



julieb@iccf.com

ICCFA Magazine author spotlight

► Burn is director of cremation services for the ICCFA. She is an ICCFA University faculty member.

► She previously was cremation services manager

at Wilbert Funeral Services Inc., Forest Park, Illinois, having started as manager of funeral service communications in 1991.

More on this topic

► The ICCFA 2012 Convention & Expo will feature many exhibitors showcasing cremation products and include a live Cremation Coaching Center program:

- “The case of the botched cremation,” a mock trial moderated by ICCFA Special Cremation Counsel Poul Lemasters, Esq.

- Cremation best practices, moderated by Burn.

- Alkaline hydrolysis: A case study, presented by John T. McQueen, CFSP (for more details on the convention program, see page 87.)

► The ICCFA has created an ad hoc committee to develop an **at-need script** for funeral directors and arrangers working with families who choose either tradition services or cremation.



► Go to www.iccfa.com to the Cremation Coaching Center for information about the ICCFA’s First Impression Cremation Phone Shopper Program, which allows you to monitor the first impression your company is making on callers. Burn makes the calls, acting as a consumer requesting information on cremation.

► Contact Burn for information about conducting in-house cremation training.

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

► **ICCFA University**, which includes the College of Cremation Services, will be held July 20-25 at the University of Memphis Fogelman Center, Memphis, Tennessee. Go to Education/Events at www.iccfa.com

► **Cremation Arranger Training Certification** will be offered at John A. Gupton College, Nashville, Tennessee, on March 30. Contact Burn for more information.



CREMATION

Can you honestly and accurately say to families that your firm “specializes in cremation”? If not, it’s time to take steps to ensure that your funeral home will thrive as more and more families choose cremation.

What you need to know to be a cremation specialist

When I conduct telephone shopper calls for a funeral home, I start by asking for information on cremation. At one location, the funeral director who took my call told me: “Our funeral home has its own crematory, so we specialize in cremation services.”

After our conversation ended and I had hung up the phone, it occurred to me that in all of the discussions I’d had as I conducted these surveys on behalf of funeral home owners to find out how their staff was responding to consumer requests for cremation information, this was the only funeral professional I had talked to who told me his firm specializes in cremation.

When I ask funeral professionals during my presentations if they are cremation specialists, most are simply stymied by the question, unsure how to answer. Maybe they simply have never thought of themselves in terms of “specializing” in any aspect of funeral service, or maybe they’re not sure if they know enough about cremation to claim the designation.

That’s a sobering thought when you consider the steadily (and in some markets, rapidly) increasing percentage of consumers who are choosing cremation.

In their book, “Boomer Consumer,” which shares valuable insights into the hearts, minds and wallets of today’s baby boomers, Matt Thornhill and John Martin state that baby boomers wish marketers would provide them with better information. Members of the baby boomer generation tend to be a little skeptical, and they want to know they are dealing with an authority on a subject.

In the case of cremation, many people don’t know much about it, and doesn’t anyone in that situation want the best information available? Wouldn’t you prefer to speak to a specialist, to someone who can answer your questions with confidence?

What can you do to assure your clientele that you are a cremation specialist and will be able to supply them with the information they want? If you work directly with families at need or preneed, you need to be proficient in a number of areas, as outlined below.

Know the cremation process

Many client families don’t know but will be interested in learning what actually takes place during a cremation. You should be able to explain to them the basics, to walk them through the process and explain, for example, why they will need a special container for the cremation, how much time it takes to complete the cremation and how they will be receiving their loved one’s remains after the cremation is performed.

Owning and operating a crematory at your establishment certainly helps your firm to claim special expertise. Make sure to tell families about your crematory and the fact that their loved one will never leave your care.

The crematory area should be scrupulously maintained to allow inspection by families if they so desire. Many people will not actually want to take a tour (or view the cremation, for that matter), but the fact that you can say, “If you would like to see our crematory, I’d be glad to show it to you,” will speak volumes.

If you have a crematory, you and your staff should be fully certified as operators. The certification verifies that you have been trained in the entire cremation process as well as in setting up and following proper procedures.

