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VISION**

HARNESSING SOCIAL MEDIA



It's a must-do in today's world, but it also must be done right so it becomes an asset to your business.

BY JEFF HARBESON

T

he use of social media by funeral homes isn't a matter of choice anymore, it's a necessity. Digital media has radically changed our lives: – how we communicate, shop, work and get our news. In the not-too-distant past, funeral homes with websites were a big deal. Social media was just emerging but was not widely adopted by most funeral providers. Fast-forward to today: In most industries, not having an updated website and avoiding social media is considered unusual. In fact, most funeral firms use both mediums to some extent.

Yet social media is still widely underutilized in the funeral profession and is, to some degree, misunder-

stood. This is especially true when considering the effective deployment of this medium for communication and advertising. Let's be clear: If misused or not managed properly, social media has a down side for funeral homes and can cause significant problems. This article will explore various avenues of how funeral homes can maximize their brand by effectively using the power of social media, along with measures to implement to avoid problems.

DEPLOYING THIS POTENTIAL ASSET

Rather than waste energy in an attempt to entice you to use social media, let's focus on how to better deploy this potential asset. If you don't get it by now and still think social

media is a fad or a conspiracy for "funeral haters" to infiltrate the profession, this article is only going to fuel those fears. From my perspective and experience, Facebook is the most popular and effective social media tool today for funeral homes to utilize. Facebook is only one slice of the marketing pie, but it provides an excellent platform to reach consumers about all of your funeral home marketing activities.

In many communities, consumers choose which funeral provider they will give their loyalty based on the following:

1. A relationship with an employee or owner
2. A recommendation
3. Proximity to a residence

PRICING OF SERVICES

Many firms spend too much time and too many resources on attempting to sway families away from competitors. These firms need to take a broader view of the market. Consumers who have not chosen a funeral home provider should be viewed as prospects and the lowest hanging fruit to develop new relationships. Believe it or not, consumers don't think about their own mortality, much less which funeral home to choose. If the number-one reason for choosing a funeral home is relationship, followed by referral, what does that tell you? A funeral home brand is all about relationship between the families, the staff and ownership. Certainly, an audacious building with a garage full of the latest fleet of limos and a casket display room rivaling a Hallmark store (Hallmark is a fledgling retail relic, if that means anything) is fantastic, but these accoutrements don't develop interpersonal relationships or reputation.

For example, my father's family in rural South Carolina has been using the same firm for generations. One reason is their comfort and familiarity with the mid-century décor. One of the only things I've witnessed change here over the years is that the ashtrays are now on the front porch with the rocking chairs rather than in the visitation room. Yes, décor is important, but for my father's family, relationships and legacy carry the day.

Facebook is a phenomenal medium by which to help funeral homes develop relationships by showcasing their most valuable asset – the people working at and associated with the firm. If you're skeptical, consider how our society now embraces online dating. Most relationships today are initiated online from apps and compatibility websites. Although this may seem a far fetched way to reach new families, it is an undeniable fact that digital and social media is connecting consumers for love and business.

Promote your staff by profiling professional credentials and skill sets. This will offer consumers not only an introduction but help to differentiate your business from competitors. Adding personal information, such as hobbies

and other highlights of "non-funeral" activities, humanizes funeral service professionals and creates a connection for the viewer. Each staff member adds a particular spice to your funeral home recipe for a solid reputation.

Sharing testimonials from families served is another important factor to consider when posting on social media. Consider your own behavior when shopping or conducting online research prior to a purchase or hiring a company for a service. Reviews are a powerful tool to assist consumers with choosing a funeral home.

Most funeral home websites have



A CASKET DISPLAY ROOM RIVALING A HALLMARK STORE DOESN'T DEVELOP INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS OR REPUTATION.

a link to their obituary page, offering families an outstanding opportunity to share their loved one's obituary with family and friends on their own Facebook page. By having the obituary on your funeral home website and connected to your Facebook page, you have an excellent opportunity to promote your brand. When the obit is posted on the funeral home's Facebook page, the family can receive a notice on their own Facebook page, thus providing the impetus to share the obituary with friends. Additionally, when a new family likes a funeral home's Facebook page, it offers an opportunity for a review to be posted by them about their experience.

"But what if we get negative com-

ments?" When negative comments occur, the owner or manager should provide an immediate response and attempt to resolve the issue. Addressing problems publicly can be important to readers of reviews because they see an example of how a firm handles negative feedback and the corrective actions it takes to ensure a positive funeral experience for patrons.

