

interview by **Susan Loving**
managing editor, ICCFA Magazine



**ICCFA Magazine
subject spotlight**

comvalfh@shaw.ca

► **Kent Roduck** is owner and manager of Island Funeral Services Ltd., which built and operates three facilities in an area of British Columbia which has a 90 percent cremation rate:

- Comox Valley Funeral Home Cremation and Reception Centre, Courtenay, the original, 10,000-square-foot facility (1992)
- Island Funeral Services, a 950-square-foot arrangement and prearrangement center established in Campbell River (2000)
- Elk Falls Crematorium and Reception Centre, Campbell River, a 2,500-square-foot, full-service facility which includes a crematorium, contemporary “chapel,” reception area, niche walls and scattering garden on the grounds of the municipal cemetery (2003)

www.islandfuneralservices.com

► Roduck served on the Funeral Service Association of British Columbia Board of Directors for 11 years, serving as president from 2005 to 2007. He has written articles on marketing and advertising for national trade magazines, acts as a resource speaker and operates a private consulting company, Profitable Cremation Solutions.

CREMATION

What image are you and your organization projecting to potential cremation customers? Are you thinking “dignified and caring” while they’re seeing “stuffy and expensive”?

Learning what the public likes while educating them about cremation

When Kent and Rosemarie Roduck started a funeral home in Comox Valley, British Columbia, in 1992, they had to think long and hard about how to succeed in what was then an 85 percent cremation market (it’s now 90 percent) and how to differentiate their operation from established competitors.

Their strategy has been multipronged, to say the least. Roduck, who spoke at the ICCFA 2011 Convention, said he was prepared to list 100 ways to profit and grow in a high cremation market (but in the interest of time, limited himself to a dozen). The Roducks regularly reevaluate their selection room display and merchandise. They offer a “sale table” of discounted products and have a hard time keeping it stocked because they sell so well. (“Dad loved a bargain!”)

They offer celebrants, having learned that cremation families are often put off by religious ceremonies. They try to establish a relationship with telephone shoppers. They included a reception center from the beginning and consider hospitality services a necessary part of the funeral business. They think about how obituaries are written, eliminating negatives such as “no service by request” and substituting positives, such as “private family arrangements.”

The Roducks believe image—what your building looks like outside and in, how your staff dresses, the color of your vehicles, the words you use—is important. “You’ve heard the expression ‘perception is reality,’” Roduck said, “and it is.”

ICCFA Magazine talked to Kent Roduck about the “image” aspect of making your business attractive to cremation families.



The Roducks’ fleet of white vehicles, shared by their three locations. They found few families want to use a limousine, so they stopped buying one, but are able to lease a white limousine if a family does request one.

CREMATION



Elk Falls Crematorium and Reception Centre is at the municipal cemetery. The Roducks believe in educating consumers about disposition options. Below, the reception area inside the crematory building, set up for an informal family gathering.

I've heard people say funeral home interiors should have the look of an upscale hotel, and I think, "That would look nice, but is it really going to feel comfortable?" Yours look more like living rooms.

You've hit the nail on the head, and with respect, I see a lot of photos in the trade magazines of new facilities and they're just gorgeous, and there's nothing wrong with that (hotel look) if you're still in an area

where you're dealing with a lot of traditional funerals—folks expect that—but when you're dealing with a high cremation rate and people who don't want traditional funerals, that look is something they don't want.

The crematorium with the red and green awnings is simple but beautiful. The landscaping is nice, and it's funny how much those awnings add to the building.

If you're not going to use the crematorium

for anything other than just doing cremations, it doesn't matter, but if viewing or witnessing the cremation is going to be a part of the process for families, you want a nice place for them to go.

It helps a bit that my wife, Rosemarie, who's a licensed funeral director and my partner, is also an interior decorator. She chose all of the colors and has had a lot of input into the actual design of the buildings.

Every few years, we update the interiors, make sure everything is nice and, if we've seen something we like, we add it to the mix.

Where is the memorial wall shown on your website at the crematorium property?

The niche wall is actually attached to the crematorium building, and then around the corner on the east side of the building we have a scattering garden, the idea being that people can have the service there, then entombment or scattering. Or, if they want to bury the urn, we're right on the cemetery property, so they can just go a few yards and bury the urn. We lease a section of the cemetery from the city of Campbell River for our building.

I find funeral directors in high cremation areas leery of getting involved with cemeteries because of the low memorialization rate.



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Until you've actually dealt with the urn and found a permanent place for it, wherever that is, you really haven't completed the cremation process.



