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Funeral Home Staffing

By Mark J. Krause

Like every other profession, funeral service evolves, and over the past few decades, it has experienced great changes. Some of the obvious are the growth of cremation, the focus on personalization and the advent of new technologies that help create better ways to memorialize. Some of the more subtle changes that have developed create challenges and require new ways of viewing funeral service. Contemporary funeral operations require many moving parts to operate well, and none of that happens without the most important piece of the puzzle – the funeral home staff.

I contend that there has never been greater opportunity for quality funeral professionals. A well-trained, caring, professional funeral service team can truly make a difference in leading families through the journey of the funeral; without one, our profession becomes nothing more than a business transaction, a scenario that holds a bleak future, with a funeral home becoming nothing more than a place to dispatch the body of the deceased. Funeral directors who have developed their skills and use them proficiently have an economic, professional and managerial advantage over their colleagues.

Our profession is facing an assortment of issues that create challenges for funeral home staffing. The American work-

The need for highly proficient directors and assistants has never been greater, and competition for employees – from entry level to the highly skilled – is increasing every day.

force is experiencing more people retiring from or leaving the workforce than entering it. The beginning of the baby boomer effect on the death rate, the complexity of contemporary funerals, marketing and preneed have all contributed to greater demands on the time, quantity and quality of today's funeral service professional.

The skills of today's funeral directors need to be different than those of past generations. Consumers are more highly educated and articulate than ever before; they demand high quality and will not accept less from their funeral directors. A director with mediocre communication skills damages the family and poisons the future of funeral service. If a family has a bad experience because of a less-than-skillful funeral director, what happens when there is another death in that family? Maybe they choose direct cremation or perhaps they choose to have their memorial event at their home, church or country club, without the participation of the funeral home.

The funeral director must be able to explain and demonstrate the value and meaning of the funeral experience and the im-

portance of including funeral professionals in that process. Creativity is a key ingredient needed by the contemporary funeral director. Families come to a funeral professional not knowing what options are available. Saying, “We do whatever the family wants” is not acceptable anymore. We need to be the creators and facilitators of this event, while communicating at a high level everything contemporary funerals have to offer families. Unfortunately, technology has caused a de-emphasis in the development of interpersonal communication skills. Today’s funeral director must embrace the skills and repertoire of an event planner to meet the wants and desires of modern funeral consumers.

The need for highly proficient directors and assistants has never been greater. As we witness a number of smaller, less efficient firms vanishing, funeral homes are confronted with the staffing challenges experienced by many other businesses. Competition for employees – from entry level to the highly skilled – is increasing every day.

We can no longer wait for people to stumble onto funeral service as their vocation. We must think more aggressively about how to attract bright, articulate individuals to explore our profession.

One issue is the familiarity of the profession to new and younger people entering the workforce. How many high schoolers or young, college-age students think of funeral service as a career path? Let’s be honest – for someone looking for an exciting lifetime career, the funeral profession does not have the initial attraction that many other occupations possess. Those of us who have experienced the variety, challenges and value of funeral service have discovered the rewards and meaning the field embraces. Reaching people starting out on their education and career paths to show them the value of a career in funeral service is vital to fulfilling staffing needs.

We can wait no longer to have people stumble onto funeral service as their vocation. We must think more aggressively about how to attract bright, articulate individuals to explore our profession. One possible path to a vibrant workforce is to recruit people who are college graduates but have degrees that do not steer them on a clear career path. Individuals with communication, English, history, psychology, sociology, political science and other humanities degrees are perfect funeral director candidates. These disciplines teach about the human condition while fostering strong writing and communication skills, all of which are in demand by the families we serve.

Explaining the intrinsic value and meaning of today’s funeral

experience is much more than running a funeral and selling a casket. Many people with whom we meet are professionals who are used to interacting with others proficient in the exchange of ideas. The continued success of our profession depends on the next generation of consumers who no longer find value in the cookie-cutter funeral and on the funeral professional painting the picture of what is possible.

Finding and recruiting potential funeral directors requires starting at the high school level. Career days involving a presentation and personal interaction are always positive experiences, but even more needs to be done. Bringing in high school students so they get exposure to and experience in a profession that may never have occurred to them is a way of planting seeds for a future staffing harvest. Recruiting incentives for the unlicensed could include mortuary school tuition reimbursement and schedule flexibility.

