

Social Media Is Changing.

ARE YOU?

BY JEFF HARBESON

The world of funeral service requires financial conservatism in its approach to business. This world, inhabited by multi-generational audiences of providers and customers, also requires authenticity and is in dire need of concise and clear communication. Finally, in the funeral world in which we exist, relationships come first. If you agree that these viewpoints are on target, can we embrace, with our technology environment, the consequences of *socially* evolving?

Although I am not a legend in the profession, I have memories of funeral services from my childhood on my father's side of the family. For the small South Carolina town, where 11 generations of my relatives rest in a church cemetery, a funeral was indeed a social event. A front porch light left on at the local funeral home was a signal to the community that a body "was in the house."

In this close-knit area, not everyone knew right away who had died. However, the party line phones (shared back in the day; Google it) would be busy with condolences, along with the nosy seeking details. Soon thereafter, a couple of evenings would be set aside so people could visit the funeral home to offer the family support. They stayed for hours, telling stories, talking with each other about memories of the deceased and catching up with relatives or friends who had moved away but returned to pay their respects. It wasn't a just a visitation – it was a social event.

Today, a funeral home will post the obituary on its website and Facebook page. In many cases, family members will link their Facebook pages to the funeral home post for all of their connections to view. Rather than making phone calls inquiring about the circumstances or giving condolences, acknowledgments may be a "Like" with a sad emoji, a written "sorry for your loss" or a full note on the family member's Facebook page.

When it comes to a physical gathering, a multiday event becomes one evening or an hour before services start. Since condolences were sent online, the need to attend such an event may be negated altogether. Thus, this formerly known social event is now being replaced with a new take on "social."

For many years, the soothsayers and prognosticators of our profession have been anxiously awaiting the great swath of death brought on by the baby boomers. Interestingly, I have



a vivid memory of a presentation displaying charts of when boomers became “of age” and how their demise was going to be the salvation of funeral homes and cemeteries. Fast-forward and the mark of increasing death rates missed for a few reasons. Mainly, we have improved our medical service and lifesaving cocktails, thus extending the life of the generation. Baby boomers are living longer and seem to be living better than ever for this age group. We’ve heard all sorts of descriptions about what the baby boomer desires for his or her final party: food service, wine, cool music and fireworks shooting in air. Imagine the noise of a screeching record at this very moment!

Now let’s focus for a moment on a more realistic view. How many baby boomers die without preneed plans? What is the problem besides the fact that the business may go to a competitor? If the boomer did not preplan, there is great likelihood that his or her children will be the decision makers at the funeral arrangement. Let’s unpack this line of thought and see why “social” comes into the scenario.

1. When a baby boomer dies without preplanning, funding the funeral may become an issue. A little-known fact (my facetiousness) is that a large segment of this generation is flat broke, living on Medicaid/Medicare and not bothering to conduct the spend-down (because they didn’t have anything to spend in the first place). If this is the case, take a guess at what the financial posture of their offspring is? The offspring of baby boomers are Gen-Xers and millennials. Let that sink in for a moment.

2. When Mama Moonbeam or Hempster Harry dies without a preplanned/prefunded funeral and the offspring must select a funeral home, what method do you think they’re going to use? I submit to you, in my not-so-humble opinion, that a smartphone will be used to conduct the initial search.

3. If the offspring is making the funeral arrangements for Mama Moonbeam or Hempster Harry, what’s the likelihood of a full-service burial? The decisions are now in the hands of Gen-Xers and millennials, along with their pocketbooks (or bank cards). Can you spell d-i-r-e-c-t-c-r-e-m-a-t-i-o-n?

Now, if we are to repackage the problems above, what are the solutions? Undoubtedly, reaching baby boomers to plan and fund their funerals in advance is a “must,” not a “should.” If the average funeral home conducts 100 annual service calls, that same average funeral home writes less than 40 preneeds. Hold on, I’m getting to my point. The fastest growing segment of Facebook users are age 65 and above. Hang with me here. If your firm does not have a robust preneed program, there is a likelihood that you’re trying to reach potential clients via old methods, such as snail bulk mail or the tried-and-true “walked in the door” method. If you want to reach more potential preneed clients who will select and pay for burial versus cremation and generate more revenue by keeping their offspring from deciding, you cannot use the same methods you did a decade ago!