Facebook also provides funeral homes with the ability to share relevant information, thus creating an opportunity for the firm to be the subject matter expert in the community. Everything from veterans benefits to common misconceptions about cremation is information firms have and should share. Consider using one-minute videos of a staff member explaining various subjects. This provides the viewer information and introduces the staff member as well.

In addition, Facebook allows the posting of community events and calendars that pop up in newsfeeds to inform readers of activities you may be conducting. Does your firm have a comfort pet, an event room or something unique to your firm and community? Post stories and show pictures, along with testimonials of families sharing their positive experiences. Connecting Facebook with other social media mediums such as Twitter can easily broaden the reach of different audiences with the same post.

THE GREATEST RISK

The biggest risk for a funeral home on social media is its staff. Most funeral homes do not have an employee handbook, let alone a social media policy. This exposes owners to the danger of an employee posting an inappropriate photo, message or comment on social media that may tie back to the business. A social media policy is critical for the protection of the funeral business. This type of policy provides guidance for employees on their use of social media at work, as well as the content they post outside of work. Oftentimes, the policy will apply to media such as blogs, wikis, microblogs, message boards, chat rooms, electronic newsletters, online forums, social networking sites and other sites and ser-

vices that permit users to share information with others in a public manner.

You may ask why this is important. Consider a situation that may arise if an employee posts a racist statement on their Facebook page. By the way, their profile indicates they work for your business, and they happen to have your company logo on their wall. A public perception may be that they are indicating an opinion on behalf of the business. As an employer, you cannot prohibit an employee from using social media or control what they choose to say, but you do have the right to control how your business is represented. The following are guidelines for employees on the professional use of social media on behalf of the funeral business, as well as personal use of social media when referencing the funeral business:

- Employees must know and adhere to the funeral business' code of conduct, employee handbook and company policies when using social media in reference to the funeral business.
- Employees should be aware of the ef-

fect their actions may have on their images, as well as the funeral business' image. The information employees post or publish may be public information for a long time.

- Employees should be aware that the business may observe content and information made available by employees through social media. Employees should use their best judgment in posting material that is neither inappropriate nor harmful to the funeral business, its employees or customers.
- Although not an exclusive list, some specific examples of prohibited social media conduct include posting commentary, content or images that are defamatory, pornographic, proprietary, harassing, libelous or that can create a hostile work environment.
- Employees are not to publish, post or release information that is considered confidential or not public. If there are questions about what is considered confidential, employees should check with the human resources department and/or supervisor.
- Social media networks, blogs and other types of online content sometimes generate press and media attention or legal questions. Employees should refer these inquiries to authorized funeral business spokespersons.
- If employees encounter a situation while using social media that threatens to become antagonistic, employees should disengage from the dialogue in a polite manner and seek the advice of a supervisor.
- Employees should get appropriate permission before they refer to or post images of current or former employees, members, vendors or suppliers. Additionally, employees should get appropriate permission to use a third party's copyrights, copyrighted material, trademarks, service marks or other intellectual property.
- Social media use shouldn't interfere with the employee's responsibilities at the funeral business. Its computer systems are to be used for business purposes only. When using a funeral business' computer systems, use of social media for business purposes is allowed (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, the funeral business' blogs and LinkedIn), but personal use of social media networks or personal blogging of online content is discouraged and could result in disciplinary action.
- Subject to applicable law, after-hours online activity that violates a company's code of conduct or any company policy may subject an employee to disciplinary action or termination.
- If employees publish content after hours involving work or subjects associated with the firm, a disclaimer should be used, such as, "The postings on this site are my own and may not represent the funeral business' positions, strategies or opinions."
- It is highly recommended that employees keep the funeral business' related social media accounts separate from personal accounts, if practical.

It should be noted that if an employee violates the social media policy, the employer would have the right to follow the same disciplinary action he or she would follow for other violations of company policies. The objective here is not to curb the "freedoms" granted by law to your employees but rather to protect your brand in the very quickly changing social media world. While social media presents many marketing opportunities, there are dangers as well. Controlling these risks is necessary, and legal precedents have been established via existing litigated cases.

The benefits of social media far outweigh the risk associated with using it as a marketing forum. Using social media as a distribution platform is similar to other non-funeral home functions, such as accounting. If the expertise for managing social media is not organic to your organization, hire a professional. "If you think it's expensive to hire a professional, wait until you hire an amateur" rings true for managing social media as well. A funeral home's message, reputation and profit depend on professional oversight. ■

Jeff Harbeson is director of marketing at The Foresight Companies. He is also co-host of Funeral Nation, a weekly video podcast, and author of The Funeral Commander blog. He can be reached at jeff@theforestcompanies.com.



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