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**ICCFA Magazine  
author spotlight**

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**MORE FROM THIS AUTHOR**

► Harbeson teams with Ryan Thogmartin to co-host a weekly video podcast called Funeral Nation.

► Educational information, including copies of this article, can be found at [www.theforesightcompanies.com](http://www.theforesightcompanies.com)

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**PET SERVICES**

If your funeral home, crematory or cemetery hasn't already entered the pet side of the business in some fashion, it's a business expansion worth considering. But even if you have the passion to serve the pet market, you need to take a number of factors into consideration before taking the plunge.

## Is the pet business for you?

I am fascinated by the continued upsurge in the pet deathcare segment of our profession. Consumers not only have embraced offerings to memorialize their beloved companions, but also have hosted celebrations of life similar to those held for the loss of a human loved one. Pet deathcare providers are expanding their reach in large metro markets and small towns across the United States. Now everyone in America has the opportunity to honor their non-human loved ones.

As anyone associated with our profession knows, we are experiencing shifts in consumer behavior that directly impact our businesses. The exodus from burial to cremation as the leading choice of disposition after death has created challenges for providers both economically and from a service perspective.

However, keep in mind that one constant will remain: When you lose someone you love, whether human or an animal, your emotional reaction to loss needs to be addressed. Remembrance of the life lived and memorialization are key components to addressing grief, and we need to continue to provide creative opportunities within our profession to meet this need.

While preparing to write this article, I was reminded that history tells us that our non-human companions have been honored from way back. I once lived in Virginia near the small town of Lexington, which has two highly regarded institutions of higher education. Washington & Lee University and Virginia Military Institute are located next to each other, nestled in one of the most picturesque spots in America. Interestingly, both colleges share an unusual commonality. Each is the memorialized resting place for a war horse.

Washington & Lee has Traveller, the

war horse of Gen. Robert E. Lee. Virginia Military Institute is the final resting place of Little Sorrel, the war horse of "Stonewall" Jackson. After the death of both horses, their remains were preserved and put on display for the public to admire.

Talk about a visitation with viewing! Eventually, Traveller was interred just outside the chapel near the entrance of the Lee family crypt on the college grounds. Little Sorrel's hide is still preserved, mounted over plaster, and is on display at VMI's museum. The bones of Little Sorrel are interred on the parade grounds with a stone marker atop of which an apple can often be seen resting.

In recent years, we have witnessed more attention to the use of service animals in law enforcement and the military, as well as for individuals. Service animals are highly regarded and integrated into the work environment, forming close bonds with their human partners. When these animals die, especially in the line of duty, their sacrifice is honored.

One example is police K-9 Kye, a 3-year-old German shepherd who worked for the Oklahoma City Police Department. After being fatally stabbed, Kye was laid to rest with full police honors. The ceremony included a service, casket and use of a hearse.

Another excellent example is the 13-year-old canine veteran Ireland, a Belgian Malinois. She served two tours in Iraq and was dedicated to saving lives and protecting our troops. A public memorial service was conducted at Camp Nelson National Cemetery in Nicholasville, Kentucky.

Ireland's service began with a processional let by a horse-drawn caisson carrying her flag-draped casket and concluded with a 21-gun salute for the

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dedicated hero. During the ceremony, the flag from the casket was presented to her military handler.

Yes, we have leaped forward as a society, including in how we celebrate our pets' lives and memorialize them. I think this trend will continue to grow.

There are still different attitudes regarding the final disposition of a pet that are contrary to the direction the pet deathcare market is headed. I know people who scoff at the idea of a pet funeral, or cremation or memorialization.

In fact, the "shade tree" cemetery (back yard) is probably the most prevalent final resting place for pets in America. Nevertheless, I think that this segment of the business offers us opportunities.

The number of pets in the United States eclipses the number of humans. Naturally, all living things eventually die. As we continue to struggle to address changing consumer attitudes toward service and final disposition, those of us who haven't already done so should consider providing services for pets.

### **Why enter the pet market?**

What are some advantages of being a provider of pet funeral, cremation and/or cemetery services?

