



# Business

By Jeff Harbeson

# Introducing the Funeral Park

## Combo? Yeah, they play some good stuff.

If I referred to a “combo” while in a social setting (which involves a cigar and libation), according to Webster’s dictionary, most would think I’m referring to a jazz band or an appealing color combination. However, in our cemetery and funeral vernacular, we know a combo as a funeral home that operates in conjunction with a cemetery (usually onsite).

From my point of view, a combo is a common-sense operation. Throw in a crematory, and *voila*, now you have the total death-care operator. Rather than using the code name combo, this type of operation should be introduced as a “funeral park” where consumers can pay one price at the gate and take advantage of all the offerings inside. Of course, like theme parks, one may have to pay extra for upgrades like a fast pass, fancy meals with a star, or special seat

positions. You get the drift?

In some states, arcane laws prevent combos from existing. While in the past, these laws may have seemed like a great idea, today they are a hindrance for consumers. For the record, I’d like to challenge readers to respond as to why prohibiting a funeral home and crematory to operate on a cemetery property is a problem. This notion makes as much sense as hotels being prohibited from providing a restaurant, a bar or food and beverage services in addition to convention meeting space. I look forward to the responses to the contrary. Now on to more insight.

If I considered entering the death-care business, a funeral home/crematory/cemetery combination is attractive from many facets.

- First, from a consumer point of view, a one-stop shop for an event they do not want to be part of in the

first place seems palatable. Traveling to make arrangements at a funeral home, then traveling to make arrangements at a cemetery is overwhelming and, in many cases, the two entities are at odds with each other over who is selling what.

- Second, a consumer would receive the benefit of being in one location for services.

In a world where we are accustomed to convenience, the unfortunate truth is funeral homes and cemeteries are the antithesis of convenience. In this case, real estate location pretty much dictates the resistance of change due to expense. The marketing opportunities to consumers are significant for convenience of service, events on-site and preplanning on-site.

The greatest cost of running a business on practically every profit and loss statement, regardless of the industry, is personnel. A combination funeral home operation offers the ability to maximize the

duties of funeral arranging employees to include a complete start-to-finish arrangement session where every facet of a funeral is addressed.

In addition, such an operation presents the opportunity for excellent training for arrangers to share a wide variety of options that separated locations would not. For example, disposition of cremated remains. Yes, I am fully aware that the majority of funeral directors do their best to make sure a family is offered a selection of urns versus the temporary container from the crematory. As a side note, prior to completing my line of thought, why do funeral home employees put the temporary container in a velvet bag? If the bag is never opened, one does not see the cardboard or plastic container, and it looks great on the closet floor. Why would anyone purchase an urn?

Sorry, I digress. Let us get back to making money. A combination arranger, meeting with a cremation family, has a competitive advantage over a non-cemetery, co-located funeral home (another reason for calling them combos). Most funeral directors at a non-combo funeral home spend little time exploring the possibilities of interment options for cremation-selecting families. They are satisfied with a jewelry or urn sale and rarely go beyond the signing of the goods and services statement. Why? Because it does not involve the non-combo funeral home for interment ceremony ... or does it?

Combo arrangers have the opportunity to take a stroll (or cart ride) for fresh air and share different possibilities for permanent memorialization of cremated remains. Niches, interment spots, creative markers (rocks, benches, trees) and other selections are more effective to envision as an option when viewing in person versus thumbing through pages of a catalog or computer website.

Speaking of interment and urns, combination funeral homes and cemeteries have a fantastic post-

service opportunity if an urn or permanent memorialization was not selected. How many funeral homes follow up with cremation-only families (you know, the ones that did not value the services or products offered) to inquire about disposition of the cremated remains? Are the remains still in that nice velvet bag on the floor of the closet or have the remains been scattered, interred or ...? An arranger at a combo has the distinct advantage to follow up with such families and open a dialogue on disposition and preneed.

Remember, preneed for a funeral home is different from presales at a cemetery, although from a consumer's standpoint, there is no distinction. Again, convenience of planning without competing entities are a win for consumers. Funeral home owners work hard at convincing consumers to preplan their own final wishes (however, many funeral home owners fail to create a succession plan for their own business, but of course, funeral professionals never die). When a consumer funds their plan, whether through a trust or insurance, the funeral home does not capture the revenue until death occurs.

Yes, I know commissions are often paid upfront, and some states allow certain upfront revenue recovery, but the majority of funds are not allocated to a funeral home until death. A cemetery can immediately capture revenue from presales, which is beneficial for cash flow, and frankly, incentivizes the business to be aggressive selling inventory, products and services.

I recently wrote an article about the state of our profession and my perspective of where we are heading. Our future is strong as we enter a year where baby boomers begin to die. Everyone knows this; however, I believe the industry missed the mark on when the uptick of death would start because we are also living longer due to modern medicine.

A challenge for our profession is that boomers are changing their perception of how post-death is

going to go for them. I recently attended a "gathering and celebration" for a friend who unexpectedly and tragically lost his wife. He took over 10 days to plan an outstanding send-off. Our tightknit group of friends pretty much hung out for the days after the death providing him support during his unexpected mourning. The day of celebration consisted of a catered cocktail reception and party. There was a time of sharing with a minister present. The family dictated the order of how things would go, including music and "open-mic" time, and they created their own life story video (you know, it's possible for consumers to use technology).

Most incredibly, the entire occasion was held at the family home as if it were, gasp ... a big family celebration! There were over 200 people in attendance enjoying each other's company, sharing stories about the deceased, laughing, crying, eating and drinking. Who wants a traditional funeral? The only service provided by the funeral home was transfer from place of death, basic services, cremation and prayer cards.

A note here: This is going to happen more and more in the future. Lesson? Make sure you are charging appropriately for your goods and services, otherwise, you're going to miss out on the party.

I'm very passionate about our profession, the people that make it work, and those we serve. This is either the best time to be in our business or the worst. It's exciting if your funeral or cemetery business is taking advantage of technology, adjusting its business model, pricing appropriately, and meeting changing demands of consumers. If your firm is doing none of the before mentioned, it's a dreadful time.

Do you have the financial fortitude and skillset to be excited, or are you initiating your own epitaph "we've always done it this way?" Agree or disagree, I'd like to talk with you about this article, so reach out to me. •