If you use a third party for your cremations, you must be confident in their services so you can assure families that you are in control. Make it a point to regularly visit the crematory unannounced and to request that you be informed of any changes

Cremation continues to grow while death rates remain flat

It appears that the national cremation rate will reach 50 percent before the decade is out. The only question is whether it will happen in 2018, 2017 or even sooner.

Official projections by the Cremation Association of North America were released at the 2011 CANA/NFDA Convention. The report featured final 2009 data, newly released 2010 data and projections to 2015.

The 2009 national cremation rate reached 38.14 percent, with projections for 2010 showing that 40.62 percent of all deaths in the United States would result in disposition by cremation.

CANA's preliminary 2010 figures found that the number of deaths decreased by 0.5 percent from 2009, while the number of cremations is expected to increase 7.3 percent in 2010.

The annual statistical report also discloses regional breakdowns as well as individual state figures. Although states such as California and Florida continue to lead the United States by volume, the states with the highest cremation percentage are Nevada (73 percent), followed by Washington (69.62 percent), Hawaii (68.99 percent), Oregon (67.82 percent) and Montana (64.81 percent).

For 2009, the bottom five states by percentage of deaths cremated were Mississippi (12.54 percent), Alabama (5.48 percent), Kentucky (17.43 percent), Louisiana (19.23 percent) and West Virginia (21.79 percent).

Mark Matthews, CANA past president, said there has been a great deal of discussion on when cremation will be 50 percent of all dispositions. CANA had always forecasted that the 50 percent mark would take place in 2018 or perhaps 2017. Some say that it may happen even earlier. —Julie A. Burn, CCRÉ, CSE

CREMATION

to their procedures or policies. And most important, be sure you would have no qualms if a family asked to view the crematory you're using.

Know how to handle a cremation arrangement conference

In the past few years, all of us have learned that serving cremation families differs from serving families who choose traditional services. For one thing, many families selecting cremation for a loved one have never done so before. Because they need more education and have more choices available for tributes and memorialization, in most cases the arrangement conference will take longer.

A cremation specialist knows that the new standard for making arrangements of any kind is to first and foremost listen to the story of a family's loved one. Using open-ended questions will gain a deeper understanding of what was significant in the loved one's life.

Questions such as, "Can you tell me what your mother enjoyed doing for relaxation?" will enable you to determine how best to incorporate that part of her life into the tribute. The old standard of collecting vital statistics first does not work with today's client families. They need to feel a connection with you, and you can start the process by asking them to reminisce and by engaging them in the conversation.

Many firms are successful because they have developed a cremation arrangement script for all staff members. Being consistent with how to talk to families and how to present options makes all arrangers part of your specialist team.

Know what the options are

Cremation specialists in our profession continually stress how important it is to make every family you serve aware of all the choices available for a meaningful tribute. As new products seem to come on the market every day, this can appear daunting.

Being able to talk knowledgeably about your service and products will definitely win your client's trust and confidence. Make sure you and your staff can explain cremation products as well as you can casket corners.

One way to help families visualize the possibilities is to describe—or, better yet, show them photos of—some of the unique services you have created for families in the past. You also need to listen to their ideas and be able to develop a plan for implementing them.

It is also important to be aware of new cremation products through trade publications and attendance at conventions. If some new cremation product has been in the news, you need to know enough about it to answer questions that people who have seen the stories might ask.

Remember the international press attention LifeGem got a decade ago when it announced it could create diamonds from the carbon in cremated remains? Just a few weeks ago, a company that incorporates cremated remains into ammunition drew attention from the media.

It's too early to tell whether that will turn out to be a flash in the pan or, like LifeGem, an established cremation product, but you need to keep up with this sort of news. How do you think it will look if people ask you for information about something they've heard or read about and you know less about it than they do?

In discussing service options, when a family asks you to do something "different," your response needs to be positive, not negative. They want a catered reception and your state doesn't allow food at the funeral home? Do you say, "We're not allowed to do that here," or do you tell them you have an arrangement with some lovely nearby establishments and will be glad to handle the details with them? Your mindset needs to be one of finding a way to get things done.

