

Business

By Steve Zittle

How to Become an
Influential Business:

Train Your Staff



We all want to think that our funeral home offers the best service when compared to our competitors. We want to assume that the work coming out of our prep room is superior as well. Why would you be in business if your goal was to be second or third best in your market? How do you really know if you're the best? What quantifies the meaning of "best?"

If you are not regularly surveying your families, you have no idea. The Foresight Companies can even survey families who did not choose your firm and give you insight as to why. We must, from time to time, conduct an operational audit of our firm. The results of which will (if we're honest with ourselves) yield

an answer to the question: Are we really the best in our market?

Even if you are the best firm in your market, surely you can identify areas where there are inconsistencies. If you had to order your employees by performance within their respective roles, what would that look like? If you have four fu-

neral directors, why is No. 1 better, and where does No. 4 fall short?

A better question to ask yourself is this: If the most prominent person in my community died today, and the family called us to handle the services, who is going to meet the family? The answer at many funeral homes is the owner. We

wouldn't normally trust anyone but ourselves (or maybe No. 1) to see such an important family. Why then, are you allowing your other funeral directors to see any families at all? If you treat "every family the same" (and admit it – you don't), it shouldn't matter which director sees any family.

How do we eliminate inconsistent performance among our employees, and establish a standard of service that will help define our brand to the community? The answer is both amazingly simple and incredibly difficult: developing an effective training program for your staff.

Is training important? Whether your funeral home does or does not currently have a training program, you have already answered that question: "Well, we all are required to have CEUs, so my company provides our employees with funds to attend seminars once per quarter, whether they need it or not."

Because so many in our industry are not able to define what training is, it might be wise to define first what training is not. Training is not CE seminars or attending conventions. Those are defined as education. An easy way to distinguish education from training is to look at the sports world.

Each spring professional baseball players congregate in both Florida and Arizona to begin training for the upcoming season. They even call it "spring training." These ballplayers, considered among the best in the world at what they do, do not simply gather in assembly halls to discuss trends and issues within the game. They do not just watch video presentations about the latest techniques being developed to hit a curveball. They don't snooze through lectures on rules of the game, waking in time to pick up their CEU certificates at the back door.

Baseball players put on uniforms and run drills. They take small elements of the broad game, and they break those elements down into parts. Then they practice those

parts, over and over, until it becomes natural. Once they feel natural, they can combine those parts and elements, and be prepared to play their best.

However, the training doesn't stop once the season begins. Athletes train practically all year long but especially during their season. Their practice is ongoing. You attending CEU classes may educate you, but you'll never incorporate what you learn until you train yourself to incorporate it.

Another obvious example of

ceived your license that makes further refining of your skills unnecessary? Of course not. That is why police dogs, military pilots, and even batting champions engage in consistent practice. Skills need to be developed and sharpened. More skills need to be learned, while keeping the other skills sharp. Training never ends.

How do you establish a training program for your firm? Start with the common elements of any good training program. First, your program should be ongoing. Remem-

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training is found in the military. The percentage of active-duty military personnel engaged in combat at any one time is relatively small. This means that the majority of the military is not participating in real, battle-related activities at any given time.

However, the military wants to be combat ready, so they train. They practice various elements of battles, and sometimes practice full-on battles themselves. That way when the combat really comes, soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines are not only comfortable performing their roles, but are adept at fulfilling their responsibilities at the highest possible competence. (And boy, aren't we grateful for that?)

It takes a dog two years to be trained to become a K-9 officer in the police department. Sure, you spent time in mortuary school and your internship, but did something magical happen the moment you re-

ber not to confuse training with education. Find time for your staff to meet consistently, whether daily, two or three times a week, or weekly, to cover a particular topic of the business day. This time should be consistent, so that everyone can plan around it, and make it a priority. Document the date, time and training topic, along with attendees in a log. (This will pay huge human resources dividends should you have to discipline or fire an employee at some point. It is to your advantage to show that he/she was trained on a particular topic.) You can even incentivize employees who attend the most training sessions.

