

# Got Ideas?

To foster change, there must be an environment and culture of creativity.

Is there a correlation between the profession's resistance to change/lack of innovation and its culture and environment?

By Jeff Harbeson



In the funeral business,  
change happens slower  
than snails traveling  
through peanut butter.

In fact, many of our colleagues still operate in 20th century mode as they refuse to use technology, still employ arcane operating practices and even still advertise in the Yellow Pages.

Is it that the deathcare environment is not conducive to creativity and there is no talent for innovation? Or are we simply just stubborn and resistant to change?

Not much has changed in the funeral profession and supporting industry. There are new gadgets, upgraded buildings and vehicles and such, but the basic functionality of the business remains. Funeral directors care for the dead, with a final disposition of either burial or cremation.

What does it take to be innovative and creative enough to come up with new ideas? I suppose there are people among our ranks who have never had an original thought in their life. However, every day, thousands of funeral directors make arrangements, transport bodies, embalm, cremate, use caskets and urns, and so on. In the workflow from first call to interment or inurnment, there are literally hundreds of steps and processes. Therefore, the opportunity for innovation and creativity exists.

Several years ago, an idea spun from my baptism into our profession. Why are funeral home operations inconsistent from location to location, even within the same company? Rooftop A operates differently from Rooftop B and significantly differently from Rooftop C. When I ask owners about this phenomenon, the answers I get range from “You don’t understand the funeral business; we’ve always done it this way” to “Well, our locations are in different communities and the personnel adapt to what families want.” In other words, “I’m too lazy to lead my business in the direction and manner I want it to go, so the inmates run my asylum.”

I know reader pushback has already started, but hold your horses. Have you ever been to Chick-fil-A? With locations all over the United States, the company is a leader in the fast food business marketplace. Brand consistency is paramount to its success. Tell me where you get the same response at any business from personnel in New Jersey and Texas? Chick-fil-A has a culture bolstered by a superior training program.

With this notion in mind, I set out with the idea of creating something similar for operating a funeral home. And yes, it works! The system is still in practice today and an integral part of funeral home operations. If inefficient procedures that waste time, resources and money are eliminated, can you guess the outcome? The family has a positive funeral experience and the funeral home is profitable. Ideas are commonplace; development and execution for success are another story.

From my point of view, we don’t encourage enough innovation and growth. The internship practices that set the tone for how a new person is indoctrinated in this profession are deplorable. Unfortunately, many new entrants to the funeral profession are met with, “You’re going to have to earn your way like I did.” Such a statement means that the new intern/apprentice is now placed in indentured servitude, doing everything from washing cars to cutting grass.

Before you have a stroke, yes, I know these tasks are necessary at some firms and that no one is above doing what needs to be done. However, training programs consisting of “just follow me and do what I do,” without any structure, are a recipe for disaster. Why? Because in many cases, the person being mirrored is doing it wrong!

A question to ponder: When was the last time you asked a new person in the profession what they would do differently? Have you ever considered inquiring about a fresh view? If not, you are perpetuating the hampering of growth and innovation within your own sphere of influence.

We’ve had some excellent ideas come to fruition in our profession that were brought about by funeral directors. The modern-day church truck was an idea of the Diuguid family in Lynchburg, Virginia, way back in the mid-1800s (Diuguid Funeral Home is still in operation). It loads caskets for easy passage through narrow church isles. Legend has it that the Diuguids were one of the first firms to operate a “rubber-wheeled hearse” and were ridiculed by other funeral professionals at the time for doing so. What a surprise – a funeral director stepping up to try something new only to be scoffed at by fellow professionals. Such behavior by our “fellow professionals” is a perfect segue into exploring the sources of our industry’s innovation.

Is it possible for a funeral director (or other industry professional) to invent the next best thing? Of course it is! An idea comes from many different people with different skills. There are some who simply connect the dots (like yours truly with the development of the operational platform described earlier). In fact, I believe there are thousands of “dot connectors” among us who have a different view and perhaps a better way, but again, we have many ideas and not much development or execution. In order to foster change, an environment and culture of creativity must exist. Is there a correlation between the funeral profession’s resistance to change/lack of innovation and its culture and environment?

