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ICCFA Magazine author spotlight

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► 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 from this author



► 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.

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



► Burn will be among the presenters at "The Cremation Customer" and the "Marketing to Boomers" sessions at the 2011 ICCFA Convention & Expo.

CREMATION

What do you say to people who call your funeral home or cemetery to ask about cremation? Do you treat the call as a nuisance or a chance to impress a potential customer?

What to say—and *not* say—to people calling about cremation

Some people who have been in business a long time probably think they don't need to read an article about basic telephone skills, but I urge you to read on anyway, because this is vitally important for dealing with the increasing cremation rate.

The fact is, cremation is growing, more and more people are doing telephone shopping and it's really competitive out there. How you and your staff represent your company to people who call on the phone is very important.

Last year the ICCFA developed a program called First Impression Phone Shopper, through which I call the locations of ICCFA members and ask for information about cremation so I can find out how their staff is handling those calls.

This is a way for owners and managers to learn what their staff is saying to cremation consumers and to decide whether they would do business with their own company based on what their staff is saying.

If the answer is "no," maybe it's time to do some training on effective telephone communication. Funeral homes and cemeteries cannot afford to lose business because the people who answer the phone are not making a good impression on potential customers.

It's also a way for me to find out what's going on in the field and make some suggestions based on the telephone conversations I've had with funeral home personnel about cremation.

The mystery shopper at work

I am the mystery shopper, the one who makes all the calls. In the course of making more than 120 phone calls, I've learned a number of things about what funeral homes are telling cremation consumers.

When I call a funeral home, my first

question is, "Can you give me some information on cremation?" What's the obvious answer to that question? "Yes"—just one word. Where do you go from there? A lot of the funeral homes I talked to said, "What kind of information do you want?" That's not necessarily what they *should* say, but it's what a lot of people do say.

Next I say something like, "My aunt is in a local nursing home and not doing well, and has said she would like to be cremated."

Ask for and use the caller's name. The No. 1 thing I learned—and also the thing that surprised me the most—is that most of the funeral homes did not want to know who I was. In fact, 98 percent of the time they did not ask for my name.

On the other hand, 98 percent of the time the person who answered the phone did give me their name, though a few people didn't. People need to stress with their staffs the importance of giving their name and asking the caller's name, because that it is a vital component in making a connection.

Don't start by talking about immediate disposition. In many cases, after I explained about the situation with my aunt, the next thing the funeral home would say was, "We have a direct cremation; it starts at so-and-so dollars." Now, I did not call and ask, "Can you give me the cost of a cremation?" I didn't bring up price, I asked for information. I wanted to know what that funeral establishment could do to help me and my aunt at the time of death.

You don't want to start out by talking about direct cremation. You need to find out more about the caller, create value and then get into pricing.

When people gave me information about their package prices, many of them started with direct cremation and then worked their

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way up in price. But you should start with your most complete package, where there’s the most value, and go down.

Something else that’s a major challenge in the industry is educating consumers about final disposition. The impression I got from these phone calls is that once you’re cremated, that’s it. Very few people asked me if the family had discussed plans for our aunt’s cremated remains. No one tried to educate me at all about the different types of final disposition available. That’s got to change.

Agree on a basic script. You need to get together with your staff and agree on what points you want to make to callers who ask about cremation and have that basic script placed beside every telephone. Overall, I heard too much about how much it was going to cost me, not about value.

Often I simply felt I wasn’t very important. Today, people have a lot of choices, and you have to convince them of why they should do business with you. You want to leave the caller feeling that they got the information they wanted and with a good feeling from talking to you.

You also want people to be prepared to answer questions. I was put on hold many times because the person I was talking to had to search for a price list. I thought that was kind of odd—it’s not as if there are 25 different packages with different prices. I do think people should know those prices, but people do forget, so have that written down as part of the script that’s next to the telephone.

Prepare to answer the phone. One of the things I learned from the Telephone Doctor program is to have a mirror beside the telephone. When the phone rings, before you answer it, take a deep breath to calm yourself down and then smile. It’s true: A smile comes out in your voice.

In one case, the funeral home owner had asked me to call a specific person, and this man had been having a lot of personal issues. When I called and asked, “Can you give me some information on cremation?” he responded, “Absolutely.” That really stuck with me, his tone of voice and the word “absolutely.” He really sounded like he was there to help me.

He also said something that no one

else said, in more than 120 calls. “We at X Funeral Home specialize in cremation.” Nobody else said that to me. Does your funeral home specialize in cremation? If you’re in the death care profession today, the answer needs to be “yes.” Yet that man was the only person who said so—I thought that was very interesting.

I should also note that if the funeral home owner had not told me this man was having problems in his personal life, I never would have guessed so by the way he talked to me.

