

Back to the basics.



A FEW REMINDERS ON MAKING A DIFFERENCE DOING WHAT YOU DO BEST.



BY KITTY ALEXANDER

IN TODAY'S EVER-CHANGING ENVIRONMENT,

consumer expectations are much different than they were even a few short years ago. When it comes to death and funerals and these consumer changes prove to be a challenge for many of us, we strive to remain the best death care provider for our communities.

I believe that often when things are changing rapidly around us, the best thing we can do is go back to the basics. For centuries we have been a support to families during the complete cycle of death, as a loved one is dying, when the death has occurred, and for years after a death has occurred. To be successful we need to continue to be both focused and intentional in our efforts to serve families during all phases of that cycle, but it does not have to be hard.

What I have found is that while some customer needs can be complex, the majority of people appreciate sincere actions. Below are some simple things you can do to make a lasting impact on your current and future market share. I want to focus (or re-focus) on a few small things we can do that will leave an impression on those we are privileged to serve.

THROWBACK TO A HANDWRITTEN NOTE

Do you remember the last time you sat down and wrote a note to someone? Chances are it has been a while. In today's world, email and texts have replaced the personal touch of most correspondence, but it does not have to be the case. A short and simple, handwritten note can give your business a lot of mileage.

When I began my career in long term care, I quickly learned and appreciated the value of the written message.

Working with seniors who had left their homes of 40+ years to downsize and move to a retirement/healthcare community gave new meaning to the term "change."

What I discovered was that many of these moves, the

decision to downsize and make a major life change, came from the death of their significant other. I enjoyed leaving them notes about their new "home" with us and what a wonderful addition they would be to the community. They were grieving because not only did they lose their partner, they also gave up their homes and many years of memories. By writing simple weekly notes, I encouraged them to become involved in activities and network with their new neighbors.

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I did not realize until my departure from senior services that many of these people kept those notes and expressed to me how much the simple gesture meant to them. What a blessing to me to understand the impact my notes had made, and that they never forgot me!

MAKE IT ABOUT THEM, NOT YOU

Thanks, in large part, to media stories in recent years – many consumers expect us to pursue them (or chase them) with upsell and preneed opportunities. Change that perception by focusing on their needs. After all, a critical part of helping someone through the grief process is to help them adapt to a changed life, to a new normal.

What type of events can you do that focuses on their needs and wants?

At our locations, we have engaged in hosting movie events at our funeral homes for hospice and long term care workers, yoga and wellness centered activities for holistic healing, massage and stress relief sessions for social workers, and many other activities that are different than just another food and beverage centered event.

If you encourage invitees to invite a friend, and you have reached twice as many including someone that has never contacted you for services. What better way to build upon your brand and the loyalty you have created in the community, by providing such events.

We also utilize our ShareLife video technology to enhance our events and make them more personal for the group attending. You may not have the same technology, but ask yourself "how can you take advantage of what you do have to create a true guest experience?" Visit our ShareLifeFuneral.com website for more ideas.

BUILD AN ARMY TO BUILD YOUR BRAND

Ok, maybe not a full army but take advantage of those you already have working with you. The days of sitting at the office waiting on a call is past tense, with more competition in the market, and the transient nature of families today, it is critical to actively create and maintain relationships within your community. You are only one person, how do you reach them all – by training your team members to be extensions of your business! Encourage your team to interact on a daily basis with your public audience. Everywhere you go, you have the potential to build your brand and business. For example, I know a Leader who enjoys stopping by a local diner and often picks up the tab for a widowers group that meets there every week. Think of the impact you can make by buying a few cups of coffee and saying hello.

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One important tidbit as you maintain and build relationships, don't forget the night shift! For one firm, the first call team delivers survival baskets to the night shift at various institutions throughout the year. Remember, the more boots you have on the ground the better chance you have to know your community and stay connected.

PROMOTE YOURSELF

I find so often that firms are doing so

much more to serve families and communities than the general public (and media) knows. And yet, firms keep these things a secret from the community. You have to stop doing that, you cannot worry that your competitor might find out what you are doing and copy it. Granted this protects our 'trade secrets', it also means that our potential customers don't know us and what makes us unique. Sure, we hope that word of mouth is working, but we cannot control that marketing mechanism. What we can control is being active on Facebook and Twitter and sharing with others what we are doing, how we are engaging and supporting families and the community beyond just 'our services'.

Showcase what you are already doing in your aftercare programs by using photos and testimonials and sharing them on your website or social media. Invite the public to events, not just those you served, through an open invitation. Yes, your competitors will be able to see what you are doing but so what? As the saying goes "often replicated, never duplicated." Believe in yourself and let others know of your good works! Take advantage of social media to stay involved. Not only does it provide an opportunity for you to showcase what you and your staff do in the community, it provides an outlet for you to see into what is going on in the community. You can learn about births, organization events, fundraisers, local needs by paying attention to what is going on in the social media world around you.

Some of the best social media exposure comes from staff photos and showing your audience a fun side from your team. We had a lot of exposure during the holidays with an ugly sweater contest. Not only did the staff enjoy dressing up but our social media engagement tripled with new followers.

EMBRACE TECHNOLOGY

In fact, technology should become your new best friend, especially customer relationship databases. It is almost impossible to keep track of all the different visits, events, and opportunities to touch people's lives.

Funeral Decisions, a customer relationship management (CRM) software, is our database for customers. It allows us to record visits, keep contact information and special dates by individual, and to pull lists for various

functions. Last year, I know we were able to do touch over 15,000 people through our visits and events through the help of our CRM software.

We also use SoftTouch, to provide personalized remembrances throughout the year proceeding a death. With the help of PFP, all we need to do is enter a death date and contact information for the person(s) we choose to receive the cards into a web database and we now have an easy way to stay in touch.

In a changing world, it is easy to try and make things difficult and scary. What I have found is that while some customer needs can be complex, the majority of people appreciate sincere actions. By incorporating some simple basic touches, and tools, you can swing the pendulum to create a more personal relationship with your families.

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