I am going to ask a question, and after you read it,

please, everyone, bow your heads and close your eyes. Question: Did your funeral home write a check or make payment for a Yellow Pages advertisement or listing last year? No one is looking – you can raise your hand if you are one of the thousands of firms that did and we will not pass judgment simply because we can’t see you. As every head is bowed and every eye is closed, with hands up in silent shame, I’m not going to tell you to go to hell, but I’m going to tell you the truth and it will feel like hell. The truth is you wasted every bit of that money on an outdated method of advertising. Wait, you knew that, but your competitor (you know, the people you think are idiots) has its advertisement in the Yellow Pages, so dad-gummit (yes, I’m a Bobby Bowden fan), you are not to be outdone because yours was bigger than theirs!

What does this have to do with social media? Everything.

Methods of communication continue to evolve, and the mediums from which people get their information have shifted significantly. I personally do not know anyone who gets a newspaper. I also know many people who don’t have televisions; rather, they watch shows online, using YouTube or Netflix. A significant but scary fact is that a growing majority of consumers receive their “news” from Facebook or Twitter. This phenomenon has emerged as a national security threat with the influx of “fake news.” If your firm is not dominating your message to the community, whose message are they reading?

More than 65% of Americans own a smartphone, and it’s their primary source of all communication and information gathering. In fact, smartphone users have no need to even type directions or a question; a simple voice-activated command does the trick. The point is: What is the return on investment for the dollars you’re spending if your funeral home is sharing its “story” in the Yellow Pages, newspapers or on television? An even more riveting question: Who are you reaching? If you want to reach the baby boomer offspring who are making their selection based on how much better your competitor is at online advertising, please keep reading (or you can stop and continue to repeat your misery).

The time has come for funeral homes to reside in the 21st century and change the mindset, attitude and behavior of their marketing efforts. A funeral profession colleague, Ellery Bowker, CEO of Directors Advantage and Aftercare.com, recently shared a great analogy: Our last presidential election was not about Democrat or Republican voters; the focus and money spent was for wooing the undecided vote.

Now think about your community. There are families that will use your firm and others will go to competitors. However, more than likely, there are a greater number of undecided families that have never considered any funeral home relationship. I submit that the undecided funeral families in your community don’t get the local paper or use the Yellow Pages. The majority use social media on their smartphone. Any of this ringing a bell at this point?



Facebook was the catalyst that changed the definition of social media. There are more than 155 million Facebook users in the United States, and as I previously stated, the largest segment of growth is found in the baby boomer generation. I have seen many memes (pictures posted online with catchy messages) making light of the fact that if the deceased had so many Facebook friends, why such low attendance at the service? If you find that funny, look at how many visitation/wake/calling hours your firm charged for in 2016 versus 2006 or even 1996.

I dare say those numbers are dwindling because “social” is changing. Online relationships have replaced face-to-face relationships. Skeptical? Have you ever heard of Match.com? I use social media extensively for work and personal use. A clear majority of my communication is online with groups of people that use LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook. Recently, I was at a funeral and cemetery service gathering at which a funeral director approached and exclaimed, “We have been friends for years and now we finally meet!” Yes, that was cool, and we both laughed at the irony. What wasn’t so funny was when one of the keynote speakers asked the large audience he was addressing how many had a business Facebook, Twitter or LinkedIn account. Shockingly, only about 30% raised their hands! Even worse, when asked how many had personal social media accounts, I was astonished by how many hands were not raised. Really, people?

In today’s world, the primary source of a funeral home’s information is its website. I spend copious amounts of time

scouring funeral and cemetery websites as part of my consulting work. For a profession that holds itself in such high esteem, I’ve never seen so many embarrassing websites.

