

Technology

By Jeff Harbeson

Winning with TECHNOLOGY



Let's face it funeral friends: Technology in the funeral profession is here to stay.

It's not a fad that people simply use to play games or catch up with each other. It has become woven into the fabric of our lives, both professionally and privately. In preparing to write this article, I considered different facets of a funeral, cremation and burial, and where technology has created a better experience for families while boosting the productivity of funeral directors.

Before a call ever takes place, a funeral home must promote itself in such a manner that prompts a consumer to make contact regarding an impending death or a death that has occurred. In days gone by, marketing for funeral homes was simple. We are in a relationship business, so visibility in operative communities was a must, and frankly, is still an important factor.

However, with the decline of civic organizations, church membership/participation, newspaper distribution and phone book use, the method of marketing has radically changed. If you are reading this and your firm does not have a website, you lose. It's not the cost: a basic website can be developed for free or a very nominal amount. I can attest there are many funeral homes at this moment that still do not have a website, so good

news for you if one of those dinosaurs is your competitor.

Before you start gloating, if your website has not been updated in the last three years, you lose, too. I laugh hard at some of the websites I'm currently seeing, as the firm is better off paying for a diner placemat advertisement. Like it or not, just like other service providers, a funeral home's website, as viewed by consumers, is a direct correlation of the professionalism that a firm provides. As a portal to a decision-making process, your website may be the only look a prospective family gets. If they are inclined to learn more, they may call or email.

moment. Having a Facebook page filled with obituary notices or preneed solicitations is really nothing to get excited about. Additionally, a funeral home Facebook page with auto-posts or communal content (defined as the same stuff everybody else has) is equally noneffective and indicative of the same symptoms as the @aol.com crowd. You are either too lazy to post content on a regular basis, too cheap to hire a professional to manage your social media (no your niece is not a social media expert) or a new category: noncreative. What is so difficult about telling your own story or sharing the positives about your own firm and

have a new arsenal of service tools available to initiate the process. Yes, it is now possible for a family to submit information prior to physically visiting the funeral home that is sufficient to complete a death certificate and most of an obituary. What? Yes, people, it's true.

Now I am sure that funeral directors at places like D.D. Daysgoneby & Sons Funeral are reading this particular part of my diatribe thinking, "Well, making a family do all that is bad service." On the contrary, by collecting data early, funeral directors are spending more time preparing to celebrate the life lived and creating meaningful services. I'll offer more on data collecting shortly. The bottom line is, I know of funeral homes that offer this service to families with software prior to arriving, and the families are happy to provide the data. Think about how nice it would be if one-time entry is completed and all that has to be done is to review the death certificate, obituary information and the goods and services contract. Oh, and most of the time, a family will spell their loved one's name right the first time.

At We R. Uptodate, a family comes to the funeral home and as they enter, a beautiful tribute to their deceased loved one is displayed on a 50-inch screen. I have actually witnessed tears shed from this form of unsolicited "wow." With the online submitted information about the deceased, Uptodate funeral home takes the initiative to create a customized welcome screen for the family upon their first visit and entry into the facility.

Of course, D. Dufuss Daysgoneby III thinks that such a display is unwarranted. Danforth D. Daysgoneby II greets a family at the door and directs them to the Magnolia room down the hall. This is also indicated on the service board just under Danforth Dufuss Daysgoneby's (the original) authentic portrait provided by a memento company that also provides the

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Speaking of professionalism and email, what is your impression if your physician, attorney or accountant sends you an email from @aol.com, @yahoo.com, @gmail.com or @wearebackwards.com? Your email domain name can be another glaring "I'm too lazy or cheap to change or invest" message. If your email isn't @yourfuneralhome.com, you lose.

Another extension of your website and avenue of approach to consumers is social media. Unfortunately, the funeral homes that don't have websites are in the same category as funeral homes without a robust social media program. Your firm may have a Facebook page, but before you start crowing like a rooster at dawn brimming with pride, hold on a

the people that make your funeral home special? I am fascinated that as a profession, we are highly critical of families that make decisions to engage with our competitors, online providers and the ever-hated discounters. We pontificate that these families "deserve what they get because you get what you pay for." Take a look at your Facebook page, your website and then look in the mirror. You lose.

We are at the point where the winners (funeral homes that offer consumers information via technology) are preparing to serve a family. Let's identify one of the winning firms as We R. Uptodate Burials & Cremations. Before a death occurs or a family heads to make arrangements, funeral professionals

service board numbers/letters ... now that's service.

Once the family of Uptodate funeral home is settled into an arrangement area that is decorated like a living room, each participant has a view of the 60-inch presentation screen (also displaying the tribute). Such a setup is completely catawampus to Daysgoneby arrangement room, where they sit behind a large desk opposite of family that are sitting in "the extra" chairs from the chapel.

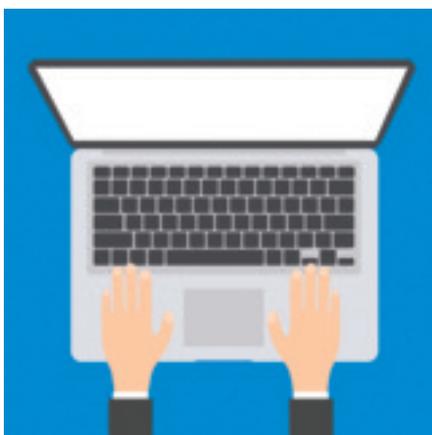
After the Uptodate family is offered the General Price List, Casket Price List, and Outer Burial Container Price List (which is a programmed mandate, thus not allowing funeral directors to subject their owners to a \$40,000 fine from the Federal Trade Commission), they engage in a co-creative software generated arrangement session. This technology marvel allows for family input and participation with visually pleasing graphics that assist funeral directors sharing the options that are available.

