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ICCFA Magazine spotlight

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More from this author

► Educational information, including copies of this article, can be found at www.theforesightcompanies.com

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Editor’s note



The Cemetery Impossible column is written by the staff of The Foresight Companies.

If you have a question you want to be featured in this column, please send it to danisard@f4sight.com. Dan Isard or a member of his staff will call you to get more information and a recommendation will be provided via this column, helping not only you but also others who are facing similar challenges.

SALES: MARKERS AND URNS

When you start to talk to a family about buying a marker or urn, do you often hear, “We don’t have much money”?

Do you have a trouble getting families to select a replacement for the “temporary” urn you provide? It’s time for a new approach.

Cemetery Impossible

Figuring out a better way to sell memorialization

Dear Dan,

I have trouble selling markers to families. During a sales conference, at need or in advance of need, my first emphasis is the sale of the interment right. Then, I focus on the vault, if they haven’t pre-purchased it from the funeral home.

Lastly, I try to sell the marker. Of course, many have pre-purchased it from the funeral home, but those that haven’t tell me they “don’t have much money” and I tell them we can put up a temporary marker for them until they can make the commitment.

I have a similar problem with cremation families. We own our own crematory so we have a great advantage in our market. We have built two columbaria. One is a granite-front and one is a glass-front. Everyone tells me glass-front niches sell rapidly, but I do not find that to be the case in my market.

When we talk to a cremation family we show them the 40 urns we display and yet more than 80 percent choose the temporary urn we use to return the cremated remains. Recently I spent the money to buy an engraving machine to engrave photos, names and dates onto the temporary urn, which families really appreciate.

I suspect there is something we are doing to cause us to have a result which is inconsistent with other cemeteries.

Tired of Temporary in Topeka

Dear Tired,

Yes, your technique is not effective for selling markers, vaults, interment rights, merchandise and memorials for cremation consumers. Let me break it down for you.

The average advance cemetery sale takes place when the consumer is 68 to 72 years old. The average advance funeral sale takes place when the consumer is 78 to 82 years old.

Therefore, on average, a consumer will

enter into cemetery decisions six to 10 years before they enter into funeral decisions.

I conclude from your letter you are not promoting advance sales. This is the biggest mistake you are making,

We have followed successful cemeteries for 30+ years and found that a well-run cemetery has advance sales that are double the amount of at-need sales. Stated another way, if a cemetery is well run and has \$1 million in revenue, about \$650,000 to \$700,000 of that revenue comes from advance sales.

The ability to talk first with a family via advance sales gives you first crack at their budget for funeral and memorial needs. By promoting pre-need sales, you can make the sale of the interment right and the protective vault as well as the memorial.

If a family spends all their money at the funeral home on the casket and a service, they won’t be able to fund the interment and permanent memorialization.

You mentioned often hearing “we don’t have much money.” How much is “not much”? To me, that is a sales phrase.

In an arrangement conference, there are sales being made by consumers and the sales counselor. This phrase, when used by the consumer, is simply an attempt to position the arrangement counselor in a corner.

Families have choices. Would the family rather spend the money on a memorial or on a grave opening? They can certainly, with your supervision, open their own grave and close it up. However, they have chosen to employ you to do that work for them.

Families make choices with their money. They choose to spend based on where they perceive value.

A memorial marker can cost from \$500 to the going price of a pyramid. This marker is the symbol of the memorial point. A marker is a modern-day *stèle*. A *stèle* was the

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engraved story of achievements the deceased would prepare to argue they are worthy of going to “the underworld.” It evolved into a gravestone and memorial.

There are many types of memorial available, including upright and flat markers as well as benches and other columns. Not everyone needs or wants columns. It is a matter of the family choosing what is proper to their sensibilities.

The grave is a functional object, the place where a person’s body is laid to rest, while the marker is the memorial to that person’s life. Today, we use substantial materials such as granite and bronze to mark the grave to protect against weather and erosion that can alter the condition of these items, as anyone going through an old church cemetery can attest.

