

Charting a Course for Success.



THE CUSTOMER CENTERED ARRANGEMENT CONSULTATION.



BY JUSTIN
BAXLEY

I CAN PROBABLY COUNT ON ONE HAND THE TIMES

my wife has asked me to go with her to the spa. For me, relaxation is usually spelled H-A-R-L-E-Y. However, this time, I was really glad I went, not just for the brownie points, but for the professional lesson in connecting with consumers.

To the guys, if you have never had a pedicure, you should try it. To the ladies, you already know. The spa we visited was beautiful – it was modern and spacious, well-decorated, smelled wonderful, well-lit, and had a friendly and seemingly accommodating staff. We were greeted and asked about our preferences for the experience and then provided a menu of options and prices to choose from. As we made our selections, we were offered a choice from several complimentary beers and wines. I opted for wine that day, and was asked, “Chardonnay or Cabernet?” It was upon my first sip that a significant realization hit me – “they do more in this spa to make consumers comfortable in making a \$100 decision than most funeral homes do for a \$10,000 (or more) decision.”

As modern funeral professionals, we must continually be seeking to provide experiences that communicate value and are relevant to those we are serving. The families who walk into our firms, seeking guidance, compassion, and solutions to the problems that death creates are comparing us – not so much to the funeral home down the street, but to the other high-touch transactions and experiences they have had. How do we compare to the modern church with advanced audio/visual, a staff of greeters, and maybe even a coffee bar? How do we compare to the upscale restaurant with a welcoming host, beautiful décor, and trusted guide to make selections? What about entertainment experiences, hotels, etc. How are we looked at compared to these experiences?

“I am proud of the fact that our company takes a very intentional approach to the arrangement conversation.”

I am proud of the fact that our company takes a very intentional approach to the arrangement conversation. Regardless of how much we have to offer families in terms of services, merchandise, facilities, event planning ideas, etc., the arrangement conversation determines whether any of that matters. Yes, in fact, the arrangement conversation is the rudder of our

entire business, and success or failure of our entire enterprise rises and falls by what does or doesn't happen in that interaction. Unfortunately, for most of us, our arrangement style and process is 50% what we were shown by our internship supervisor, 30% lessons of trial and error, and 20% flying by the seat of our pants, hoping we will avoid any objection we are unprepared for. Rarely, do we take a purposeful approach to what happens in the arrangement. I dare say, the whole of funeral service probably spends more time training on what to do with the flower cards or how to park cars than on how to engage with families making important decisions on the most difficult day of their lives. But we can change that – and some funeral homes have and are seeing the difference the right arrangement conversation can make.

Being proficient at knowing your services and merchandise well is a baseline assumption. Being kind and compassionate is also a minimum standard. Where we typically need help in creating the right arrangement conversation is our proficiency in: providing hospitality, interviewing skills, and creative event planning.

PROVIDING HOSPITALITY

Hospitality is a mindset. I don't know about you, but I love having guests in my home, and I want my guests to have the

best experience possible. How much more important is it for us to pay attention to hospitality in the arrangement conversation, when emotions are raw and consumers are ponying up big bucks for our expertise?

First, take a look at your facility through fresh eyes. Come in through the front door every day this week and ask some pointed questions of yourself and your team:

- Is your funeral home comfortable and inviting?
- Does the average person feel like you were expecting them? (here's a tip, signs never really replace human beings when it comes to hospitality – it may be efficient, but it is not near as effective)
- What does a first-time guest see, hear and smell, and do those observations raise or lower their anxiety-level?
- Does the flow of the building make sense to a consumer or does it feel disjointed and cluttered?
- Are bathrooms clean, bright, and providing basic needs of guests in the funeral home (tissues, mouthwash, quality soaps and hand lotions, etc.)?

“How much more important is it for us to pay attention to hospitality in the arrangement conversation, when emotions are raw and consumers are ponying up big bucks for our expertise?”

Consider getting together a small committee of community members who are NOT funeral professionals to see what they feel would be meaningful to families coming to an event in your facility. I would recommend including Hospice nurses and social workers, clergy, and community business leaders.

On the topic of hospitality related to design, specifically in regard to the arrangement conference room, think in terms of creating spaces that are designed for the comfort of the client-family, rather than for the convenience of the arranger. In our company, we have had great success with using a living-room style arrangement conference suite. It takes a little getting used to for arrangers, but is instantly more warm and inviting than a stark business-like environment, especially one that places you on opposite sides of Grandpa's big antique oak desk.

