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ICCFA MAGAZINE AUTHOR SPOTLIGHT

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MORE FROM THIS AUTHOR AND ON THIS TOPIC

► Some “best” Web sites, in terms of cremation education and information being provided to consumers, to check out:

■ Stewart Enterprises’ Web site format with the Funeral-pedia Learning Center www.oakhillmemorialpark.com

■ Butler Funeral Homes and Cremation Tribute Center www.butlerfuneralhomes.com

■ Anderson-McQueen Funeral Home www.andersonmcqueen.com

■ O’Connor Mortuary www.oconnormortuary.com

■ Baue Funeral Homes, Crematory, Cemetery, Flower Shop <http://baue.com>



► Go to www.iccfa.com to the **Cremation Coaching Center**, where you can post a question for Burn to answer.

► The ICCFA will offer its Cremation Arranger Certification Program at the **2011 ICCFA Convention & Expo, March 8-11**, Las Vegas, Nevada. Details will be available in the January issue of ICCFA Magazine and online at www.iccfa.com.

► **NEW** The ICCFA now offers a “first impression” cremation phone shopper program. See page 83 for details.

CREMATION / TECHNOLOGY

As cemetery, cremation and funeral professionals, we bemoan the misconceptions today’s consumers have about cremation:

Cremation means no service, cremation is easier on the family, cemeteries have no relevance for people who choose cremation, cremation is a simple process that should be cheap.

So what are you doing about it? Is your Web site educating families about cremation or contributing to the problem?

What is your Web site teaching families about cremation?

Have you ever found yourself asking what you would do without the Internet? I have to admit that in the last five years I ask myself that question all the time. Whenever I want to learn something, whether it is how to properly water my geraniums or where to buy a “must have” new product, I turn on my computer and Google it.

A recent Wall Street Journal article stated that 84 percent of baby boomers surveyed said having an Internet connection is a basic need, not a luxury. I couldn’t agree more. The Internet is where we baby boomers (and many of our parents) go today for information.

We all know how important it is to educate today’s consumers, especially when it comes to cremation. Many of us have had the experience of telling a new acquaintance what we do, only to have them say, “I just want to be cremated.”

But the fact is, what is actually involved in cremation and the many options available for services and memorialization are little understood by many of those people. It is our responsibility to help consumers learn as much as they can so they can make well-informed decisions when the time comes to plan services for themselves, a spouse or a parent.

What better way to provide cremation education than through your company’s Web site? No one in our profession can afford to waste this opportunity, but, as I recently learned, some are.

Over the years, I have visited many funeral establishment Web sites for different reasons. However, I never seriously focused



Butler Funeral Home’s Web site includes information and photos about the company’s Cremation Tribute Center.

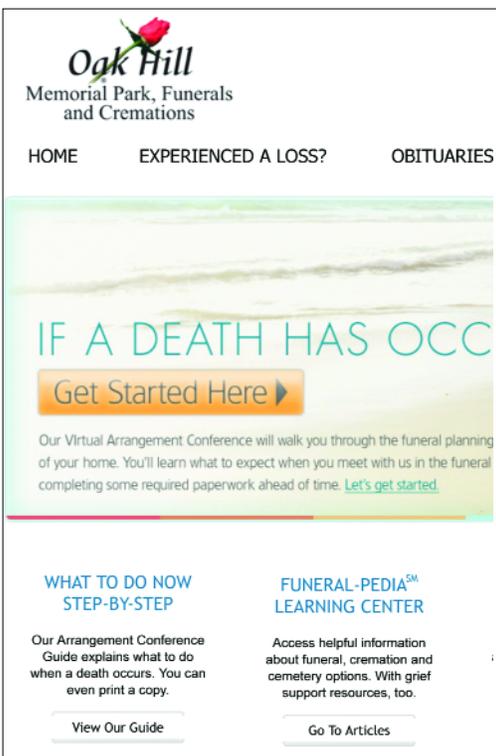
on what our profession was saying to consumers who were looking online for information on cremation until now, in preparation for this article.

Using Google and sometimes Bing as my search engines, I typed in “funeral homes with cremation” and many different cities, both large and small. The cremation information I gathered from hundreds of Web sites can be divided into the “good, better and best” categories with which we are familiar.

And then there are the sites that provide consumers “not so good” information about cremation. In those cases, you have to question whether no Internet presence (or at



Anderson-McQueen includes on its Web site a photo of its attractive viewing/service area just outside the crematory.



Part of the Web site for Stewart Enterprises' Oak Hill Memorial Park, Funerals and Cremations, showing the link to the Funeral-Pedia Learning Center, which includes information about cremation and other topics.



The Baue site includes “cremation options” on the main navigation bar, which is the best place to have it, showing that cremation families are important to you.

least no mention of cremation) would be preferable.

Without naming names (except for some of the best, screen shots of which are included with this article), let me share my findings and judgments about what makes a Web site’s cremation information not-so-good, good, better or best.