In my professional funeral service career, I have been blessed to fill many roles. I’ve worked in sales for a public company. I am a partner/developer of a funeral home brand and a co-host of the funeral industry’s leading online information show. All of these experiences provided me the opportunity to become director of marketing for The Foresight Companies.

The reason I share my “funeral lineage” is that I have been and continue to be on both sides of the aisle at funeral expos and conventions. I have attended state and national conventions as a funeral home owner. I have been a vendor. My exposure from both points of view has been interesting. As a funeral service provider, I have seen vendors who sit in their booths playing with their phones or engaging with their own folks and are completely uninterested in sharing the product

or service they represent. I have also visited aggressive vendors who serve up all sorts of enticements to get folks into their sphere of display.

The few newbie vendors are my favorites because they are passionate about their new service/product and very eager to share its virtues. In fact, no matter the venue, I always take time to visit the newbies and listen to their pitch. Most of the time, their ideas are relatively good; however, their lack of research and ability to understand how to navigate this unusual business is evident. Unfortunately, although new ideas for products or services very often have merit, the major reason for failure is a lack of capital coupled with poor preparation of launch into the industry. Thus, I have seen newbies come and go over the years.

From inside the booth as a vendor, the view is completely different. I can attest to the fact that in some cases, I am embarrassed for the vast majority of funeral service professionals. In the past, I have been at state conventions where family members would invade vendor booths with bags like those proffered on the front porches of neighborhood homes at Halloween. Kids and adults alike would grab pens, trinkets and candy like bandits in a jewelry store heist. From inside the booth, I have also witnessed funeral directors avoiding eye contact as if they were walking past someone afflicted with a terrible disease.

For a community that prides itself on being friendly, there are some real jerks among us. One example of bad form was

a funeral home owner playing the “stamp my card” game, meaning that he needed to stop at 10 booths to get his little card stamped to maybe win a prize for participation. Representing We R. Jercs & Son was We R. Jercs Sr. He came to my booth and said, “I’m not interested in what you do, but I need my card stamped.” I proceeded to tell the self-righteous Jercs Sr. that I was not going to stamp his card until he gave me a few minutes of his time so I could share my service/product. Jercs Sr. howled that I had to stamp his card and that he was not interested in what I had to say. I proceeded to tell him that as a fellow funeral home owner, I was embarrassed by his tirade and that the likelihood of his card getting stamped “for participation” was nil.

My favorites are the booth-visiting naysayers who haven’t invented or created anything, much less had an original thought in their life. During engagement, I have heard “That will never work” and “Facebook is a fad.” My response is always, “Tell me what you do better or different to be successful.” A hasty exit without an answer usually ensues, save for the grabbing of a few pens from the table on the way out.

The vast majority of innovation and creativity is emerging from outside the walls of our industry. I believe without a doubt that there are modern-day Diuguids out in the field with great ideas ready to make enhancements to our profession. My point of this article is that we need to open our minds to take a different stance on what’s in our collective future. Providing an environment for creativity is paramount; however, so is embracing something new.

This article is published for such a time as this, as the NFDA Expo is this month in Boston. I implore attendees to bring inquisitive attitudes and engage others with enthusiasm about what they see, along with entertaining the possibilities of what lies ahead. It’s time we lean forward together in a direction for success rather than step back into “what used to be.”

I am passionate about this profession and blessed to have platforms that allow me to share observations or points few desire to breach. You may not agree with me, but at least consider that engagement sparks action for those of us who want to make a difference.

Stop by Booth 3331 in Boston and let’s talk, banter and work alongside each other for our collective future. ☰

*Jeff Harbeson is director of marketing for The Foresight Companies. He is also co-host of Funeral Nation, a weekly video podcast, and author of The Funeral Commander blog. He can be reached at [jeff@theforesightcompanies.com](mailto:jeff@theforesightcompanies.com) or 602-274-6464.*



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