

Asking the Right Questions



INTERVIEWING FAMILIES WITH AN EVENT-PLANNER MINDSET



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REGARDLESS OF YOUR TENURE AS A FUNERAL

professional, no matter how long you have been serving families, it is possible you have never really planned a funeral service event. While you arrange all around the funeral ceremony and the details associated with it, just how often do you take an active role in helping the family design and execute a personal, meaningful and intentional celebration of life event? Sure, the flowers are set up, the themed urn is in place, the seats are reserved, and staff knows exactly what to do and when to facilitate a flawless service. But all too often, the actual ceremony, the most meaningful part of the funeral time, and to be honest, the invaluable marketing tool that is telling everyone in the audience whether what you do matters, is left to chance. We as funeral service professionals take a passive role and leave this experience in the hands of the clergy, or even worse, to the family, to try and figure out.

Another reason for my assessment that most of us have never really arranged a service, is that unless you are blessed with a company that has a teaching mindset, it is likely that the way in which you consult with families, the way you "make arrangements", lacks a thoughtful approach and process.

For most of us, consulting with families is a mixture of how the person we interned under did it, mixed with a lot of trial and error. Sometimes, in our very real desire to serve well, but lacking a process, we default to an "Every family, every option, every time" approach. But what does that really mean? I think it means we want the family to have our entire set of resources available to them, in hopes that they will choose something meaningful to them and profitable for us. However if you put yourself in the customer's shoes, it likely means "I'm unwilling or unable to get to know you and your very special and specific needs, so I'm dumping my entire bag of tricks on the table, and hopefully you can pick what you want."

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There is no such thing as a "cremation

family," rather there are families, a majority of them now, who choose cremation. Beyond legal and financial matters, they have five basic choices to make.

FIVE BASIC CHOICES TO MAKE IN THEIR TIME WITH YOU, THEIR TRUSTED GUIDE

1. Whether or not to say "good-bye" to their loved one through some type of viewing
2. The type of remembrance event (notice the change in vernacular from "funeral service")
3. A final resting place for their loved one's remains (yes, it is our professional responsibility to help with this choice, even if we do not own a cemetery)
4. An appropriate container for saying "good-bye" and/or for cremation
5. An appropriate urn and/or keepsakes, driven in part by the previous choices

As a profession, we have a tendency to

either make assumptions and not educate families well or to overwhelm them with options. Instead, we must undertake a change in philosophy. We must become expert consultants, asking the right questions and making meaningful recommendations.

Out of necessity, we have to ask families a lot of questions. We are skilled at asking questions clearly and compassionately. However, we often focus more on the questions that meet our immediate needs – such as completing the death certificate. As event planners, or funeral service consultants, we are story-tellers. We must also ask the questions that reveal memories and stories stacked with emotion and importance.

EXAMPLES OF THESE "FEELINGS FINDINGS" QUESTIONS ARE

1. Think of the most wonderful memory you have of spending time with your Mom.
Pause
Tell me about that day. What do you see, smell, and hear?

2. What do you think your Dad was most proud of in his entire life?
3. What are the special things you hope friends and family members will remember most about your brother?
4. Who were some of your son's closest friends? What were those relationships like? How did they spend their time together
5. When your grandmother found time to relax, what would she do?

Being a good interviewer hinges upon your ability to be a good listener. Fight the tendency to tell your own stories in response to what the family is sharing – this is their time. And avoid personal distractions. With so much going on, can be hard to listen through the answers to these types of probing questions when our mind is racing on a thousand other items – cremations to conduct, obituaries to place, flowers and merchandise to get ordered, and the list goes on and on. It is important to learn to focus only on the family at that

time. The answers to our interview questions become the ingredients to a personal and meaningful remembrance event and allow us to guide families on the choices they need to make. Think broadly, provide ideas to the family, and let their responses guide you on what they may be comfortable with. Your suggestions give them permission to be creative. Be willing to take the remembrance event outside your facility to a special venue that helps tell the story. To measure the effectiveness of your recommendations, ask yourself, "Will this event be able to tell this person's life story effectively?"

Remember that our recommendations flow into the event experience itself, not just the location and set-up.

FOLLOWING ARE SOME ACTUAL EXPERIENCES ARRANGERS HAVE CREATED TO ILLUSTRATE WHAT IS POSSIBLE

BALLPARK—Take the ceremony to the

ballfield and sell (for the price grandpa paid back in the day) ballpark-style hotdogs (great for sense of smell too).

CAMPING—Set up a camp-fire on the patio, open a cooler of beer, and encourage a time of story-telling.

BEACH—Ask guests to draw in the sand of a beach scene created inside the funeral chapel, using a projected background and play sand.

GOLF—Bring in a putting green, and ask that every attendee who would like to, sink a ball with the decedent's favorite putter as they share a memory.

COOKING—Have the result of a favorite recipe available to sample and enjoy.

GARDENING—Set-up tables where guests can pot a seedling in memory and take with them.

NON-THEMED—Candle-lighting services are so powerful - don't reserve them just for the holiday season.

Our profession is not for the faint of heart – we work through long hours, changing consumer preferences, compressing profit margins, and misunderstood intentions, not to mention training, mentoring, and running a business fraught with liability. This work must be fueled by passion, if it is to be a successful venture. With all that we have to do and remember to do, it is easy to forget about some of the basic building blocks that drive our success. The family consultation is certainly one of those that needs our continuous improvement and intentional focus. By focusing on asking the right questions and honing our creative event planning skills, you can ensure that each family's experience is the best possible and that, ceremony or not, the outcome is an experience that you can be proud of having provided.