Left, an L-shaped niche wall is attached to one side of the crematorium. Below, the memorial for the Serenity Walkway. The walkway is a scattering area. Plaques on the memorial may be for people scattered elsewhere, as well as those who scatter here.



I guess the only way I can respond to that is that each market is different. We find it convenient to be able to say, "After we've completed the cremation for you, what would you like to do with the urn? Would you like to put it in a niche wall? Would you like to bury it in the ground? Would you like to scatter in a scattering garden?"

We know 90 percent of our families are going to choose cremation, but there's still an education process that has to take place. When I say to the family, "Have you decided what to do with the urn after your dad's cremation takes place?" about half say, "Gee, I don't know. What are the options?"

We say, "It's much like burying a casket. With a traditional funeral service, you go to the cemetery, bury the casket, closure takes place and you go have a reception." I explain that's basically what you need to do with an urn—something has to happen. Until you've actually dealt with the urn and found a permanent place for it, wherever that is, you really haven't completed the cremation process.

One of the ways we advertise which works really well for us is a question-and-answer column in the newspaper. We use questions people actually ask us, and one of the columns is titled, "Cemeteries aren't just for caskets anymore." We tell people about different things they can do with cremated remains at a cemetery.

Do many people go to the crematory to observe? Is it set up for families to view?

Oh, yes. It's very well designed for that, because we had the advantage of building from the ground up.

In an average scenario, if people want to accompany the deceased to the crematorium

or if they want to have a little time with the person before the cremation actually takes place, we take the cremation container in through the double doors much as we would handle a traditional casket, and it's set up in a beautiful area where the family can sit and spend time with their loved one.

In many cases, the family wants to have a final viewing before the cremation takes place. When they are done, we take the cremation container through the double doors; our cremator is right there. We also have a window through which they can watch the container go into the cremator and see the cremation start. Most people don't, but some want to.

I don't think I've ever heard of putting memorialization right on the crematory.

It works quite well, and when we get to the situation where it's full—and it's getting full at this point—we will expand into free-standing niche walls, so we'll continue to have niches available on the property.

What is the Serenity Walkway?



This small (950-square-foot) arrangement and prearrangement office is in downtown Campbell River. With lots of windows and red paint, the building has the bright and contemporary look the Roducks chose to appeal to cremation families.

That’s our scattering garden. We can do the scattering for the family, or they can be there and take part in the committal. There is a marker they can add a bronze plaque to with the person’s name on it.

We have had families come to us and say, “Dad wanted to be scattered, and we did what he wanted, but that was a couple of years ago and we have nowhere we can go and visit. We have nowhere the grandchildren can go on Father’s Day or on his birthday to put flowers. So can we just put a plaque on the memorial?”

Well, of course they can, and there are a number of families who have put plaques on that marker even though the person’s cremated remains are not there. I tell them it’s very much like the Vietnam War Memorial: No one is buried there, but thousands and thousands of people come each year just to stand in front of it and find that person’s name.

Unfortunately, a lot of people think scattering is romantic when they do it, then down the road they end up feeling kind of empty.

Going on to your funeral homes, I like the red color of the downtown arrangement

office—very striking.

I’m not saying everything has to be vivid, but through dealing with a high cremation rate for so long, we’ve learned what people respond to and what they don’t, what they want and don’t want, and one of the things we’ve had the greatest response to here is the fact that our buildings are very bright.

Our main funeral home in Courtenay is a bright buff color with white trim and Sherwood green. Our vehicles are white. So many people comment, “Wow, this doesn’t look like a funeral home.”

You walk into a huge gathering area; there’s a fireplace, skylights. Everything is movable in the area where we have our ceremonies—I really don’t call it the chapel anymore because to a lot of people that has a religious connotation, and in a high cremation market they have difficulty with that. The furniture is movable so we can set it up any way they want.

We have a huge screen where people can see video presentations. In our garden room, where we have our receptions, the whole roof is skylights. And then there’s the door through which you can walk out onto the outdoor patio. People can wander

through the funeral home, very much as if at someone’s house.

There’s a lot of greenery, water features, things that make it bright and uplifting.

As for our fleet, white cars are not that common in Canada. We decided to go with white because it’s uplifting, and it’s been amazing to me how many times people will say they like the white cars.

These ideas are not carved in stone, you can keep black cars. But consider choosing another color that will set you apart. Some people, those in a high cremation market, respond to it, because they don’t want anything that looks funereal. We stay away from black.

I see in your wife’s photo on the website, she’s wearing something light colored.

