

By Daniel M. Isard

Trounce Your Technophobia

Every dynamic of your operations can be enhanced by technology, and families appreciate the professionalism and ease it provides.

Our business focuses on death and the living. This can be said of the tools of our trade as well, as we mourn the death of those things we felt we could never do without. Funeral service has lamented the death of three great tools of the trade. Can you guess what they are? I think they include:

1. *Office chalkboard outlining all the cases* This device was wonderful until you spilled water on it or leaned up against

it and erased important details of upcoming services. Or perhaps you had employees with short arms, so they couldn't write on the top half of the board.

2. *Black velvet open-face message letter board* While there is really no consistently used name for this thing in the industry, we all knew what it was, and it was wonderful unless...

- You lost a couple of "Ws" and had a preneed on Willie W. Williams

- You lived in the funeral home and came down in the dark to get something and stepped on one of those letters

- You dropped the box and spent an hour putting every letter back in its place (and wound up with more "Ms" than "Ws"; ergo the problem with the preneed.

3. *The mortuary student's sleeping room upstairs in the funeral home* This was because you wanted phones answered by staff and not an answering service. It was great unless you got a student who was a sound sleeper or until the Department of Labor audited you for this student's time card.

These items became obsolete because technology came up with better solutions. Funeral service has never embraced technology. Directors loath change, and technology causes not only change but ongoing change.

So we must understand why technology is the savior and not the ruin of our future. Here are four important reasons for embracing technology:

1. *Time* We want to spend more time with families and be less focused on the mundane.

2. *Time* Families want to spend less time with the funeral director and more time with each other at the time of a death.

3. *Time* We have less and less time to get things done. It used to be that Jewish, Muslim and Cuban funeral directors had to get things done in 24 to 36 hours. Now, families want things done ASAP, regardless of the date of the funeral.

4. *Time* Tasks take time. It used to take two hours to clean and saddle up the two-horse hitch to do a removal. Now you can start the car remotely so the seats are toasty for those cold winter removals. We've gained two hours right there.

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SHORTAGE OF EXPERIENCED STAFF

There's another real reason for embracing technology: We are facing a critical shortage of seasoned staff to do things. We are clearly in a negative employment world, as there are not enough people to hire as licensees, and each year is getting worse. Therefore, the employees you have must be quicker and more efficient.

FIRST CALLS

Every dynamic of your operations can be enhanced by technology. The first call is taken either by a funeral home employee on a cellphone or by an answering service. When the employee answers the call from the consumer directly, the consumer doesn't know whether the employee is at the funeral home or away, and it doesn't matter. The relief of knowing the funeral home is in play has been initiated.

When the call comes through an answering service, many specialty funeral home answering services also provide a text message with the proper spelling and phone number. Some offer a recording of the call. Some are integrated into your funeral operating software, so a file has been created, with information populated. If the decedent was a prearranged party, some software can forward the information to the funeral director on call. This sure beats the kid sleeping upstairs taking the information on a scrap of paper. Families appreciate the professionalism technology provides.

ADVERTISING

Advertising, too, has evolved via technology. Websites have been routine for almost 20 years, and they surely have evolved. Consumers use them constantly. Funeralocity.com, a third-party consumer aid site that helps funeral homes and consumers connect, has reported that more than 73% of consumers who search for funeral homes via its site do so on a smartphone and 12% on a tablet. Just 15% use a desktop computer to investigate funeral homes. This is revolutionary.

A decade ago, in an article I wrote on technology, 40% of consumers searched for a website on a smartphone or tablet. I was an advocate of funeral homes having their websites "mobi," meaning mobile enabled. Today, it must be 100% of them! In fact, Funeralocity reports that a huge number of people use the built-in "click to call" technology, meaning the phone number on the website can be activated directly.

PRENEED

Preneed is both a service and a marketing effort. During my time in this profession, I have seen many effective tools for generating leads from the community that might be preneed prospects. However, laws were launched to kill phone solicitation, and direct mail is less beneficial over time. Today, solid preneed marketing must include the use of technology-driven solutions. These include email marketing with social media and other internet marketing tools. A funeral

The advertisement for PLUDRA INTERNATIONAL features a central logo with a colorful leaf design and the text "PLUDRA INTERNATIONAL". To the right is a "Quality Made in Germany" logo with the German flag. On the left, a circular logo for the "2019 IFAA International Convention & Expo" in Chicago is shown with handwritten text: "visit us in Chicago... Booth #1078" and "We are looking for distributors." Below the logo are five different urns: a wooden urn, a water-soluble urn, a biodegradable urn with a candle, a glass urn with a blue floral pattern, and a ceramic urn with yellow flowers. Each urn is labeled with its material type. At the bottom, the website "www.pludra-shop.com" is displayed with a colorful arrow graphic. The footer contains contact information for PLUDRA - FRANKFURT GmbH: "Bruchkampweg 20 | 29227 Celle (Germany) | Tel.: +49 (0) 5141 - 888 600 | Fax: +49 (0) 5141 - 888 6012 | info@pludra.de www.pludra.de".

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home that employs all the tools available to them will have more leads than they know what to do with.

PAPERWORK

If you were to handwrite or type a new file in the 1980s, it could take two to three hours. Now, with proper management software, the process is reduced by half. Many redundant items are now self-completing, and duplicious forms are filled in automatically after the first time. Typos are eliminated; if names are spelled correctly the first time, they are correct each time thereafter. Obits are sent rather than called in. Orders are filled by computer, not phone.

With the right technology, we are able to reduce total man-hours by about five per call. For a funeral director serving 80 families a year, that's 400 man-hours saved! That gives the

funeral director either more quality of life or the ability to serve another 15 families.

TRAINING AND MANAGING STAFF

Training staff is more necessary than ever, and with technology, you can know on which tasks each employee may need more training. It's as simple as using management consulting software. Run reports. For example, you can run a report on the accounts receivable aging, sort it by arranger and see who is collecting and who is not. Run another report on each sales contract, sort by arranger and see who is doing the best job planning arrangements by average sales. Look at merchandising and see who is helping families select the best merchandise. Technology can help you manage your staff as well as your business.

ACCOUNTING

Accounting is a critical operating component, and it can be done by well-programmed management consulting and accounting software. Whether you want to do this yourself is another matter, but it can be done. Tax planning is still an art form, so I should have a job for a few more years.

So, you don't have to like technology. You just have to use it. Don't tell consumers, "I don't do that." Hire a high school or college kid to work for you rather than at the movie theater, and he or she can translate for you.

Do you know how many software programmers it takes to change a light bulb? Hmm... None! It's a hardware problem!

Embrace technology and it opens up a whole new world of bad jokes. How about this one: What is written on Steve Jobs' tombstone? (Come on, this is a funeral and technology joke.) iCame, iSaw, iConquered, iLeft, iRIP!

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