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Improving Celebration of Life Service Opportunities: Leveraging Proven Strategies from the Hospitality Industry

By Bill Williams

Digital transformation has become somewhat of an overused term these days, but deathcare professionals cannot dismiss the important role that new technology will play in serving families in the future. Funeral directors are leaving money on the table if they are not leveraging today's digital tools to offer families customized, modern end-of-life celebrations.

Unfortunately, and this is an all-too-common refrain, our industry has been slow to harness the power of new technology. One key finding from the Foresight Companies' 2022 "Funeral and Cemetery Consumer Behavior Study" sums it up: "Consumers expect the (deathcare) profession to behave like other industries; offering technologies that make shopping, paying and participating possible without leaving the comfort of their home."

Traditional services, while still a mainstay of our industry, will lessen over time. More families in your community will be holding services at a wide range of entertainment and hospitality venues, such as wineries, breweries, country clubs and resort hotels, to name just a few. And those families will be turning to the owners of those venues to help them plan remembrance services.

The travel and hospitality industry recognized that technology-savvy consumers are comfortable using a wide array of digital tools to make managing their lives easier. Nearly 80% of the U.S. population purchases goods and services online – and nearly all business in the travel and hospitality industry is conducted online.

The coronavirus pandemic fundamentally changed how consumers view traditional funeral services and how they integrate technology into their daily lives. With the number of funerals returning (or have returned) to pre-pandemic levels, deathcare professionals have a unique opportunity to strengthen their competitiveness and position their funeral homes to increase revenue by doing the following:

- Offering families vision-setting, non-traditional end of life celebrations
- Boost pre-need trust income by incorporating those services in contracts

Families are searching for celebration of life options

Our industry is truly unique because of the experience, dedication and commitment of our professionals who are always there for our customers during one of the most emotional times of their lives. We truly are an invaluable resource to help families heal and gain closure.

Nonetheless, we need to offer more than a traditional funeral, which we all know tends to be a solemn experience and focus on remembrance – and include standard services, such as a visitation, a funeral ceremony and burial or cremation. An increasing number of consumers, however, are looking for more choices and not funerals like the ones our parents attended.

Research from the Foresight Companies backs that up. It found that 59% of respondents in its 2022 "Funeral and Cemetery Consumer Behavior Study" survey said they are "looking at alternative venues where they can celebrate, searching primarily for a more relaxed atmosphere."

That should not be surprising. After all, many people in your community who will buy funeral services in the future likely have spent hours online meticulously planning vacations, including reviewing resort amenities and entertainment options. They are also the same ones who have downloaded dining apps so they can buy customized meals and have them delivered to their doorstep.

Here are just a few examples of the kinds of celebration of life services consumers are choosing:

- The family of a long-time resident of Key West, Fla., held a ceremony at a local bar

- The family of a devoted skier had a service at the top of the decedent's favorite ski run
- The family of a bowling enthusiast had, you guessed it, a celebration of life at his favorite bowling alley

Offering families ways to incorporate non-traditional services can be intimidating. That is because it involves upgrading the funeral home's website (and billing system) to provide lists of options. That, in turn, means consumers must make more decisions – funeral directors may think that consumers will suffer information overload and go straight to the lowest price package.

Yet take a minute to think about how well the travel and hospitality industry has integrated digital technology to plan, book and pay for family vacations. Using a smartphone, tablet, laptop or desktop computer, consumers can take a virtual tour of a resort, including 360-degree views of rooms where they will be staying and the facility's amenities. They can choose from a wide variety of entertainment options and packages to create a customized plan that meets their needs.

But it is exactly those comprehensive vacation packages that provide additional revenue. Research by travel giant Expedia Group found that average daily hotel room rates for package stays generate 30% more revenue than standalone stays.

By expanding options, funeral homes can help families turn their celebration of life vision into reality by using their website to:

- Engage and educate consumers
- Increase top-of-mind awareness about the funeral home's services
- Provide families with a positive online experience, which could lead to increased sales

There is also another important benefit of providing more online options: The traffic on your website will begin to yield a treasure trove of invaluable consumer behavior data. For example, you will be able to:

- Find out exactly what visitors are looking for
- Communicate directly with visitors who leave contact information
- Test and monitor the results of new product offerings
- Increase the number of marketing leads, which will help improve the probability of closing more pre-

need and at-need business

Celebration of life services can enhance pre-need sales. We believe an enhanced focus on helping families visualize and plan alternative end of life celebrations can have a positive effect on pre-need sales, including pre-need trust contracts, which generally account for between 20% and 40% of a funeral home's total revenue. And that revenue is increasing, based on recent financial results of the industry's largest companies.

Remember (and this is an important point): It is okay to sell a \$1,995 direct cremation as long as a \$9,000+ service is part of the package a family purchases.

By integrating your website with preneed administration technology, you can make it easy for families to purchase the kind of customized celebration of life services they are seeking. The technology can:

- Compile a draft contract (based on selections made) that can be presented to the customer at any time during the purchase process
- Families can select "buy now" to purchase the contract
- The contract is executed after acceptance of a credit card payment

Now is the time for the deathcare industry to take its new technology game up a notch. The families in your communities are looking for something different. The increasing variety of digital tools available will help you create new value for your families, reduce the risk of losing business to competitors – and position your funeral home for long-term success.

Bill Williams is president and CEO of Funeral Services Inc. and serves on the FSI Board of Directors as vice chairman. He joined FSI in 2001 as vice president. He was named president in 2003. Under his leadership, FSI has expanded to offer services in more than two dozen states across the country.