The best

Marketing studies have found that when it comes to baby boomers’ buying habits, they want better information and would prefer to have more information rather than less. They will then use this information to decide what holds the most value for them.

The information-rich “best” Web sites that I found included better and more information such as:

- Separate “cremation” category on the main navigation bar under which one can find materials such as:
 1. General information on the cremation process.
 2. Frequently asked cremation questions that were carefully customized by the respective firm.
 3. The importance of memorialization.
 4. Firm’s cremation offerings, including pricing.
 5. Other pertinent information, such as a glossary of terms. Remem-

ber, we should never assume that a consumer is familiar with our terminology.

6. Updated statistical information.
7. Educational videos, such as a tasteful look at what takes place during the cremation process.
8. Offering of educational brochures on cremation.

- Consumer information section with cremation facts and guidance from a major funeral supplier.

- Easy-to-navigate links to other Web sites with additional resources.

Better

- Cremation listed under “services” category on the menu bar with usually one page of cremation information.

- Cremation offerings listed.
- A FAQ or resource section where several cremation questions were answered, along with other industry-specific questions.

Good

- Cremation listed under “services” category on the menu bar with one or two paragraphs of cremation information.
 - Cremation offerings listed.

Needs improvement

I’ve listed here both items that fall in the “not so good” category and items that are

“good” or “better” but should be improved.

• **No information.** Yes, I found funeral establishment Web sites that did not contain any information on cremation. (Obviously “not so good.”) In some cases, I did find the word “cremation” mentioned in the general information on what the firm offered, with no further details. Hard to believe in this day and age, but true.

Regardless of how low your area’s cremation rate is, giving cremation such short shrift is telling some potential future customers that you are not interested in their business.

• **Poorly displayed information.** In one case, a funeral establishment included its cremation authorization form. Done properly, this is a good idea (providing the consumer with more information), but the copy of the form was lopsided on the page, which looks unprofessional.

• **Outdated information.** I saw many Web sites that are using a list of general “frequently asked questions” which include two questions specifically addressing cremation. One cremation question and answer reads as follows:

“Is cremation a substitute for a funeral? Answer: No, cremation is an alternative to earth burial or entombment for the body’s final disposition and often follows a traditional funeral service. In fact, according to FTC figures for 1987, direct cremation occurred in only 3 percent of deaths.”

Uh, 1987? FTC figures? This is definitely outdated and confusing information.

I have a feeling that some of the people using this standard Q&A may not even realize this section is in there. Please check your Web site, and if you’re using this, you should remove that last sentence as soon as possible. Then, read over the rest of your site and make sure it’s up-to-date.

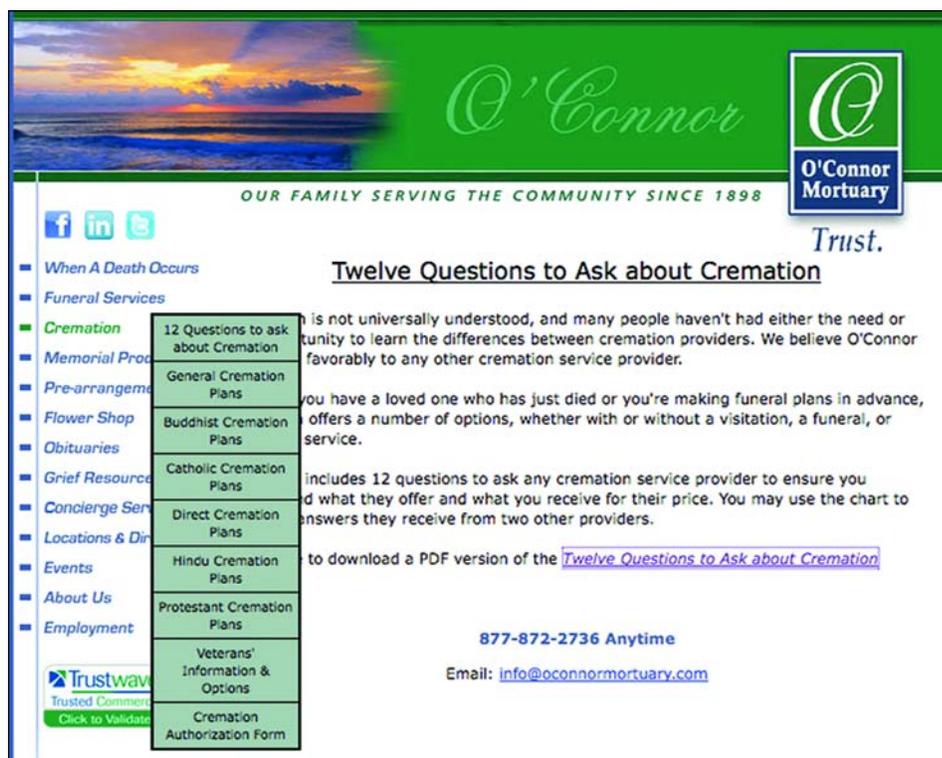
Some firms are featuring CANA statistics, but obviously not keeping them updated, since the ones on their Web sites are 10 or more years old, which might as well be the Stone Age when you’re talking about the Internet.

