

Serving THE Living

A funeral home is as much about serving families as it is service to the dead. How aftercare and outreach programs can bring you the best results.

BY DANIEL M. ISARD

I have seen many efforts put forth in this profession to influence patronage within a market. Nothing is perfect; there is no magic bullet to marketing. It's when you try hard *not* to market and instead adopt a true sense of altruism that you get the best results. That's what aftercare and outreach do.

First, let me establish a universal definition: Aftercare and outreach are the efforts a funeral home makes to help surviving family and community members adjust to the loss of a loved one. While this is a fairly broad definition, different people need different tools to help them continue

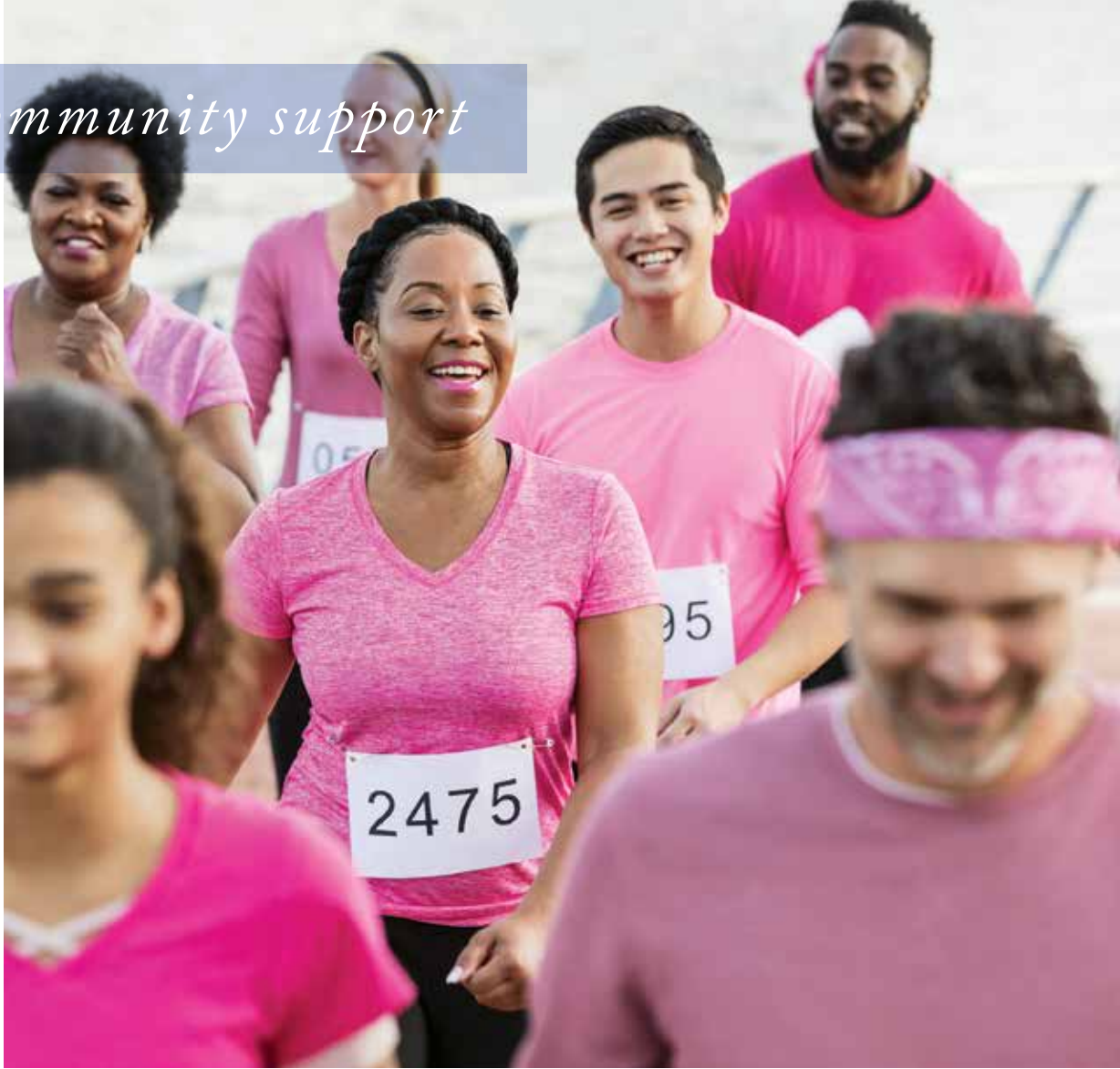
without that person in their lives.

Various programs deal with all sorts of needed skills and are education- and event-focused. As an example of an educational need, imagine that the spouse who died was responsible for balancing the checkbook and all other household financial supervision. Sud-

community outreach



community support



denly, the surviving spouse needs to learn banking, finance, investing, cash flow, tax payments and other basic household finance issues with which they've never dealt. That survivor is in need of education quickly. If a funeral home sponsored a class or classes on these subjects taught by local professionals and offered free of charge, there'd be a significant audience.

An example of a disease awareness- and memorial event-focused program is the Susan G. Komen breast cancer awareness walk, which unifies much of the community affected by breast cancer. You can sponsor or join with others to sponsor a walk or discussion group.