First and foremost, the pet population is larger than the human population in the United States—approximately 400,000,000 pets versus 327,000,000 people. Along with this number, consider the lifespan of pets versus that of humans.

Dogs have an average lifespan of around 12 years and cats, about five years. Humans live for an average of 79 years. People average two pets during their lifetime, though it's common for people to have many more.

What these numbers add up to is the potential of a tremendous market for funeral and cemetery professionals accustomed to helping people after a loss. Pets have become part of our families, so their death causes grief, as would the death of any family member.

As a funeral service provider, offering services to pet owners provides you with an excellent marketing and service opportunity for you to engage new client families.

An excellent example is Jodi Perkins Clock in Muskegon, Michigan. She not only offers pet funeral services, but also writes a fantastic blog, "Ask Jodie," where

she offers insights about pet loss. She is also a licensed funeral director.

An increasing number of funeral homes across the United States are successfully offering pet deathcare services in their respective communities. Many create separate businesses to differentiate those pet services from their existing funeral homes. It is estimated that more than 1,000 such businesses exist in the U.S. That might sound like a lot, but it's a relatively small number in comparison to the number of funeral homes in the country.

These pet facilities are very similar to human funeral homes and often come complete with arrangement rooms, visitation areas, product display rooms, onsite crematories and even embalming rooms. Many varieties of caskets, urns and keepsakes are available for pets. Though the idea of cemeteries creating sections allowing people to be interred with their pets is fairly new, pet sections or cemeteries dedicated exclusively to pets are not uncommon.

Another consideration worth noting is that the pet funeral and cemetery business is subject to significantly less regulatory oversight. Licensure for personnel is practically nonexistent, which makes recruiting people to work in this area a much less daunting task than hiring funeral directors.

### **Will a pet business be profitable?**

Now to the big question: Can a pet funeral home and crematory be profitable? For most businesses, the components of success do not differ. Yes, I know that some claim the funeral and cemetery profession is unique, making the foundation for success different. I agree that the services provided and the products sold are unique, but the basic tenets of running a successful business remain constant.

Starting a pet funeral-cremation business requires research and due diligence, as does any other venture. Many businesses fail because their initiation is fueled by passion. Don't get me wrong, having passion for your start-up is essential, but conducting market research is vital.

In the funeral business, I have seen many well-meaning and enthusiastic funeral directors passionate about "doing it better" start a new funeral home and fail because the market could not sustain another provider.

Creating a solid business plan to address every detail of concept, operations, funding, the market, marketing initiatives, execution of the business and sustainable revenues is necessary so that entrepreneurs can "ferret" out and prepare themselves for the challenges they will face.

The biggest reason small and new businesses fail is lack of capital. Even if you have a great idea and well-thought-out plan, not having enough money to survive during the ramp-up of a new business is often fatal. If you are expanding an existing funeral home or cemetery, funding should not be substantially difficult.

Does location matter for a pet deathcare provider? We all know that in most cases it does for both funeral homes and cemeteries. Look for the answer in your market research. Some schools of thought suggest that funeral homes should not co-locate pet death care services but rather house them separately. But as with any decision, you need to make a decision based on your market.

Finally, you need to understand the true overhead cost of running a pet deathcare business in order to decide on the retail prices to charge for your services. Unfortunately, the funeral profession is rife with misunderstanding about proper pricing, which continues to be one of the major challenges to long-term viability.

Setting your prices at \$100 less than those of your competitor—whom you sometimes refer to as "an idiot"—is not a formula for success. Since I'm on my pricing soapbox, I'll remind you that changing prices once a year simply because the casket company increased their cost to your firm is an equally poor management decision.

In closing, what is my opinion about whether a funeral home or cemetery should be a pet deathcare provider? If you have arrived at this point of the article you may surmise the answer is "yes."

However, if your existing firm is not profitable, expanding into such a venture is most likely to fail. If you're not successful in one business, opening a second one without addressing the reasons for your lack of success pretty much guarantees that both businesses will go to the dogs.

I'm passionate about the funeral and cemetery profession; throw me a bone and let's chat sometime—I'd love to listen to your thoughts. 