• **Lack of links.** Some firms do not provide links to resources mentioned. Links are expected. Do not tell consumers that if they want more technical information (or any other information) about cremation they should go to the ICCFA or CANA or other Web site without provid-



O’Connor Mortuary in Southern California includes on its Web site a link to a downloadable pdf form called, “Twelve Questions to Ask about Cremation.” The form helps people compare O’Connor with other cremation providers in terms of answers to a dozen questions, including “Where is your crematory?”, “May I attend the actual cremation?”, “Is embalming required before cremation?” and “Why are there significant price differences in cremation services?”

I haven’t run across anything else like O’Connor Mortuary’s “Twelve Questions” comparison brochure in my Web site research, and it’s very, very effective.—Julie A. Burn



O’Connor Mortuary has developed and posted on its Web site detailed cremation plans for Catholics, Protestants, Buddhists, Hindus, none of the above (general) and a so-called “direct cremation” plan, which like the others nevertheless offers different levels of service. The plans (four listed under each category) are similar, with differences such as the fact that the Hindu and Buddhist “traditional” services include a witnessed cremation, while the Catholic “traditional” service does not but does include a vigil/rosary service, Mass of Christian Burial and blessing of a crucifix to be

Service Option Enhancements		General Price List	
Flower Selections	Urn Selections	Marker Selections	Cremation Caskets

given to the family. All of the plans include links (left) to additional cremation products and services, as well as a general price list.



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TECHNOLOGY

Make sure your Web site is user-friendly

As part of my job, I have visited many, many funeral home and cemetery Web sites. The most common problems I have found, basic pitfalls that nobody should tumble into:

- Keep the right tone. Do not let a creative Web designer sock you with blinky things, dancing bears, mewling kitties, or any other unrelated embedded video that sucks up a lot of bandwidth. You are a dignified business, not a Justin Bieber fan page.

- Remember that your visitors will include (you hope!) older persons. Do not set important information such as your hours and location(s), in teensy pale type on a colored background. Make key data big and bold, so they don't need their reading glasses to make it out.

- Be certain that your address and phone number are on the home page, preferably near the top; the bottom of the page is the wrong place for this. If you have many locations, don't squeeze them all in—they'll be illegible. Put them on a second page (in a generous font) and have a big button on the first page labeled, "our locations" to lead the reader there. Links to directions or a printable map are also thoughtful.

- Contacting you should not be like pulling teeth. Do not force your visitor to click through half a dozen links to get to your phone number. If you have a "contact us" button that leads to an e-mail fill-in form, be sure that the form also displays all the basics such as your address, your phone number, your fax number, and your e-mail address.

Sometimes people don't want to contact you (or to have you contacting them)—they want to send the information to friends or relatives who may not be as computer savvy and have asked them to gather information for them. Make it simple for them to do this.

- Help visitors see you. Handsome pictures of your facilities and/or grounds (if you have a cemetery) are a must these days.

Photos of staff help customers visualize dealing with a friendly person instead of a faceless corporation. Make head shots consistent in size, which will give the page a professional look. No one needs to look like a beauty pageant contestant, but all must appear friendly and approachable.

Shots of products or services (urns, flowers) educate people about what is available and may inspire shoppers to buy. If you have ever sold or shopped on eBay or amazon.com, you know that a picture of the product is essential.

- Don't let the home page load too slowly. Putting a dozen large photos on the page will clog servers so that visitors get bored and click somewhere else. Remember that not all your visitors will have a fast Internet connection. Ask staff members and/or friends to check out your site on their home computers and let you know if anything loaded slowly for them.

- Keep your site current. Your Web site is your business card. If anything important changes, get it updated right away.

A good Web page is touched up at least seasonally, so that visitors can see that the site, and thus your business, is alive and busy, and not just a shell.

For cemetery sites that don't include obituaries (which provide frequent updating of the site), a "Christmas at our cemetery" photo or a little note about this year's Memorial Day activities would do it.

When I go to a dusty Web site that hasn't been touched since last year, I worry that the business is going under, and nobody wants to climb on board a sinking ship.

- Don't be generic. This is especially a problem if your Web site was created from a template. A bad Web site is bland vanilla—too corporate. It looks like the business could be anywhere, run by anybody. Personalize your Web page so it showcases the special qualities of your business. □

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ing a link for easy navigation.

- **Small font sizes.** Like many baby boomers, I do wear reading glasses, but there were times when it was challenging to read some of the small print. Keep in mind the people you're trying to reach and make reading your site easy for them.

As you look to serving the large baby boomer population (and their parents), many of whom will choose cremation, now is the time for you to determine if you are addressing the needs and desires of your future customer by providing better and more cremation information on your Web site.

Of course, there are many more factors besides providing ample cremation information that will make your Web site profitable for your firm. Make sure you work closely with your Web site vendor to ensure that your online presence is compelling and stands out from your competition. Doing so will contribute to your success and longevity. □