

By Daniel M. Isard

## Step 3: The Online Marketing and Service World

Six marketing dimensions to implement now.

Last month, I provided to readers the vision to understand key points of marketing and advertising and made reference to some matters the online world addresses. Normally, for an article dealing with technical points, I would do it slowly, giving some basics and then moving to more complicated matters. Unfortunately, we do not have time to go slowly! So, let's deep-dive into the topic, and keep your eyes open.

Following are six key points to implement now or you will miss the proverbial boat. Remember, your competitor is reading this column, too! The funeral service online world is used for communication, marketing, education and service.

**HAVE YOUR OWN WEBSITE** There are some 19,000 funeral homes in the country, some 14,000 of which are privately owned. I would estimate that about 10,000 of those privately owned firms have a website provided by a vendor free of charge. Ever hear the expression, "You get what you pay for"? There are many that buy "packages" from funeral home specialty vendors, but fewer than 250 have a customized website made specifically for that one business. I can also attest to the fact that some still don't know why they should have a website (free, package or otherwise).

You must have a website, and it must be your design,

even if it is from a package. If you buy a package, personalize it. Change the images to be your images. Add local references. Make sure each page is up to date. I cringe like a parent at a second-grade violin recital when I go to a website and the page title is "We Care" and the text beneath it says, "Under Construction." I'm certain that when you buy a new wallet, for example, you take out the pictures placed inside for demonstration purposes and replace them with photos of your own loving family.

Promote your website with lots of content about your community and your staff. Search engines are like databases; if someone types in "Funeral Home Boston," it will produce a number of websites that look like they fit that content. Then the search engine will see which you pick. After getting about a thousand of these types of requests, the search engine will look the next time and say, "Gee, in 32% of the previous requests of this kind, the person clicked on Jones Funeral Home, so I will list that firm at the top of the list; 21% clicked on Smith Funeral Home, so I will list them in the second spot" and so forth. The act of getting more action in that database is called search engine optimization, and your goal is to have better SEO than others in your common search criteria.

### EMPLOYEES MUST HAVE THEIR OWN BUSINESS

**EMAIL** Repeat after me: "Email is free." Most website providers offer free email, and there are third-party companies that offer free email as well. Nothing says "I don't get this internet thing" like a firm whose email is info@smithfh.com. Give each person who communicates with families or the community their own email. It is empowering. You certainly don't have just one phone in the funeral home, do you?

Also give all staffers business cards, which should list their email address. I tell the story in my seminars about a client who did this and gave 100 cards to the receptionist. One day, the receptionist came in and asked for more cards, as she had given them all out at church. Subsequently, a family came in after a loved one had died and asked for the receptionist. In that first year, three families asked for the

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receptionist – three families my client may never have served otherwise.

**WEBSITE SEO** Increasing search engine optimization is not easy; it takes a professional because the search engines keep changing how they work. Remember, search engines are free, so how do they make money? They like to encourage people to pay to be on the top of the page. You want to be up there without paying, but you need guidance.

First of all, your website must be properly equipped to allow the analytics of your search results to be registered. This is sometimes nothing more than a button that needs to be turned on when creating the website.

SEO results are also driven by the keywords chosen. Keywords are phrases and words you use in writing your content that are distinguishing your business. I had a client who was promoting his cremation services and had good content. He found himself fourth on the list and couldn't get his ranking higher for months. Then we created some content and intentionally misspelled "cremation" as "creamation." (Did you know that 7% of all people misspell that word?) Well, now, all 7% were pushed to his website, and that single move pushed him up to third in the rankings!

Use the names of all towns around your funeral home. Don't assume those people don't want to come to you. By listing all of them, you will have more SEO.

Lastly, don't be cheap. Maybe you do want to pay for people to come to your website. Pay-per-click (PPC) is quicker than waiting for the other forms of SEO buildup to occur. The good thing is that PPC increases can happen overnight, whereas SEO could take months.

What would you be willing to pay to drive preneed consumers to your door? Currently, most using direct mail are paying anywhere from \$250 to \$500 per executed preneed contract when you factor in all the costs. At a 10-cent PPC, you would need 2,500 to 5,000 clicks to reach that same cost/contract. I can tell you that PPC is nowhere near that expensive.

You can also retarget people who have visited your website as they move around the internet. Many sponsored pages will have inserts of ads from websites you have visited recently. Those inserts will be auto-designed to provide an ad square of your business, with a hyperlink to your website. We've all seen this in our web searches.

**SOCIAL MEDIA** There are many social media platforms. By definition, social media platforms create and promote online communities whereby the members share information, messages and other content. These include Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Snapchat, Tumblr and Pinterest. "Which should you be on?" you may ask. The answer is all of them!

Yes, Facebook is the largest of all social media platforms, and yes, I know you think no one uses Facebook anymore. Well, there are almost as many Facebook users as there are phone numbers in the world. In the United

States, there are some 250 million users! With about 240 million Americans over age 18, I think that shows Facebook is still viable.

Facebook and other social media platforms are free. You can use them to communicate with your community in a very timely manner, and it will augment your website and can enhance your SEO tremendously.

**REPLACING OBITUARIES** If newspapers are not dead in your town already, their death is imminent. They are dead because the online world has made it so easy to transmit information, including obituaries. Think about the cost of an obituary in the local paper. Think about the limits. How does that cost change if you want to add color photographs? Now suppose you want a video montage in the paper. (Yes, I know, that's part of my point). Now put everything on your website. Put everything on Facebook, where it's free and unlimited.

**THIRD-PARTY COMPARATIVE WEBSITES** Shortly after the internet was created, third-party referral websites sprang up and shouted, "Hey, sign up and we'll bring consumers to your door!" But then they whispered, "For the first to sign, it's only \$5,000 per year." If you're going to be on a referral website, then choose one that's looking for a monetary benefit just like you are. This is what restaurant and hotel booking websites are willing to do.

I've heard that some do not like paying a percentage of their revenue for this service. But be analytical: If you plan on doing 100 calls and a website can bring you 10 additional calls you would not have had otherwise, that's free money. Your costs will be the cost of goods (a variable cost) and maybe some part-time labor (also a variable cost), so you will gross about 70% to 75% of the revenue this website generates. You can afford the fee they are requesting and still come out ahead.

Always remember: The online world is not an option. It affects everything you do. So, do it and do it right.

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