Funeral homes need to be involved with mortuary science schools. This can be a great way to interact and expose a funeral home to those already interested and invested in a funeral service career. Scholarships, awards, internships, apprenticeships and other opportunities can be directed through the schools to foster an energetic atmosphere of learning and professional development.

Another avenue to address the demands of a shrinking and unaware workforce is to look at legislative barriers that keep people from exploring funeral service as a career. I’m not saying we reduce the requirements to become a licensed funeral director but rather allow unlicensed individuals to experience our profession in a controlled and regulated environment. This would require licensed funeral directors and funeral homes to be more hands-on with staff. By having the director or firm responsible for the oversight and professionalism of the recruit, the funeral home’s reputation and livelihood would provide the incentive for legal compliance and performance.

The job market will only become more difficult for funeral homes looking for new staff. Mortuary schools do not have the time or resources to develop directors who can hit the ground running in the short time they have with students. The school’s focus is and must be getting students to graduate and pass the National Board Examination. Funeral homes need to develop a “farm team” or have developmental positions in place to create the professionals needed for the future.

Funeral directing is not an easy vocation, and time and experience are necessary to be effective in serving families. Those firms that take the time, make the effort and invest in the future will be in the best position to grow market share, provide meaningful funerals and employ a staff that will excel at meeting families’ needs.

Mark J. Krause is president of Krause Funeral Homes & Cremation Service of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He operates four funeral homes that serve more than 1,300 families annually.



The Road Ahead: Planning Through the Looking Glass

By Daniel M. Isard

As a mortuary science student, you are looking out on a life-time career. You've come into the profession with lofty ideals for selfless service to others at their most difficult times. Just as the ministers of your community tell you about their "calling," so can you tell of your calling to funeral service.

There are contradictions you'll encounter along the road, and you may realize before the journey ends that you have made some good choices and perhaps a few bad ones. The more you study yourself and those around you, the better your chances of success.

My career is at the other end of the spectrum. I have spent four decades working with funeral home employees, owners, managers and suppliers to the profession. In this series of articles, I would like to help you prepare for your career as best I can.

My first recommendation for your journey is that you seek role models, people who will give you a substantial visual from which you can model your future self.

The biggest problem I have as a financial and management consultant is getting my clients to take certain actions that are in their personal financial best interest. I understand their reluctance to change business operations, as most funeral home managers put the needs of clients above their own.

From my lofty vantage point, you are like Alice as she goes through her journey in Wonderland. You are not certain where you are, how you got there and where you are going. You just want to get there quickly.

As Lewis Carroll wrote in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*, at one point Alice reaches a fork in the road and ponders, "Which way should I go?" Then she notices the Cheshire Cat perched in a tree above the fork.

Alice: Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go?

Cheshire Cat: That depends a good deal on where you want to get to.

Alice: Oh, it really doesn't matter, as long as I g...

Cheshire Cat: Then it really doesn't matter which way you go.

So here you are, maybe having apprenticed, maybe working in a business, maybe working in a family business, maybe working in your family's business. Where you are going tomorrow is not where you'll wind up. It is merely the path of your progress.

My first recommendation for your journey is that you seek role models, people who will give you a substantial visual from which you can model your future self. Most people think role models are always good examples, but I must warn you that you may find more role models who want to teach you all the things not to do than those who want to teach you what to do.

Bad role models help you say to yourself, "I will never do it

that way.” That image is powerful. You must respect that your own psyche is the driver. This image of what not to do will shape you because there are really so few people who do it right in this business. And by “doing it right,” I don’t mean service to families or embalming. I mean doing human resources, pricing, business actions, business growth, accounting, taxes and marketing right.

As Alice was told by the Cheshire Cat that it doesn’t matter which way she goes, she replied:

Alice: ...So long as I get somewhere.

Cheshire Cat: Oh, you’re sure to do that, if only you walk long enough.

This is the problem with your vocation. You will be 60 years old before you know it. Your career will be in its final stages very quickly and you may come to realize that it might not measure up to the dedication you’ve put forth.

Alice asked the White Rabbit: How long is forever?