Know what's happening

Make it a habit to stay on top of the news. A number of industry websites provide links to local and national news stories about the industry, including cremation. Weekly and monthly publications geared toward funeral professionals (such as the one you're reading right now) feature stories on a wide range of cremation-related topics, including marketing tools, liability issues and revenue generation.

Some families will be interested in knowing how many people choose cremation vs. traditional casketed burial. You should be able to quote the confirmed 2009 national cremation rate of 38.15 percent or the preliminary 2010 national rate of 40.62 percent as well as your state's cremation rate and, of course, the percentage of the people you serve who choose cremation.

Certainly if your state's rate is 30 percent and 40 percent of the families you serve choose cremation it appears that your firm specializes in cremation.

National and state cremation statistics are

put together each year through the Cremation Association of North America and are widely reported.

Know how to effectively market your cremation services

As always, first impressions are key. Anyone who might be talking to families—receptionists, office personnel, funeral assistants and greeters—needs to sound confident in presenting your firm as cremation specialists.

Having everyone on your staff refer to themselves as cremation specialists in many cases is not feasible, but anyone who comes into contact with families is instrumental in building relationships with them and may be asked a question about cremation. They can simply say that they will find one of the firm's cremation specialists to answer the question.

This could be standard for phone calls inquiring about cremation: "Let me have you speak to one of our firm's cremation specialists."

Your website is an important tool you need to use effectively to convey your cremation expertise. I went into depth about this subject in an October 2010 article in ICCFA Magazine, "What is your website teaching families about cremation?"

Suffice it to say here that videos on the cremation process, frequently asked cremation questions and samples of unique ways to memorialize a loved one will contribute to showing consumers that you are a cremation leader.

I also can't stress enough that "cremation" should be listed on your main navigation bar. When people arrive at your website, you want to make it easy for them to find information on cremation. If cremation is prominently featured, not buried in a submenu, it sends the message that cremation is an important part of your business.

Know where to look for advice and inspiration

It is always refreshing to attend industry functions and learn from others what they are doing on a day-to-day basis to effectively address the cremation market. The people recognized as leaders in the field are often the ones sharing ideas and practices to improve the profession as a whole. Take advantage of these opportunities.

You probably know someone you would refer to as a cremation specialist. Make it a point to reach out to them for advice and

inspiration. If you don't know someone in that category, it's definitely time for you to increase your participation in the networking offered by seminars and conventions.

One cremation specialist I have had the pleasure of knowing for several years is Jerry Sullivan, owner and president of the Cremation Society of Illinois and Olson Burke and Sullivan Funeral and Cremation Center in Chicago, Illinois.

His success in the cremation market has a lot to do with his mind-set. He did an excellent job of responding to the increase in the number of cremations at a time when many thought it was just a fad. He makes it a priority to continue to stay informed and currently serves as president of the International Cremation Society and has contributed to the Cremation Association of North America for many years.

Know that you never stop learning

It has just been in the last few years that we are seeing some mortuary schools add a cremation course to their curriculum. The reality is, most funeral directors did not receive any formal cremation education when they were in mortuary school. If that's your situation, it is incumbent on you to seek out the necessary education. Fortunately, cremation is frequently the focus of continuing education courses.

The ultimate cremation training can be found at ICCFA University's College of

Cremation Services, held each year at the University of Memphis, Tennessee. The four-and-a-half-day program addresses all things cremation (Crematory Operator Certification, Crematory Administrator Certification and Cremation Arranger Certification).

Attendees come from all areas of our profession—funeral directors, crematory operators and cemetery maintenance personnel, as well as owners and managers, providing a well-rounded experience. A funeral director who works at a firm using a third-party crematory learns what actually takes place during the cremation process. A cemetery worker learns how funeral arrangers connect with families in creating meaningful tributes.

There are books you should have and make sure your staff reads. For example, "Cremation and the Funeral Director—Successfully Meeting the Challenge," by Michael Kubasak, gives you everything from definitions to product knowledge to the cremation arrangement conference. It is a basic and must-read for all funeral professionals. My former employer required all marketing and sales staff to read this book, which was instrumental in my preliminary cremation training.

If you are an ICCFA member, be sure to read the new "Cremation Best Practices" white paper, available on the Cremation Coaching Center website, www.cremationcoach.com. 