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### ICCFA Magazine author spotlight

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### More from this author

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## CREMATION

‘You have to stop doing things the way your grandfather did!’  
That’s what funeral professionals are told every day.  
But there’s an exception to every rule, and this funeral director’s  
‘stupid’ Canadian grandfather is that exception.

# Why you should make cremation arrangements like a Canadian

The title of this essay is actually the closing sentence. I am telling you this so you won’t imagine that I’m going to tell you to pepper your conversation with such things as “from a to zed” or “eh” during arrangements.

Let me tell you a story. About a decade ago I was doing some consulting for a Canadian funeral home. This business had an 85 percent cremation rate yet also had an 82 percent casketing rate. That’s the sort of thing that makes a consultant scratch his head and immediately assume there is a definitional problem with the data. There wasn’t; nearly all the people choosing cremation at this funeral home also bought or rented a casket.

This might be a good time for me to pause and make sure you understand what a consultant does. I meet with people and talk with them about their businesses. On every assignment, I try to help my clients, and I also learn from them.

When I see something that works, my goal is to dissect it and figure out if it is the result of dumb luck or of something reproducible. If it is reproducible, my goal is to record the details so I can recognize future situations where the same thing should work.

I then create an acronym or cute name for this solution, write an article about it and take credit for discovering it. So, being a consultant is easy—no inventory, just acronyms and cute names.

In this case, I was working with a client who was doing the impossible. He was selling caskets (rental or purchased units) to almost 95 percent of his cremation cases. I needed to find out if what he was doing was reproducible.

Meeting him for dinner, I couldn’t wait to ask him how this was possible. Before the waitress had brought the wine, I blurted out, “I am impressed with the fact

that you are selling caskets to almost all of your cremation consumers. How do you do it?”

His reply? “Well Dan, it wasn’t me that started doing it, it was my dumb grandfather.”

I know funeral service, whether in Canada or the United States, has traditionally involved a lot of “because that’s the way we always do it.” I know mortuary school only partially prepares students to make arrangements or run a funeral; the rest is learned in internships and on the job. I know we tend to transfer knowledge and know-how generation to generation. The problem is, sometimes when the “what to do” is taught this way, the “why” gets lost.

When my grandmother made a brisket, she would cut the short end off before cooking. My mother did it the same way. When I learned to cook, I asked my mother, “Why do we cut the end of the brisket off? Is this a religious issue, a way to improve the taste or texture, or what?” She didn’t know, so she said, “I will ask Bubbe (my grandmother).”

I was there when she asked Bubbe, who answered, “Because that is the only way it would fit in my pan.” Hmmm. Since her time, hundreds of brisket-ends had been sacrificed for no reason. I can only imagine how long this might have continued if I had not asked “why?”

So, back in Canada, my mission was to discover why my client credited his “dumb grandfather” with the fact that most of his cremation clients used caskets.

I asked, “How did your grandfather come up with this plan?”

My client replied as if I had a short memory, “Dan, he was stupid!”

I asked why he thought his grandfather was stupid.

“Dan, he never went to any of those

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seminars on how to make a cremation arrangement. All he knew was how to drive to the crematory, and nothing more!"

Unfortunately, this still did not answer my question. So I sat back and said, "Tell me the whole story from the beginning."

He took me back to 1965. The funeral home had never handled a single cremation case. Then one day his grandfather answered the phone and heard, "Gerald, Dad died and we want a direct cremation."

"Well, my grandfather was stupid," my client said. "He never learned how to do a cremation arrangement like you smart guys in the United States did. So he just started to do a routine first call on the phone.

"He said, 'OK, now what day do you want your visitation?' The family said, 'Wednesday would be good.' He said, 'Do you want the funeral at our chapel or at your church?' The family replied, 'Your chapel is easier for everyone to get to.' Granddad said, 'Do you want us to embalm the body for the visitation?' and the family said, 'Well, yeah, that would be good.'"

My client went on to tell me about the "stupid" arrangement the grandfather made the next day when the family came in and he showed them caskets and some urns in a catalogue and they bought one of each.

Every chance he got, my client reminded me of his grandfather's "stupidity." Finally I asked, "Why do you think your grandfather was stupid?"

He said, "Because, Dan, he never learned how to make a cremation arrangement. When my dad started meeting with families, he copied what my grandfather did, and then ultimately he taught me to do it the same exact way."

### Hear 'O Canada' before you speak

What did I learn from this client and his "stupid" grandfather? When the phone rings at your funeral home and the family asks, "How much is a direct cremation?" you should hear "O Canada" playing in our heads before you speak.

Do not assume the family is asking you about the limited act of removing the body, getting the death certificate and other regulatory forms processed, bringing

the body to the retort and returning the cremated remains to the authorized party.

I am not asking you to be disingenuous, because the fact is, through conducting focus groups I have learned that nearly 90 percent of consumers who say they want cremation for a loved one do want services and products in addition to the basics. This finding is consistent with the FAMIC-continued Wirthlin Study.

So you need to start by asking questions, as that "stupid" Canadian funeral director did when handling cremation cases, in order to find out what products and services the family wants, just as you do with traditional burial cases.

Many funeral arrangers are just not using their creativity. They are actually prejudiced when they hear the word cremation and assume it is an insult to their professionalism. I dare say it is more of an insult to the family to turn off your creativity in a funeral arrangement just because you disagree with their decision regarding preparation for disposition.

Just a week before writing this, I was at a convention where I was told by a funeral home owner that she tells families, "I won't do cremations." Well, this is a funeral home owner more likely to end up in bankruptcy court than successfully retired from funeral directing.

I recently handled some cremation training for a funeral home in a community with a 75 percent cremation rate. In other words, cremation was now the traditional choice, moreso than a so-called "traditional" funeral.

I made some "mystery shopper" calls to the funeral home and recorded the interaction I had with the various arrangers. Then I came in and conducted my training.

I demonstrated how to ask questions, to talk about the service until a cremation family actually says they don't want a service. I had them role play, practicing talking to consumers on the phone about various service options.

We took a 15-minute break. I went outside the building and called the funeral home, asking for information about direct cremation. Within a few seconds, one of

the arrangers who had been sitting in my training session for the past three hours was on the phone.

I asked, "How much is a direct cremation?" Despite the fact that we had just finished doing 45 minutes of role play on how to answer this question, he replied, "\$1,345 plus the container." This man clearly was not Canadian. In fact, he probably couldn't spell "hockey."

When we came back together I asked if everyone was comfortable with the training and all were smiles, including my victim. Looking at my victim, I then asked, "When was the last time you took a call about direct cremation?" He now realized he had flunked the test. This just goes to show how hard it is to change. But change we must.

### Who's the smart one?

During that dinner, which took place a decade ago, my Canadian client told me he was hoping to someday do cremation arrangements like they do in the United States. I realized then that he was the dolt and his father and grandfather were the smart ones.

We all have to learn to make arrangements with cremation families without prejudging their needs and limits, or find a new profession. As managers, we must change our pricing so that cremation and partial-service families are paying for our overhead, or sell our funeral homes and invest the money somewhere else.

The fact is, cremation will continue to change the funeral profession. It will provide many good reasons for there to be fewer funeral homes, and will sharpen the divide in the nature of providers.

Those who can embrace cremation will survive. Those who can merchandise and market for cremation services will have nice fixed assets. Those who cannot are going to be the utilitarian providers. The choice is being made now, based on planning, training and confidence.

Remember, I observe, mimic, create the acronym or cute name and then publish the article. You are reading the last step, eh? Make cremation arrangements like a Canadian. 