White Rabbit: Sometimes, just one second.

Allow me to give you some guidance. Learn from everyone you come across. Some you will emulate and others will help you retain the image of bad decisions and compel you to work not to repeat them.

The first thing you must ask yourself is where you want your career to take you. This is a question with many components:

- The “where” can be location. Funeral service offers many chances of employment or ownership throughout the country.
- The “where” can be management. Do you want to manage a business? Funeral service does not have enough quality people who can manage one business location, let alone many locations, which is where the future is pointing. That also means managing the actions of many people, some of whom will be remotely overseen.
- The “where” can be ownership. Prior to the advent of SCI, probably 80% of all funeral homes transferred intra-family. The other 20% went to other regional operators or those buying their first business. Today, about 20% of business transfers go to national multiple-location operators, about 20% to regional acquirers, 20% to first-time buyers and the remaining 40% to family successors.

About a third of you are following in your family’s footsteps and think you have an advantage over other students who have come into funeral service on their own. In reality, you may actually have a tougher course to run. You won’t be exposed to other owners, managers, firms and communities. You’ll be working in your family business as the heir apparent and will have little or no chance to challenge and question why things are done or not done. You have no chance of a role model, good or bad.

If you were my child, I would send you to work for another firm for at least five years. See whether you like funeral service. See other ways in which people practice their profession. Meet other advisors to those businesses.

You must first get past the line of scrimmage to determine the direction of your career. By my estimate, about half of all mortuary school graduates do not survive five years in this profession. There are many reasons for this attrition, and most are curable.

Licensure is the biggest obstacle to long-term employment. I am not against a licensing requirement. However, I am opposed to a “one license” state requirement. To me, funeral service operations have two prongs: front of the house and back of the house. Each is very important.

The back of the house is where body preparation takes place. The front of the house is the arranger work, which is also critical (and I would whisper that it’s perhaps even more important).

The living have needs, and it takes special skills to communicate and work with the living to help them through the days, weeks and months following a death. In 23 states, you must be licensed as an embalmer to be able to work at the front of the house. I find this to be contraindicated when striving to get the best career results. Many caregiving people don’t want to have to embalm for the sake of licensure or long-term employment.

About a third of you are following in your family’s footsteps and think you have an advantage over other students. In reality, you may have a tougher course to run.

Continuing education is another obstacle, though CE itself is not the problem. The problem is “professionals” who don’t want to have to do it or treat it like an annual flu shot. Imagine waking in the back of an ambulance. Would you want to be taken to the hospital that didn’t require its emergency room team to take and pass continuing education courses?

I have provided more than 2,000 hours of CEU programs for accreditation. Do you know how annoying it is for a presenter to see people sitting in the last two rows and trading sections of the newspaper? Continuing education must be made meaningful and required across state lines.

3. Paraprofessionals are necessary. The medical world today would not exist if it were not for high-quality paraprofessionals. Physician assistants and nurse educators are well

qualified take the burden off doctors, and the level of care does not decline. Yet in funeral service, with the exception of a few states, you are either licensed as a funeral director, an embalmer or a funeral director/embalmer – or you're committing fraud.

Funeral homes in many small towns cannot afford licensed staff. The 100-call business, when it sold 100 caskets, could afford two licensees. When that same business has 50% non-casketing, it can barely afford one licensed person.

My young neophytes, I beseech you, as the King said to Alice: "Begin at the beginning and go on till you come to the end. Then stop."

You are at the beginning. You are moving toward a goal. I will try to provide more advice in future issues. If you have direct questions, email me at danisard@theforesightcompanies.com. In future issues, I will address matters of business valuation, operations, human resources and other pertinent segments of your career path.

Dan Isard, MSFS, is president of The Foresight Companies, a Phoenix-based business and management consulting firm specializing in mergers and acquisitions, valuations, accounting, financing and consumer surveys. For more educational information, visit theforesightcompanies.com.

Each Chapter of Your Career Should Be Titled: Exceed Every Family's Expectations

By Lacy Robinson

For many of you reading this installment of NFDA's *Director.edu* who have graduated, congratulations! This new chapter of funeral service is just the beginning. For those of you who are one step closer to graduation or perhaps just entering into your mortuary science education experience, you have much to look forward to in the coming semesters.