Meanwhile, back at "tri-D's" place, the good old-fashioned arrangement is taking place with "Danny" D. Daysgoneby IV starting with, "Wasn't he a member of the Loyal Order of Water Buffalo Lodge 26?" With painstaking precision, notes are taken so Mrs. Darlene Daysgoneby (wife of III, mother of IV) can get started typing the obituary.

As part of the Uptodate funeral home offering, the family does not need to enter the dreaded casket display room (also known as the Hallmark House of Horrible memories). Selections are presented and made in high definition on the presentation screen for caskets, outer burial containers, urns and other funeralesque trinkets.

Back at DDD's Funeral Home, everyone in the arrangement party must depart the comfort of the wooden foldout chairs to trek into the basement where caskets, vaults,

along with a few urns and keepsakes are displayed. Of course, it's always been policy at DDDFH to leave the family alone in the room filled with "death stuff" to make their own decision. After all, funeral directors are not sales people. DDDFH thinks their families "want to kick the tires" when buying caskets, thus chides Uptodate for "not giving good service." Of course, having inventory collecting dust and not revenue is "the way we've always done it" at DDD.



Once the family is fully traumatized, er, has made their selections, they are escorted back to the arrangement office. Mrs. Daysgoneby gives everyone a copy of the obit she created from the scratchings of IV (she thinks his handwriting was always below par because he plays on the computer too much). As the family reads the typed-out notice, they realize it sounds just like the notice they read from a funeral last week of another local lodge member.

After IV takes notes on all the changes, he returns them to Mrs. Daysgoneby for another round of editing. Finally, after two more edits, the time has come to settle the bill. Danny IV brings in the handwritten goods and services statement. Danny IV finds it curious that, after he tells the family what the cost is, they all have to go to the bathroom or need a smoke break.

Meanwhile, back at Uptodate, the family makes choices with the tally visible as selections are made. They have digitally signed the goods and services statement. The insurance policy was sent by the funeral home to an assignment company and the family made the entire transaction to the firm "cashless." The family is able to return home to prepare for the fellowship with extended family.

Meanwhile, Danny IV is explaining how the JC Penney insurance policy can be used to pay the bill, if they can find it. IV is tired of the three-hour arrangement. He knows that the "Dukes of Hazard" season 2 is on shortly, so he makes a brilliant executive decision and tells the family to try and find the policy, bring it in, and "we'll do right by ya," knowing that it's more important to serve than get paid.

As the next day progresses, both families initiate the funeral process of their deceased loved one. At Uptodate, attendees at the gathering sign a digital guestbook, which allows for messages of condolence on Facebook. The family of the deceased is pleased that so many are in attendance. This can be attributed to the online obituary and Facebook postings. All attendees witnessed a fantastic memory video on screens placed throughout the funeral home. In addition, several personal items of the deceased are displayed throughout the visitation areas, eliciting fond memories of the deceased.

Across the street at Daysgoneby, a scant crowd (the only obit was printed in the local paper and they don't have a website, much less a Facebook page) is signing a paper guestbook and viewing a memory board that is placed next to the casket. A few remaining Buffaloes (they are becoming extinct) amble in and give the secret handshake to Danny IV along with their condolences.

The Moral of the Story

My analogy may seem absurd, but the unfortunate truth is that there are many Daysgoneby funeral homes still operating. It's not just "their" problem, because the perpetuation of the "I don't want that kind of funeral experience" reaction by consumers affects the entire profession.

Conversely, a vast majority of funeral homes recognize the need to integrate technology into nearly every facet of their business. Why? Technology streamlines operations and is a major factor in eliminating mistakes. Something as simple as one-time data entry for a death certificate and obituaries can eliminate a waste of time and overhead.

I have used technology as a platform for funeral home operations, and the result is that funeral directors find that their job becomes easier. The fact is, Daysgoneby, and others

clinging to the glory days, are mistaken if they think that the "fad" of cremation and all things internet are going away. If a funeral home is not fully engaged with an up-to-date website along with a robust and communicative social media program, its competitors are winning, no matter the legacy pedigree.

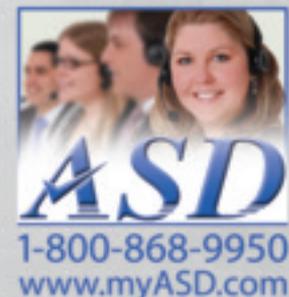
If you haven't noticed, consumers are not loyal, especially to funeral homes or religious organizations. Being a member of the Loyal Order of the Buffalo isn't going to cut it anymore. Refreshing the arrangement session is one of the bright spots that technology has enhanced in our profession. Unfortunately, there are many that think "typing" on an iPad in front of a family is unprofessional. I can type and look you in the eye, can you write legibly and do the same? Don't be too lazy or cheap to update/upgrade your arrangement experience.

With certainty, I am sure that some readers will take umbrage to the thoughts and manner I conveyed in this article. Let me be clear: The Daysgoneby funeral homes are hurting our progress. I am passionate about the funeral and cemetery profession, but I comprehend the hurdles we face are generally perpetuated from within. Once again, the truth is we are not any different from any other business. We provide a service and sell some things, we charge a fee to make money, we collect our money, we pay our bills and we hope to have some left over to pay our personal bills. Yes, we deal with dead bodies, which seems like taboo stuff. Unless we market ourselves in an open and forthright manner, thus meeting the needs of consumers, we lose. I solicit your thoughts of collaboration or your words of consternation. Either way, say something and get involved. •

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