If your website has not been updated since 2012, it’s stale. If your website plays piano music while the reader is attempting to take in the funeralesque jargon posted in 10,000 words on a mauve background, I’m talking about you. If your website does not link to an active social media page, you’re out of touch. And there are funeral homes that have no website, much less any social media presence (hopefully, they are a competitor).

Websites and social media have been around for years, yet many funeral professionals continue to resist change, which in turn damages their ability to communicate effectively with the public. The message has shifted: If you don’t get social, you are going to lose. So don’t be a loser – use social media and update your website!

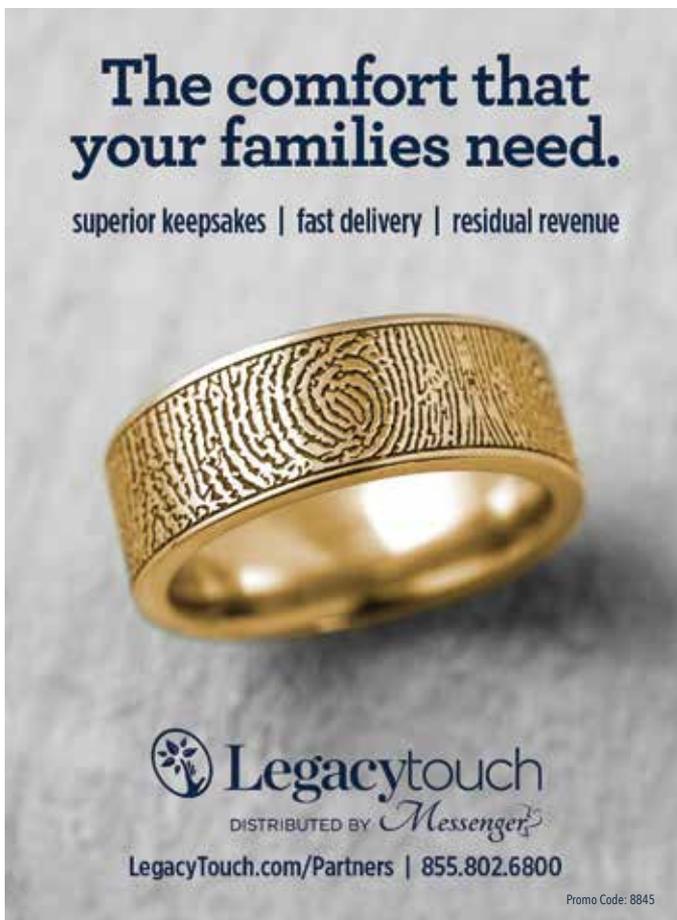
Funeral service is the same as plumbing in that nothing mechanically has really changed much. A body is either buried or cremated. We still wash our hands, use the toilet, shower or wash clothes. But while consumers and their demands continue to shift, our business models and methods of communicating have not.

The time for funeral professionals to acknowledge that digitization is an integral part of our business has passed. Noticing the small changes early will make adaptation of bigger changes easier. The small changes are now big changes and, if you haven’t noticed, you are losing. If no changes are made, extinction is inevitable. Remember when traveling meant calling a travel agent to book a ticket or plan your trip? When was the last time you used a travel agent? Almost every strip mall shopping center with a Subway restaurant, dry cleaners and a grocery store had a travel agency. But the travel agency business did not become extinct – it adapted to change.

Of course, I know that if naysayers have read this far into the article, their thought is, “Well, they don’t have to pick up or deal with a body.” It’s an analogy, so please continue ignoring the fact that it’s not a choice to be social or digital – it’s a requirement. If you don’t pay attention to the families you serve and to your business, I assure you someone else will.

If you read any of my articles or blog posts, watch my videos or attend my presentations, you will know that I have a satirical style. I prefer the use of humor, analogies and irony to expose what may be obvious but unspoken. I do this particularly in the context of contemporary issues within the funeral and cemetery professions. My goal is for those reading, watching and listening to “get the point” with a smile on their face. In some cases, I may strike a chord that resonates, but some recipients will take umbrage and tune me out. Either way, I am passionate about our profession and believe the best is yet to come for those willing to be unafraid of change. ☰

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