While a wide range of topics is covered during mortuary school, one in particular that is the most difficult to test on is customer service skills. Your ability to effectively communicate with client families is critical to providing a positive funeral service experience. Average customer service skills result in average experiences for consumers. However, exceeding every family's expectations and displaying exceptional skills result in an unparalleled consumer experience.

A family's experience often begins with a phone call. When you're talking on the phone to anyone, you are playing more than the role of a funeral director. You are a supplier of information, consultant, problem solver and public image representative. Every conversation is a performance – a performance from which the listener should leave with a confident feeling about you, the funeral home and the information discussed.

Let's take a look at six basic principles to make a great impression on the phone.

Be Prepared

Before making a call, be prepared: Know the purpose of your

call, have the information you need and be ready to answer any questions the person may have. Jot down notes to refer to if the conversation becomes sidetracked.

Listen Carefully

Take on the role of active listener. The more you listen, the more information you can obtain. Whether you're conversing with the next of kin or a doctor's office, being an active listener will make that phone call valuable for both parties.

Take Notes

Significant phone calls require you to take notes. Write down relevant points to avoid repeat questions and repeat phone calls. Use your notes to recap at the conclusion of the call. This shows attentiveness and understanding of the information discussed.

Be Kind and Considerate

When speaking with a family, wear your compassionate hat. Feeling compassion and understanding affects the tone of your voice. Families need to hear the sincerity and seriousness in your voice. Being kind and considerate will enhance your performance.



Block Distracting Noises

Many phone conversations you conduct do not happen at the funeral home. If you're conducting business from home or a public place, make an effort to block distracting noises. People can hear more than you think. Chewing gum, drinking or typing can all be heard by the receiving person.

Monitor Your Rate of Speech

Make a conscious effort to speak slower. When communicating with people of different cultures and backgrounds, it is necessary to speak at a slower rate. This will help you enunciate words clearly while giving the listener time to adjust to your accent, translate words and comprehend the basic message.

You will have days at the funeral home where the phone rings nonstop and other days where you'll have plenty of time to

Every conversation is a performance and the listener should leave with a confident feeling about you and the funeral home.

catch up on different responsibilities. When the phone rings, it could be a family member, someone in the community asking for support, or solicitors. As soon as you hear that first ring, immediately put on that compassionate hat, follow the guidelines above and be ready to give your very best performance each and every time.

Lacy Robinson is NFDA director of member development.

Anatomy, Pathology, Microbiology... Cremation?

By Mike Nicodemus

Some 40 years ago when I attended mortuary school, this is what I knew about cremation: The funeral home would receive the death call, pick up the decedent from the place of death, hold the remains for a few days and then take the decedent to the crematory. That was it!

Thankfully, things have changed. As a student, I wanted to learn all I could about anatomy, pathology, microbiology, restorative art and embalming because I was going to be a funeral director and needed to know all I could about the human body and how to trace a drop of blood from the right earlobe to the left little toe.

Yes, we had exams that made sure we knew these things, but when it came to cremation, most of us students wondered, "What is that all about?" My alma mater, Pittsburgh Institute of Mortuary Science, was a great learning institute, with instructors like Doc Emory James, Dean Bill Mussmano and Bob Mayer, to name a few, who taught us all they could on the subjects above, except for cremation.

Cremation wasn't real popular 40 years ago. In fact, I'd venture to say that most funeral directors hated it, so it wasn't something that was covered at all at the time.

As I write this article, I'm sitting in my hotel room in Greenwood, South Carolina, getting ready to present the NFDA Cremation Certification Program at Piedmont Technical College to students in its mortuary science program. I can't begin to tell you how it makes me feel knowing that more and more mortuary science schools are adding this program to their curriculum so students today become well acquainted with this "anomaly" called cremation.

Why has it become so important to add curriculum and conduct programs on cremation? Here's a hint. In 2015, cremation surpassed burial as the preferred method of disposition.

More families are now choosing cremation over burial, and with the national cremation rate exceeding 50%, I think it's probably a good idea students know all they can when it comes to sitting across the desk from a family that really doesn't know a whole lot about cremation but wants answers



to the questions they have. How long does it take, how hot does it get, what's left of the body?

