but as Bill Murray said, "That's a fact, Jack!"

Also consider the decline in church attendance. I've read studies that show 4,000 churches are closing annually because 3,500 regular attenders stop attending. Less than 25% of all millennials attend any church at all. Certainly, this downward trend of moving away from traditional worship has a correlation to funeral service. If a growing majority of people don't like going to church, what makes you think they will like coming to a funeral home?

**Take a nitroglycerine pill
because online funerals
are already happening.**

In our consumer online world, we take advantage of technology to make our life easier. Televangelists still preach and have broadened their reach to the internet via YouTube and Facebook. People attend funerals virtually as well. The technology to offer such service to families improves daily. Has your firm offered Facebook Live for visitations or services?

We now order food, clothing and cars; seek medical advice; find a mate or date; manage our money; conduct business; communicate; and a host of other activities via the internet. If technology eases the burden of doing things we don't like to do, what do you think the choice will be when it comes to funerals?

Now, I can hear the suspenders slapping against those well-starved shirts, and I imagine the smirks on the faces of those with thoughts of, "Yeah, they can do all that stuff, but they can't do a funeral online."

Take a nitroglycerine pill because it's already happening. *Some people do not like coming to a funeral home for any reason!*

Yes, there are funeral service providers offering complete arrangements, selection of products, signature of documents, identification of the deceased, burial, cremation and receipt of payment without the family walking into the funeral home. Perhaps the first thing that will come to mind is that this type of operation must be a discounter or some sort of group that has no clue what they are doing. Let me assure you, licensed funeral homes across the country are offering such services successfully, and many of them are well established.

Why does this concept seem so surreal when practically every major retailer on the planet now offers similar services for their customers' convenience? It's entirely possible to conduct practically every segment of our business online, so why wouldn't we at least offer such a service? The online process provides positive results in communication with families, as well as a reduction of overhead expenses. Those positive results are what we call satisfied customers and profit.

In the online world, the funeral service profession has expanded beyond the hallowed halls and confines of licensed providers. Ten years ago, the only threats to funeral homes from the outside were a few online casket providers. In 2017, a quick Google search for funeral planning, cremation planning, urns, caskets, funeral venues, end-of-life planning, etc. will reveal that the providers of information are *no longer* overwhelmingly funeral homes.

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One communication-hampering issue is that many funeral homes use funeral jargon, such as “preneed” and “at-need,” that has no meaning to the information-seeking consumer. While my research reveals that just 9% of funeral home websites offer pricing information, it is still a shock to directors that there are websites offering GPL pricing of funeral homes for comparison. Not that big a deal, right? Please take another deep breath.

What’s going to happen when seriously funded entrepreneurs with volumes of consumer data figure out that funeral service lags far behind in its ability to reach its own customers effectively? Imagine the first time your Facebook feed reveals to a family that they can use a search website to find suitable funeral service providers. If you can get a consolidated search provider for a new house, car, air travel or hotel, why not a funeral service?

Speaking of hotels, what if major hotel operators initiate programs to sell their wares – rooms, food and beverage – for life celebrations? Seriously, think about how families use hotels now for celebration of births/baptisms, birthdays, bar mitzvahs, holiday gatherings, retirement parties. Is a funeral that out of bounds? The hospitality market is poised to host a funeral with all of the trappings that a funeral home that still has Brady Bunch décor doesn’t offer.

I’ve attended several national and international conventions/expos in my years of funeral service. Interestingly, I have been both on the buyer and seller sides of the aisle. During these floor times, I explore the new offerings that create a better a funeral experience for families and make funeral directors’ jobs easier. Every offering I find is technolo-

gy based, which means that many funeral professionals keep walking past these booths as if they’re leprous. Their faces, pasted with skepticism, scream: “That will never work and my families won’t like that.”

Interestingly, many of these new offerings come from businesses outside the deathcare industry. I have noticed and am aware of new entrants to our marketplace that do not rely on funeral director “acceptance.” Rather, they have funding and are not funeral industry regulars directly targeting consumers with the message of their funeral service vision.

So what’s stopping the funeral service business from moving to an online world of business? Nothing. The shift toward technology in the business is inevitable simply because families are demanding different types of service with more convenience and communication. Funeral directors are losing the ability to stonewall products and services simply because technology dictates they can be bypassed by the consumer. Will funeral directors be reduced to only providing perfunctory services such as removals, embalming or cremation?

Who could have predicted when Elroy was just a Space Cadet in the 60s that our world would include some of the ideas portrayed on *The Jetsons*? Although we do not yet exist in a technological utopia, our reliance on technology has surpassed what was only speculation a few generations ago. The “virtual” funeral home is only in its infancy as yesteryear’s traditional service and operations come head to head with the use of computer and internet technology.

It is our obligation to consider what the families we serve are seeking rather than waste time attempting to turn the tide of change. Technology is happening and families are responding favorably. Just like all other changes in life, we must get on board or risk being left behind. It’s really no longer a choice but a matter of survival and growth.

When email first emerged, there were those who thought it was a waste of time and effort. Some even said, “Why can’t we just call someone on the telephone?” Perhaps those early nay-sayers are still searching for a phone booth to make that call. ☰

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