That is why a “temporary” marker is not proper. In fact, it is a misnomer. A temporary marker is usually paper on a metal insert. The paper eventually deteriorates, leaving only the metal insert. Over time, the insert may be moved by grounds crews and put back in the wrong place or not at all.

A temporary marker can possibly set you up for litigation, as these are not markers meant for the public. They are generally for the work crew or setting companies, but they are not intended to be relied upon by the public.

Cremation sales

Your issue for cremation families is just as problematic, but since you caused the problem you can correct the problem. A temporary urn is not temporary. It is usually made out of plastic or some simple wood. If left unprotected in a field, sun, wind and elements might break it down in 50 to 70 years. Something that lasts that long is certainly not *temporary*!

These plastic vessels in which the cremated remains are encased when being returned to a family are actually “transfer urns.” They have a limited purpose, that of taking the cremated remains from the retort to the point of permanent interment or transfer to a permanent urn. They are not “temporary urns.”

Lasering images and words on these transfer items gives them too much respect. It

confuses the families into thinking these are full-fledged, permanent urns.

They are not intended to be on display in a household, let alone in a glass-front niche. You can place them in a granite niche, because no one will see them. You could place a plastic bag containing cremated remains in a granite-front niche, for that matter.

Customizing or decorating these transfer urns simply serves to interfere with a family’s choice of an urn.

Scripting is important on Broadway, but it is also critical in an arrangement. Too often arrangers learn a script of their own device and stay with it even if it results in poor communication.

A family has at least two decisions to make in the choice of merchandise for a cremation service: Is the purpose of the container to hold the body for transfer, care and maybe display for a service? Will the vessel chosen to hold the cremated remains be permanent?

We use euphemisms because we are so accustomed to this discussion, but for a family that has never made a cremation arrangement, this adds to confusion.

The script should be, “In a moment, we are going to review two product choices you need to make in dealing with your loved one’s body. First, what do we want to use to hold their body between now and the cremation? This will be used to care and protect the body and be a way to display the body for the visitation and service. We will use this to protect the body as we move it from the point of the service to the crematory.

“Secondly, we need to place the cremated remains into a vessel that you can use to protect the remnants of the body, which may be for the display in your home or for interment in a permanent place such as a cemetery.”

Then you lead them into the display area to make their choices.

Selling urns is different from selling caskets in many respects. The biggest difference is timing. A casket is almost always purchased within 48 hours of death in an at-need arrangement. However, an urn can be purchased at-need or post-need.

Post-need is any time after the service. I strongly recommend to our cremation-

providing clients that they track which families do not purchase an urn at need and continue to market to them. You can do this by letter and email.

Generally, 2 percent to 5 percent of people contacted post-need will purchase an urn.

The key to selling glass-front niches is positioning the price relative to a granite niche. Assuming a granite niche costs \$500, the same size, same position of a glass-front niche would be about \$1,000. If you set your price for glass-front niches too low, they don’t have value. You might sell them out too quickly.

Glass-front niches are often chosen because they can be personalized easily. This starts with the selection of the urn itself. A more personalized and possibly more high-end urn will be purchased for a glass-front niche than a granite-front niche, since it can be seen.

I remember seeing a bank of glass-front niches where only about three out of 40 had been sold. The owner wanted uniformity and decreed that “everyone using one of these must use this particular urn.”

Those niches didn’t sell because of that cemetery owner’s rule. To the consumer, “glass-front” means “custom.”

Glass-front niches appeal to families who want to be more expressive. The layout within the niche is important to them. They will pay to rearrange and reset the niche interior every few years.

The urn is a part of this staging. To tell people who want the niche contents to express who their loved one was as an individual that their niche must look like everyone else’s is to operate at cross purposes.

People who buy glass-front niches will buy more ornate and personalized urns. You need to encourage this to promote the complete sale of the glass-front niche.

Why else would people be willing to buy larger niches, niches that are taller or wider than average? These options appeal to some people because they allow them to use decorations that are of different sizes.

I recommend you look at all you are doing in light of this article and change a few things at a time. □