I would suggest that as a student who has recently graduated and has now become a licensed funeral director that you be prepared to answer any questions a family may have.

The last thing you want to say to a family that asks, "How long does it take?" is, "You know, I'm not sure." Mortuary science students can tell a family exactly how a body is embalmed, and they should be able to do the same thing when it comes to cremation.

According to the Federal Trade Commission, cremation procedures are the largest source of risk exposure and liability in the funeral industry. In other words, there is much more to cremation today than picking up a decedent, holding the body for several days and then delivering the body to the crematory.

People today will sue for any reason, and litigation is at an all-time high. Don't give them the chance! Be on top of your game with each and every family with which you make arrangements.

How certain are you that the person making the arrangements is the person who has the right of disposition? Do you require each family to identify the decedent prior to cremation? Do you make sure to cover with all staff who specifically can receive the urn?

Another thing that's critical for today's students to understand

is not to get involved in family disputes. If a family is having a disagreement about burial versus cremation, you need to let them work it out. Stay out of it and tell them, "When your family works this out, please give me a call." If you put yourself in the middle of a family squabble, trust me, you are not going to win.

Cremation is to be taken very seriously. As we all know, the process is irreversible; once a decedent is placed into the re-tort, there is no turning back. I have been involved in dozens of lawsuits as an expert witness and at times I find myself shaking my head and wondering, "What was the funeral director thinking?"

While it's indeed necessary to have a solid background in restorative art, embalming, business management and anatomy, to name a few areas, I strongly recommend that you supplement that knowledge with all the information you can gather on cremation. Why?

By the year 2025, which isn't that far away, NFDA projects that the cremation rate in the United States will be 65%. If I were a student in mortuary school or a recent graduate, that would certainly get my attention!

The late Dr. Maya Angelou said it best when she stated, "If people knew better, they would do better."

Mike Nicodemus is NFDA vice president of cremation services.

Student Perspective Tips to Grow the Funeral Home With Cremation

By David Antinelli

There is no doubt that cremation will become the preferred means of disposition of human remains, with the national cremation rate estimated to grow to 54.3% by 2020.

Still, too many funeral homes are failing to adapt and the number of direct cremations is skyrocketing. And while we are in the business of helping others during the worst times of their lives, we are also in business to stay in business.



Funeral directors must use their professional branding – service to families – to their advantage. What that should mean is that every family, whether they want a traditional funeral or a cremation or some version thereof, will be treated exactly



the same and you will work with each to provide the best type of service *for them*. We must use this to our advantage. When a family seeking cremation walks through the door and we greet them for the first time, we must treat them as if they are our own. Never just assume that it is a waste of time because the family wants cremation. Treating every family the same will cause the community to advertise your business because you did a wonderful job and they felt at home and comfortable with you.

Don't Try to Upsell Products

As many directors know, cremations are less profitable than traditional funeral services. However, this doesn't give you the okay to really dig to make a profit. Avoid pushing products or services on families that don't want to spend the money for those items or can't afford them. This does not make a good impression on the family and will lessen the chance that they will want to use your funeral home again. Instead, work within each family's means to create a pleasant and meaningful experience.

Personalization

Personalization is one of the big game-changers seemingly spurred on by cremation. One reason people choose cremation is to have the unique experience their loved one wished for.

Personalization starts in the arrangement conference. It's important to listen to the stories the family shares to help create a special memorial service. Families will also enjoy helping to create this special service for their loved one, which allows you to not only work with the family more but to create an experience they will always remember. This, in turn, will improve your brand reputation, which is important to the growth of your business.

Another benefit is that it allows you to open up options with a family. You can provide visitations, memorials and scatterings, along with unique products such as biodegradable urns. Again, this will lead you to many different ways of working

with families in order to both grow the business and truly embrace all of the ways cremation can be memorialized for the family's benefit.

Have a Good Showroom Display

Traditionally, caskets have been the focus of showrooms in funeral homes. But in order for firms to keep up with the increasing demand by cremation consumers, they will want to showcase urns and other cremation products as well. And this doesn't mean shoving them to the back of the casket showroom.