I learned about aftercare and

outreach in the 1980s by watching the change in my clients' businesses. As they implemented A&O at many levels, I would see:

- Average revenue per call increase
- Average wholesale per call increase
- Quantity of at-need cases increase
- Quantity of preneed cases increase
- Length of receivables decrease
- Amount of bad debt decrease
- Use of facilities per call increase.

In the 1980s and early 1990s,

cremation was not a big factor, but I still found these same results in calls whether the deceased was cremated or buried. I would see preneed lean heavily toward burial over cremation in these aftercare- and outreach-employing businesses. And when there is no other change in a business except aftercare and outreach, then A&O is logically the reason for the changed business dynamics.

Over the past few years, I've worked on categorizing the many events and classes funeral homes can use to promote aftercare and outreach. I'm up to about 150 a firm could sponsor as part of its initiative. There is no limit to the creative options.

In an effort to bolster support for and convince you to adopt

these programs for your firm, I give you:

8 Ways Aftercare and Outreach Programs Can Benefit Your Business

Aftercare and Outreach Extend the Term of Service

How long from the time of a death and your first call until you end your term of service to a family? For most, it's four to five days. Then, seven to 10 years later, the surviving spouse dies and you are (hopefully) called upon to serve again. The spectrum of service is therefore about 3,650 days, and you have contact with a family for five days. That doesn't seem right.

Aftercare and outreach will keep you connected to a family on some level during that 3,645-day gap. Imagine the first year focusing on education and survival. The next several years could concentrate on memorial and perfecting survival skills. The last year's programs are about planning for the survivor's death and memorial needs. Remember, a funeral home is as much about serving the living as it is service to the dead.

People Do Business With Providers They Know

In days past, there were many ways the community could interact with and get to know their funeral director. Between Rotary or other civic organizations and church, people bumped into funeral directors all the time. Today, however, civic organizations and churches are less frequent-

ly utilized as common gathering locations.

By bringing the community to your funeral home or other location for aftercare and outreach events you sponsor, you have the chance to talk with more people in the area. As people know you and your staff, they will trust you. People don't shop for the lowest price with providers they know and trust.

Aftercare and Outreach Protect Your Market Share

Remember: If marketing is about shifting patronage, your competitors are trying to shift the patronage of the families you have served in the past to themselves. More than 45% of all consumers state they use a funeral home based on previous service. You need to protect the families you serve from being redirected.

Aftercare and outreach events help extend the term of service to survivors from the few days of service for a loved one to the next death in a family. It's a way of reminding families you've served that you are their funeral home of choice. It can also allow you to take that message further if you offer Aftercare and outreach programs that help the next generation.

Aftercare and Outreach Are the Epitome of Ethical Business Behavior

Business ethics is a widely offered college course. The problem is, the subject and the reasons behind it are widely different. Business ethics is about doing the right thing for the right reason to accomplish the right outcome.

Imagine that your funeral home's core value is to be the best it can be in its market. You should therefore be employing both aftercare and outreach initiatives because that's what the best businesses would do.

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Aftercare and Outreach Motivate People to Prearrange

When people have questions about death, dying and planning, it helps for them to talk to informed people. As the community attends aftercare and outreach events and has a chance to talk with you or your staff, they may elect to prearrange their funeral. Often, it's the sandwich family member (the child of living adults who has kids of his or her own) who wants to act as the facilitator of his or her parents' needs.

However, this is a dangerous dimension of A&O as you don't want to cross the line from altruism to capitalism. Do not have your preneed people run or work aftercare events unless they're there as support staff.

Aftercare and Outreach Help Survivors Have Positive Memories

My father has been dead for 20 years now, and I still receive a card every year on the anniversary of his death from the funeral home that served my family, rekindling the positive feelings I have for the firm.

Even the simple act of writing a letter or sending a card is a form of outreach and aftercare. Everything that helps survivors adapt, remember and memorialize their loved one is a form of aftercare or outreach program. This takes little effort and is a positive step in cementing the consumer's relationship with the funeral home.

Aftercare and Outreach Shift Consumers to Your Business

The key marketing word for this decade is "differentiation." How are you different? If you use aftercare and outreach events and your competitors do not, you are demonstrably different.

Some years ago, a client got mad at me. He was doing a holiday help program and I told him that his invitees (the families served) could invite one other party who had also suffered a loss that year. His program went from having 300 families each event to having more than 500! He started to yell about how expensive the program was getting and how he was giving away this service while his competitor had so many of the calls.

But within five years, he was up by 50 calls annually. He did nothing different, so, in my subtle way of redeeming myself, I asked him, "Why do you think you are up 50 calls over five years?" He replied, "We care more!" He didn't get it, and I didn't get my apology, but the community got an active A&O program.

You Become the Publisher Who Memorializes These Events

One key advantage directors have today is the ability to publish an aftercare or outreach event themselves. For years, it was a struggle to get local newspapers to cover these programs, but now you're the publisher, and the local papers are begging for content.

Imagine you videotape a hosted event and have a student reporter interview families that attend. You can edit the video and distribute it to attendees who would like a copy. You can also use video snippets for social media posts. You can even use these event videos to create a video channel!

Ultimately, directors must choose to use aftercare and outreach, but I've never seen it fail. Like cooking, similar recipes may produce different results. If you have problems with your results, call me and we can discuss your technique.

A&O works – you just have to work A&O! ☰

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