

By Daniel M. Isard



Nothing More Critical

To market your message for the future, capitalize on the tools and techniques of communication that exist today.

As we prepare to reinvent your business with foresight (ahem, it's just a common word, folks) and vision for 2020, there is nothing more critical than marketing. Because you cannot assume families will simply come to your funeral home, you must address the methods and design of marketing today – not in anticipation for the turn of the 21st century and not stuck in the 20th century.

The key elements of marketing have changed. Everything you thought was marketing 20 years ago has been eviscerated, blown up or has died. The one thing that has not changed is your message. Advertising and marketing attempt to transmit your message to those seeking that message.

I contend that the message of funeral directors over the history of mankind is the same: “We get the deceased where they need to be and the living where they should be.” If it were not for funeral directors, we would have bodies abandoned by the side of the road and the living might be grieving alone, without support from others.

The problem is that your dialogue has been co-opted by anti-funeral parties trying to make death a commodity; they only want to concentrate on price, which is as ridiculous as buying a car based only on price. But the problem is that we're not fighting to get our story out. We all know who wins a boxing match if only one party comes out swinging.

To market your message for the future, you must capitalize on the tools and techniques of communication that exist today. There isn't one method for marketing in small towns and another for large towns. A large town is a grouping of neighborhoods. People live, work and play within a neighborhood. The size of the geographic town is moot. Your service area is a defined as part of that town.

In small towns, your market may be the entire area and some miles beyond. In a city the size of New York, it might be three miles or less. A funeral director who advertises on a local radio station in a small town might cover the entire service area, but a New York City funeral home broadcasting on WABC is going to be wasting its money since the broadcast goes far beyond where its removal car goes.

The first goal in marketing a business is identifying your customers. After all, how else would you know what audience to get in front of?

The first goal in marketing a business is identifying your customers. After all, how else would you know what audience to get in front of? I assert that today's consumer is far more blended than ever before. In 1980, we

had funeral homes that differentiated themselves by the religion they served. Today, a funeral home tries to serve families of every religion, along with the nonreligious. We used to be segregated by the consumer's thought that some funeral homes didn't know their customs. Today, our society is much more blended about race and nationality. Funeral homes need to be inclusive, not exclusive.

A GOOD MARKETING PLAN

A strong marketing plan must have a clear objective. In this case, your objective is to retain those families you've served in the past and get those that haven't used you to consider your services the next time a need arises.

1. *Know your clientele.* You don't serve everyone in your town. There are people not in your neighborhood or market group. Don't try to be the funeral director for everyone unless you are located in a very rural area.
2. *Tell your story.* Your story is the differentiator between you and your competitor(s).
3. *Don't assume.* You must be proactive in promoting your business. Otherwise, you'll get free advertising via bankruptcy court.

There are four key elements of marketing – that has not changed. But the methods of getting your message out have indeed changed, and we must all move with the changes.

WORD OF MOUTH

Word of mouth once meant using your telephone or telling friends directly over coffee. Now, social media allows every voice to be heard loud and clear. Therefore, Yelp and Google ratings are important. Whether good or bad, they

need to be answered. There are some things you cannot say due to financial disclosure, HIPAA or liability concerns, but they all need to be replied to.

Third-party testimonials are critical to your business as well. When a family thanks you, it's a nicety. If you publish the comment, with their consent, it's a testimonial. When you use these on your website, in your advertising or hang them in frames on your wall, they have value. If they are locked up in a file drawer with a copy of the GPL, you are wasting goodwill.

Your staff must be trained because they are the front line of this dialogue. Make sure they know what to say in various situations. Work with them on how to answer questions and promote the business. How they can be local ambassadors? A client recently said to me, "Dan, we are too busy for this!" He thought about his full-time licensed staff but didn't see the value of training the 31 different people he has working part time over the course of the year.

PUBLIC RELATIONS

Advertising is when you buy space in media and the ad says, "We are great!" Public relations is when the media publish a story and within the story they say, "This company is great!" Which of these two methods bring you greater recognition in the eyes of consumers?

The press makes companies. However, the press can also break a company. Therefore, solid press relations are very important. What has changed is who the press is. With a blog, you become the press. Are you going to write bad things about yourself or about funeral service? Of course not. How refreshing it is to have a publisher write nice things about the people of this profession. If you can't write, hire someone. If you can't hire someone, then aim

When a family thanks you, it's a nicety. When you publish that comment (with the family's consent), it's a testimonial.

your phone's video camera toward you and talk for one minute on an informational subject. People now prefer video over the written word.

In generations past, we had cartoons in newspapers and magazines. Today, people read cartoons on Facebook or sent from their friends in emails. Some of these email rebroadcasters have gotten so powerful that they are the new press. *Huffington Post* got started as a blog in 2005 with one employee and now attracts more than eight million unique views a month! This is just one instance of the new press in the internet age.

The new television isn't on any cable channel – it's on the internet. You can broadcast anything you want on the internet. You can have your own video blog and post it via a site such as YouTube, and it's free! You can also drive people to that site via social media, which is also free. You can publish all the funeral news you want, in a good light, for your community and beyond – for free. William Randolph Hearst is rolling over in his grave over the amount of influence you can wield without having to buy paper or ink!

THIRD-PARTY MEDIA

Are newspapers dead? No. They're being reinvented. They will never be the strong communication tool they were in the 1950s, but they will still exist. You need to have a presence in these papers and other periodicals. However, the story you need to tell is different.

The story needs to be about you and why you do what you do; it can also include who you serve. We must promote our message. Can you imagine if someone thought that the story of a lifetime is contained on a grave marker? You can't tell your entire story in a newspaper, but you can send the reader to the area where that entire story exists. Even on television, we see 30-second ads that get your attention and then tell you, "To learn more, go to buymybeer.com." They do this because people will go to the website.

My passion for this subject is to tell you there is no one silver bullet. It takes an integrated approach to get your message out. There are several media outlets, paid and worked for, that can be united to market your business.

OUTREACH

The number-one reason people choose a funeral home is previous service. The number-two reason is because they think they know the owners and employees. So let's find ways to talk to as many people in your neighborhood/service area as you can.

Outreach is a matter of having a chance to see people under favorable light. I learned 35 years ago that when I go to lunch with a funeral home owner, they sit so they can see the door. This is not some reference to Wild Bill Hickock's death, but rather, by seeing the door, it goes from being a lunch to a working lunch. They can be seen and they can see.

Rather than just waving during a meal at the luncheonette, let people see you at your funeral home. Let them see your building when they are not there to pay respects to a neighbor or loved one. Let them be able to have a conversation with you and your staff. One client bought his part-timers logo baseball jackets, so when they are out in the community or at a working event, they can be easily differentiated as members of this business.

So get ready. Next year, we break everything you have done and have comfort doing in marketing your business. This is going to be a fun run!

Dan Isard, MSFS, is president of The Foresight Companies, a Phoenix-based business and management consulting firm specializing in mergers and acquisitions, valuations, accounting, financing and customer surveys. He can be reached at 800-426-0165 or danisard@theforesightcompanies.com. For other educational information, visit theforesightcompanies.com.

Financial and tax advice contained in this article is for informational purposes only and may or may not apply to your individual position. Readers are strongly encouraged to seek the counsel of qualified advisers before undertaking any action based on this information.