Be sure to meet the physical needs and desires of the family – especially relating to food and beverage. Water and coffee do not get it any more – not when families are having better experiences at the spa down the street, as mentioned earlier. Work within the confines of the law in your state (a few are still well behind the times when it comes to hospitality) but I would recommend keeping an array of healthy snacks that do not pile on too much sugar or fat. Additionally, consider creating a beverage menu, including flavored coffee, bottled water, sodas, and yes... beer and wine. This helps with the family's comfort level and plants a great seed for discussing your catering and reception capabilities later. In many states, no license is required if you are merely serving beer or wine, not selling it. But, why not go ahead and get the license – for beer and wine? There are solid margins to be found for public

events, and the hospitality industry has already set a standard that the public is more than comfortable with.

Before anyone asks, I am not suggesting anything in the realm of impairing judgement. Set a policy that only one or two servings will be offered in the arrangement conference, and consumers will most certainly understand that. If you are in a part of the country which is particularly sensitive to alcohol use, make it a separate menu, and use it when appropriate.

INTERVIEWING SKILLS

The truth is we have to ask the families we serve a lot of questions to be able to serve them well. We are good at asking those questions clearly and compassionately, but the most important questions are not those we need for the death certificate and other paperwork. The most important are those which reveal the life story and memories of the deceased and their family and friends. As a funeral event planner, you are a story-teller. You should ask the discovery questions that reveal precious memories and stories stacked with emotion and importance. Below are several ideas to get you started.

- 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?
- What do you think your Dad was most proud of in his entire life?
- What are the special things you hope friends and family members will remember most about your sister?
- Who were some of your son's closest friends? What were those relationships like? How did they spend their time together?
- When your grandmother found time to relax, what would she do?
- If you had to pick one thing that you cherish most about your wife, what would that be?
- If your grandfather could share something important with those remembering him, what do you think he would say?

And one more ...

- What have you experienced at other funerals that you know you do not want to have take place at this one? You will be amazed at the direction you receive and the landmines you avoid with this question.

“As a funeral event planner, you are a story-teller. You should ask the discovery questions that reveal precious memories and stories stacked with emotion and importance.”

Being an effective interviewer also means being an expert listener. Avoid the tendency to tell your own stories in response to what the family is sharing with you. Instead, use that opportunity to reflect back the story and the associated emotion from that story to confirm that you were listening and understanding what was being shared. Also, work hard to avoid personal distraction. As Funeral Service professionals, we have a lot going on in our day.

It can be hard to listen through the answers to these types of probing questions when we have obituary deadlines, setting up for calling hours, cases to prep, and even home-life responsibilities crowding in on our thoughts. Lastly, respect pauses. The family member you are speaking with is sifting through years of memories and emotions to answer the questions you are asking. Wait, and give them time. A good rule of thumb is to count five seconds in your mind before you attempt to clarify the question.

CREATIVE EVENT PLANNING

The answers to our interview questions become the ingredients to a personal and meaningful remembrance event. Maybe it's a college football theme, or maybe it's bringing the outdoors in for an outdoorsman or someone who loved the beach. Think broadly, provide ideas to the family, and let their responses guide you. Be willing to take the funeral outside the funeral home to a special venue that helps tell the story, or you can bring the place to the funeral home through the use of imagery, props, sounds, scents, and tastes. To measure the effectiveness of your set-up, ask yourself the question "if no words were spoken about the deceased, if there was no obituary, if there was no music would the staging be able to tell that person's life story?"

Do not forget to build experiences into your event. Every funeral is a marketing opportunity, and every funeral guest is deciding if the experiences you create are of value to them. Following are some ideas for bringing active

audience participation to various types of remembrance events. These are all actual experiences funeral directors have created at their funeral homes.

- Ballpark - sell ballpark-style hotdogs during calling hours (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
- Golf - bring in a putting green, and ask that every attendee who would like to, sink a ball with the decedents favorite putter
- Cooking - take a recipe, and where regulations allow, have the result of that 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

"To measure the effectiveness of your set-up, ask yourself the question "if no words were spoken about the deceased, if there was no obituary, if there was no music would the staging be able to tell that person's life story?"

Our profession is not for the faint of heart – long hours, changing consumer preferences, compressing profit margins, misunderstood intentions, not to mention training and mentoring our teams - all contribute to a profession that simply 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 arrangement conference is certainly one of those that needs our continuous improvement and intentional focus. By focusing on hospitality, interviewing skills, and creative event planning, we can ensure that the family's experience is the best possible and that the outcome of the right arrangement conversation is an event that you, and they, can be proud of having provided.

Originally published in *The Director*, April 2017