We all know that people “buy” people. They buy from people they like. So when someone calls, it’s important to make a connection. Ask the person’s name and use it throughout the conversation, including when you’re ending the call with a thank you for the fact that they called your funeral home. Use a pleasant speaking voice. Ask open-ended questions to find out a little bit more about my aunt so you can tell me what you can do for me and my family. Be confident.

One question that makes sense to ask a caller who asks about cremation is, “May I ask you (always ask permission before you ask a question), have you ever been involved in making cremation arrangements before?”

I like that question a lot, because if they say no, you’ll know that this person needs to be educated on the basics. If they say yes, you can ask some open-ended questions about what they’ve done, what actually took place and how satisfied they were with it.

So I think asking whether they’ve ever been involved in making cremation arrangements is a better question than the one I heard a lot, which was “What kind of information do you want?”

Simplify, simplify, simplify. Today’s consumer wants information that’s clear and easy to understand. That’s why so many funeral homes have packages, correct? Often they’re “good, better, best.” Start with your most complete package, explain what the value is, then go on to the next package and then the third.

Remember that most people just know that cremation means burning the body. And these days, they’ve been reading a lot of stories about how cremation is a cheaper

alternative. So those two things are all that a lot of people know about cremation.

Make sure your staff is educated about cremation. Twice I actually had people say to me, “With cremation, you really don’t need any merchandise.” That’s not true.

Even with an immediate cremation, you’re going to need at least two containers—one for the cremation and one for the cremated remains. And maybe a third container for cemetery placement.

Don’t talk yourself out of a job. I talked to a couple of arrangers who did a good job overall. They talked to me about their packages, starting with their complete package. But when they got down to the economy package—direct cremation—they said, “With an economy cremation, we will pick up the body, do the cremation and take care of the paperwork. And then you’ll do a service on your own.”

Oh, I can do that? I can do a service on my own without any help from the funeral home? I guess I can!

Sometimes we say things without thinking, and that was probably the case here. But aren’t enough consumers doing their own services without us encouraging them to do it?

Talk about final disposition and memorialization. This is a big challenge in the industry today, and the fact is, we have laws and regulations that say cremation is disposition. But we know it isn’t. Cremation isn’t final disposition, but too often, that’s what consumers are being told.

Cremation is preparation for final placement, and we need to educate families about final placement. Many times, someone explaining the funeral home’s most complete package would say something like, “We can have a visitation for your aunt where the family can come to the funeral home or to the nursing home. And then instead of the body going to the cemetery, it goes to the crematory.” Period. And of course I’m thinking, “And then what?”

Talk about the value in your offerings. How do you differentiate yourself?

Obviously, if you’ve got a crematory on site, tell me you do and what that means to me. Let me know that my aunt’s body will be in your care the entire time. In most

cases, the funeral homes with their own crematories did mention it—but not always.

Tell me that I don't necessarily have to hold the service at your funeral home—you can do it anywhere. Some of the most effective phone conversations I had were with people who used my name, recognized the name of the local nursing home I said my aunt was in and told me their funeral home works with that nursing home and has done services there. That's something a lot of people don't know—that they can have the service somewhere else.

Mention your product and service options. Some people told me about memorial DVDs, they mentioned creating diamonds from cremated remains. But I didn't hear enough of that sort of thing, certainly not enough to give me a reason for choosing one funeral home over another.

Make sure people can see what you're talking about. Remember, people are visual thinkers. You can tell me all about what you have, but it's important for them to be able to see it—websites are really

important. Offer to send people information so they can see some photos of that reception center you have now.

Don't assume callers are price shoppers. I've had owners and managers say to me, "There are so many people that call around—they're price shoppers. So we don't spend a lot of time talking to them."

You can't do that today. Please, please don't think everyone who is calling around just wants the cheapest price, because that's not always true. Take the time to explain what you can do to help me honor my aunt's life.

When my father was very sick, I was the one who went to the funeral home with my mother to set up the preneed contract. Once it was done and we showed it to my sisters, one turned to the other and said, "Did you see how much that cost?" If you asked them today, they can't even remember what the cost was, because we had a wonderful tribute for our father. Everything was perfect. Again, it's about value.

Don't assume callers know what they

want. Help educate them and give them the right information. And if you're not comfortable telling people you specialize in cremation, get more education about it so you can. Attend ICCFA University's College of Cremation Services.

Don't assume callers don't want a service. Start with your most complete package, not your immediate cremation/basic package.

Take every call seriously. They're not going to call you back if you handle that first call badly—you get one chance.

Make sure you know what your staff is telling people on the phone. People buy people. They want to talk to someone who's personable, makes them feel good and gives them the information they need.

Remember that for most people, making arrangements at the time of death or preneed is one of the most costly expenditures they're going to incur in their lifetime. Treat them accordingly, and make your first impression a good one. □