

*By Daniel M. Isard*

WHAT BUYERS THINK

REFERRALS

THE VIRTUAL LINK

## Marketing Today: Don't Miss the Mark

Three things you must understand to successfully market your firm for growth.

Dear Dan,

*I have been in funeral service for 40 years. I own my own place and have been doing about 120 calls a year for almost 30 years. I have not gained or lost more than a handful of calls in any one year. I have three competitors in my town and we all have the same market share today as we did 30 years ago. I have a website. I have newspaper ads. I have a billboard on our main intersection downtown. I am active in my church and have more than 20 years of Rotary attendance.*

*I don't understand how to market my business in this present age. Oh, one more thing, please disguise my name so my competitors won't know I'm asking for help.*

*Signed, Marketing Maven in Malborne*

Dear 3M,

I understand your question. How do you grow a business in this present age? Everything you are doing is great, for 2003. However, as we are presently in the late stages of the second decade of the 21st century, you are missing the mark on three fronts.

### MISSING THE MARK: LACK OF CONSUMER KNOWLEDGE

First, I would direct you to the September issue of *The Director* to read the latest Consumer Awareness and Preferences Survey conducted by NFDA. This survey asks many of the same questions each year so we can track consumers' shifting preferences and attitudes. It's critical to take advantage of the big dollars NFDA employs to help you and others learn about consumer attitudes and how they choose a funeral home.

I would draw your attention to one of the clearest results of that survey. Previous service is important. It is consistently the number-one reason for selection of a funeral home by consumers. I want you to know that the power of "knew the funeral director" is a top answer as well.

I like this method of marketing. The best way to do

this is with aftercare and outreach programs. If you look at the typical firm involved in NFDA's Pursuit of Excellence program, it is employing community programs to different degrees. Quality programs help people deal with the adjustments in their life due to the death of a loved one.

We find that when people know the funeral director or a member of the staff, they are less apt to:

- Be price focused
- Shop other funeral homes.

We find they are more apt to:

- Prearrange a funeral
- Prefund their prearrangement
- Refer others.

The market shares for funeral homes with year-round offerings for aftercare or outreach programs tend to increase over a three- to five-year period by as much as 20%.

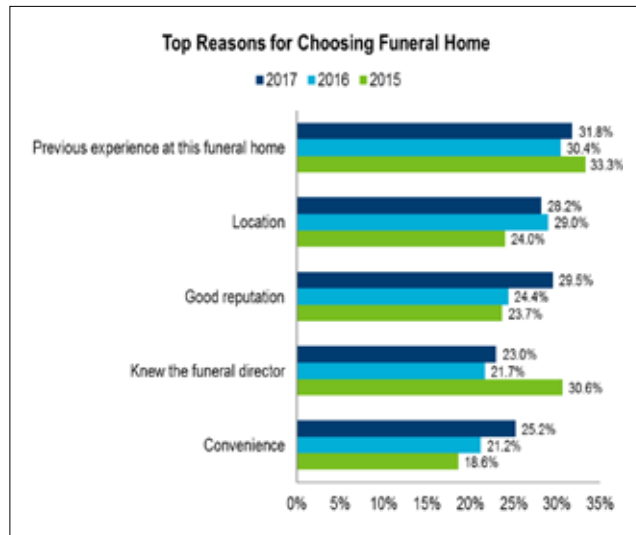
### MISSING THE MARK: THE VIRTUAL WORLD

Simply having a website is so passé. The selection of services and merchandise is about shopping. A recent Harris poll commissioned by Funeralcity.com determined that 88% of all consumers begin shopping for items online. They might buy the item at a store or online, but shopping is about gathering information.

Results from that same survey revealed that some 75% of consumers wish funeral homes did a better job of being transparent on pricing. The above-mentioned NFDA survey showed that 79.7% of consumers want a website with average price information.

I bet that when you travel and need to book airline tickets, you don't go to the website of your favorite airline. You begin your shopping with information from a site that aggregates several airlines. From there, you might make a selection or go to the specific airline's website.

Having a website is important, but it is not making shopping easy. Websites only do so much. Social media is a more powerful instrument.



Almost two-thirds of all people in the NFDA survey responded that they are comfortable using social media. Almost 55% of respondents this year acknowledged that they used Facebook daily, up from 52% last year.

Social media is more than just Facebook or Twitter. It is a proactive campaign that will drive people to your website based on certain comments/posts you publish on social media sites. If you are not comfortable using social media for posting, then hire someone to do it for your company.

Years ago, you had a Yellow Pages ad, so people could find your phone number. Today, people don't find your phone number right off, but they do find your website.

The better your social media, the better your search engine optimization. SEO is the way search engines determine the rank of your website. As someone goes to Yahoo and types "funeral home Malborne," the first sites that are shown are those that are paid ads. The sites after the ads are those with the best SEO. You don't need to be a marketing maven to understand that better social media yields better SEO, which yields better search engine placements.