We have never worn the traditional directors’ suits, the black jacket. We do have funeral suits we wear for funerals, memorial services. They’re navy blue, and we wear them with white shirts and striped ties that are quite bright, a little bit of red in them. We make sure our shoes are nice and polished. That’s about as traditional as we get.

We do have a dress code. You must look neat and clean, slacks pressed, shoes polished, shirt nice and clean. But if you want to wear grey, beige, blue, whatever, it’s fine. Basically, you dress as a businessperson. We want to look professional, but not funereal. Staff members can be identified by their nametags.

I was surprised you used the word “funeral” in the name of your locations, since it’s a word you urge funeral directors to avoid in talking to cremation customers.

The thing is, it was in the original name, and we’ve kept it. We still do funerals. You have to tell people what you do; it’s part of the education process. So Comox Valley Funeral Home, Cremation and Reception Centre tells people that yes, we do funerals there, but we also do cremations and receptions.

It’s very important to have a reception area. I know a handful of states don’t allow refreshments in a funeral home, which is unfortunate, because this is something that really works well; families really appreciate doing everything at one location.

Elk Falls was a bit of a different challenge because we wanted to call it Island Funeral Services to let people know that we provide that service, but then we say below that, Elk Falls Cremation and

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Above, the original funeral home, Comox Valley Funeral Home, Courtenay. Left, the patio area, where people can go during receptions.

Reception Centre, so again we're tying in cremation and reception center. It's not that you have to be black and white on this, but it's interesting that in a lot of people's perception, if you call yourself simply a funeral home you don't do cremations. That seems odd, but it's true. If you call yourself simply a cremation facility, they may think that's all you do, and gee, maybe we can't have a casket with a viewing.

You built all three locations?

Yes, we did. That was an advantage, because we've been able to create the type of building we felt was most acceptable to cremation families. Which is not to say that existing funeral homes can't make those changes—they can. Some have physical facilities that lend themselves more to it, but they need to consider it.

About the white cars, what vehicles do you have? It sounds like you wouldn't need too many limousines for driving families to the cemetery.

We have a funeral coach; we have a sedan we use as a lead car for processions; and

we have three vans, and we find that works well for us. We don't use the funeral coach much.

When we first opened, we included a limousine. When we updated our fleet the first time, we also included a limousine. When we updated our fleet for the third time, we eliminate the limousine. What we had found, in the final year or so of owning the limousine, is we used it so seldom it just wasn't cost effective. People didn't want it. You're not going to the cemetery that often, and even if you are, a lot of folks in this particular area really aren't comfortable with a limousine. There's a company here in town that has white vehicles and it's no problem to rent one if the family wants it.

That's this market, but I find in talking to a lot of other funeral directors operating in high cremation areas, that limousines aren't in high demand.

I guess bright red wouldn't be appropriate, but white doesn't seem at all disrespectful—it sounds kind of "heavenly."

It's interesting you mention that, because

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there are funeral homes that use red vehicles—I've seen them. There are also some firms in the U.S. that use pink vehicles. I assume these firms want to set themselves apart. You can use just about any color.

Sometimes a funeral director makes an assumption that families won't like something or that it's not conservative enough, and in fact families think it's creative, it's neat. Some funeral homes have antique vehicles or horse-drawn vehicles, and they find that a large number of families will say, "We'd like to use the 1959 Cadillac," or the old horse-drawn hearse.

It's very easy for us to think conservatively as funeral directors, but in a lot of cases our clientele, particularly today, when they have so much more access to information, want to do something special, something different.

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Of course the first adjustment some folks have to make is to embrace cremation and its opportunities. They really have to want to present those options; if they go into an arrangement conference with an anti-cremation prejudice, the family's going to feel it.

Cremation families don't usually come in and tell you what they want, they usually tell you what they don't want (a funeral, a casket). It's a different type of thought process, and funeral directors have to understand that the cremation person sees things quite differently than someone who wants to arrange traditional funerals, and their services and merchandise need to reflect that if they want to continue to capture that market and continue serving those families.

When I speak at conferences, I say, "Here's what we've learned in the 18 years we've been here. Here are some things that have worked and some that haven't. Not everything we've done has worked, but we try different things. If it doesn't work, we move on. If it does work, great, we incorporate it into what we do."

Your market may be somewhat different, but if it's a high cremation market or it's moving in that direction, these are things you should be aware of.

I often hear people say, "That wouldn't

work in our market." Well, people are people. They may have different traditions, but when it comes to looking at cremation, they're pretty much of the same mind—they want some new ideas. □