In addition to being ongoing, the topics and activities should be interesting. If there is a specific area you want to cover, for example, handling phone calls, then spend time communicating your desired methods and outcomes. Then role-play. This is where the true training

begins. When someone is role-playing helping the caller, you can encourage the staff to take notes. What went well on the call, what needs to be improved? Everyone can learn from each other's mistakes, and it can be fun along the way. Encourage those who do well at that particular skill to share tips for those who aren't as comfortable.

Thirdly, training should be based on an established set of guidelines for that topic. If you want to build brand consistency (and you should), employees need to have an expectation of not only what duties you want completed, but how you want them completed. If there is no clear standard for how to perform a task, it is very difficult to expect your staff to consistently achieve it. Communicate methods that make the most sense to you, but be open to suggestions from your staff, since they are a source of great ideas.

Lastly, training should be limited in time. A tendency some have is to get bogged down and train for hours. Forty-five minutes to an hour is as long as a regular training schedule should go. Learn to be efficient with your time and people won't dread the process.

Why is it so difficult to implement a training program? There are several obstacles that owners and managers find difficult to overcome. The first is, believe it or not, a lack of training topics. This is just lazy thinking on our part. Whether you perform the operational audit, have one performed for you, or implement the standard operating procedure manual, there will be plenty of topics from which to draw.

How many times have you witnessed something go wrong, either on a service, on the phone, or in front of a family? Look at these situations not as errors but opportunities to train. Training opportunities can range from operating the copy machine to properly washing a vehicle, from transferring a body from a residence, to collecting money or where to stand at a graveside service. As you go through your week and you see something done poorly, make a note to yourself to include that topic in your next training meeting. If your staff currently meets after a service to discuss how it went, you can develop areas on which to focus future training opportunities.

The biggest detriment to regular training is often the lack of time. Once the day gets started, anything can happen (and usually does). It is difficult to have the discipline to schedule arrangements around the training meeting. If work requires the training session to be adjusted or even skipped, so be it. But we must be disciplined enough to not let that be the norm. The more seriously you emphasize training, the better your firm will become. If you treat training as a nuisance or worse, ignore it completely, you will foster an attitude and a culture within your organization that your staff is above training. It will be more difficult to correct mistakes, to introduce more efficient ways of performing tasks, and to develop additional skills.

As a leader, you have the inherent responsibility to train your staff. Failure to do so shows incredible weakness in your leadership abilities. But it doesn't have to be so. Commit to regular staff training, and you will see strong results.

Why should you train? Quite simply, because your competitor is probably too lazy to train his/her staff. By training your staff, you give them an edge over the competition. Weak areas become strengthened. Funeral directors become equally proficient. A rising tide lifts all ships. Not only does your staff get better at their tasks, but they develop a camaraderie, having to role play different skills with one another.

Everyone (including you) can show improvement in weak areas. Everyone's faults are on display, and so are their victories when they develop. We all tend to bond when facing difficult tasks together. Training won't always be pleasant, but it will give opportunities for your staff to rally around one another. We naturally have a desire to compete and to win. When placed in a group setting like this, that desire is fostered. As these individual skills are honed, they will bleed over into everyday performance. It is then that you have the opportunity to use that as praise for a job well done.

Training provides you the chance to create a culture within your firm of mutual support, teamwork and humility. I dare say that none of these traits would be considered negative within our workplace. Identifying individual staff members to lead training in which they are proficient is another way to reward them, and at the same time, assume some of the burden from you of organizing the meetings.

A famous Chinese proverb says that, "A journey of a thousand miles begins with one step." This represents the crossroads at which you now stand. Your first step may be to do an honest evaluation of your operation, or to have an independent third party do one for you. Use that data to identify weaknesses, inefficiencies, or just things you'd like to see change.

Call a staff meeting and introduce your intention to conduct weekly training at whatever time on whatever day works best in your location. Then hold yourself (and your staff) accountable. Make it a priority. Insist that they take it seriously. Break out your list of topics and start there. Don't just teach (because that is education.) Role-play. Give your staff opportunities to practice. Let them make mistakes. Gently correct and guide the direction to where you want it to be. The monetary cost of this exercise is virtually nothing, but the dividends it will pay are unlimited. •