**FUNERAL HOMES  
DO GET LETTERS OF  
RECOMMENDATION  
FROM FAMILIES, BUT  
UNFORTUNATELY, NO  
ONE EVER SEES THOSE  
WORDS OF PRAISE.**

**MISSING THE MARK: FREE REFERRALS**

The last thing to remember about marketing today is that referrals are free. This profession has always had ministers and other community centers of influence that referred your firm. Today, everyone is a center of influence, even people you don't know.

Recently, I was in Birmingham, Alabama, and looking for dinner. On Yelp, hundreds of strangers made suggestions through their reviews and testimonials. Based on a hankering for mac and cheese, I wound up at John's City Diner. As I finished my meal and before I paid my check, I posted a recommendation on Yelp. Are you encouraging the families you serve to do the same?

Funeral homes have always gotten letters of recommendation from families served. Most cautious and modest funeral home owners would read the note and place it in the family's file. That file is then placed in a five-drawer cabinet and locked at the end of the day. Then, the office in which the filing cabinet is located is locked at the end of the day. There's no way that testimonial will see the light of day. No one will ever see those words of praise and thanks. Today, we can encourage people to place comments on your website and on third-party sites, and you yourself can take their written words and republish them.

It's one thing when a business owner publishes the opinion that "I am the best" but another when an independent party publishes the same observation. Consumers credit third-party testimonials with high respect.

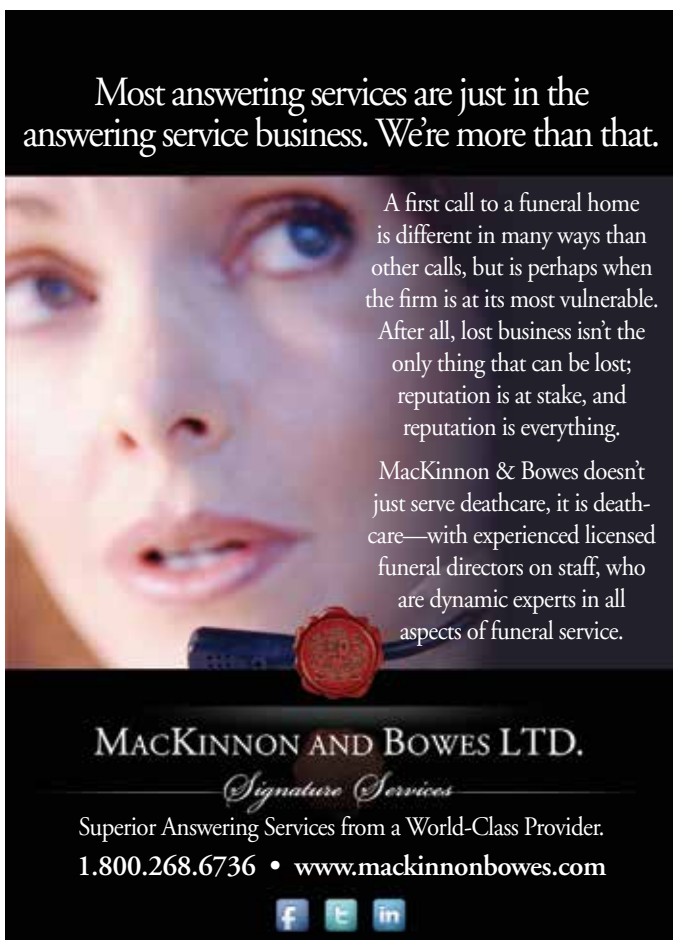
If you visited a website that sold all brands of televisions, you would probably buy the brand with the highest ratings. You might not even recognize the brand name, but if a thousand other TV aficionados liked it, you'd spend your money with that company.

Listen, 3M, marketing is not hard. In fact, it is easier today than when you bought your first Walkman. It's about making sure you and your staff meet as many people as possible and are seen in the most credible way with families. It's also critical to understand the virtual world or hire someone who does. Most of all, it's about getting people to say nice things about you that can be published for others to see.

Oh, and by-the-by, if you're ever in Birmingham and want some killer macaroni and cheese, did I mention John's City Diner?

*Dan Isard, MSFS, is president of The Foresight Companies, a Phoenix-based business and management consulting firm specializing in mergers and acquisitions, valuations, accounting, financing and consumer surveys. Isard can be reached at 800-426-0165 or via email at danisard@theforesightcompanies.com. For copies of this article and other educational information, visit theforesightcompanies.com.*

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Most answering services are just in the answering service business. We're more than that.

A first call to a funeral home is different in many ways than other calls, but is perhaps when the firm is at its most vulnerable. After all, lost business isn't the only thing that can be lost; reputation is at stake, and reputation is everything.

MacKinnon & Bowes doesn't just serve deathcare, it is deathcare—with experienced licensed funeral directors on staff, who are dynamic experts in all aspects of funeral service.

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