There must either be a separate showroom for urns and other cremation products or a room that is divided equally between caskets and urns, etc. This is important because families want to touch and see the products they're going to buy just like a family seeking traditional services would.

As funeral directors know, cremations are less profitable than traditional funeral services. However, this doesn't give you the okay to really dig to make a profit.

Educate Families on the Importance of Services

Many cremations today are direct cremations. But funeral directors know that having some sort of memorial service allows us to guide families in the right direction for the grieving process. This is one of the most important jobs we do as funeral directors, and without educating families on the importance of memorialization and grieving, we simply aren't doing our job. We can educate families during arrangements, but we can also educate them on our funeral home website and via social media. Take the time to explain the importance of a memorial service.

By following these tips, we can work *with* the cremation trend instead of trying to fight it. The trend is not going to go away and we must adapt. Work with the families that want cremation and you will be doing your business a great service as well.

David Antinelli is a student in the mortuary science program at SUNY-Canton.

From the Editor's Desk...

Hitting the High Notes

We've all heard the term "baby boomer spike" referring to the anticipated increase in the number of deaths that would come at the end of the baby boom years. For a variety of reasons, not the least of which is improvements in healthcare that extend life expectancy, this spike will most likely take the shape of a gradual curve instead.

However, a subset of the baby boomer group, the classic rockers, has definitely seen a bit of a spike over the past couple years. Most recently, Tom Petty, founder of the legendary Tom Petty and The Heartbreakers, died unexpectedly after being discovered in cardiac arrest at his home, and Troy Gentry, of the country duo Montgomery Gentry, died in a helicopter crash. While the services for Petty were pending as of this writing, Gentry had an extraordinary funeral – it was visible, it was traditional and it was personal.

There are a number of celebrity funerals that stand out in my mind for one reason or another, but I keep going back to one funeral that occurred more than 10 years ago.

I did not attend the funeral, but an account I read in the *Providence Phoenix*, a now shuttered Rhode Island alternative news and arts weekly, has stayed with me all this time. The funeral was for a musician in a band I had gone to see hundreds of times over the last 30 years – John Cafferty & The Beaver Brown Band, which some might recognize as the band behind the *Eddie and the Cruisers* movies. The band achieved a degree of national and global success on the strength of the movie soundtracks and its own albums. The Beaver Brown Band, from Rhode Island, was one of the bigger attractions on the Jersey Shore club scene, particularly in the 1980s and 90s, and the keyboard player, Bobby Cotoia, was one of the founding members of the group and a featured performer.

In a very well-done article called "Brothers in Arms" (it can still be found online), the writer, Bob Gulla, describes the wake and funeral, which brought together past and present band members in "*The Big Chill* with the backdrop of a band rather than a class reunion."

Gulla wrote that hundreds came to pay their respects and ended up telling some of their favorite stories involving Cotoia. He wrote, "At the wake, [band members] got up to share some stories about Bobby, who was lying just behind them, resting painlessly for the first time in years. Awkward at first, the band imparted a few of the funny, poignant and revealing Bobby stories they had experienced."

This passage made me think of the wakes I've attended and how it was always a challenge to get the first few people to loosen up and tell their stories. But when it finally happened, the mood in the room changed from "When should we leave?" to "Oh, let me say this..."

Later in the article, Gulla wrote, "After the wake, the entourage headed to the cemetery to lay Bobby to rest." The funeral, in the words of one band member, was "incredibly moving and celebratory." The article describes the graveside scene when, at the end of the service, the band's saxophone player played the tune to *Tender Years*, one of the band's best-known songs. In recordings and performance, the soaring sax solo fades out into a quiet piano solo. Gulla wrote: "Only this time, Bobby wasn't there to play his part and the cemetery remained shrouded in silence. Each person at the gravesite finished Bobby's notes in quiet, tearful tribute."

After rereading the article many years later, I still smile at some of the stories told at the visitation and still feel emotion at the description of the cemetery scene. In that poignant scene at the cemetery, I don't think there was a more powerful way to communicate that he'd be missed than to hear silence when they should have heard him playing.

Too often, that simple message of letting the deceased's loved ones know that he or she will be missed is not communicated effectively.

In this case, a classic funeral was simply hitting all the high notes.

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