

Customer Experience



BEGINS BEFORE THEY WALK THROUGH YOUR DOOR.



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FOR DECADES, FUNERAL HOME OWNERS HAVE RELIED ON REPEAT BUSINESS

from families they have served. Loyalty was expected and owners that truly engaged and invested in their communities were rewarded with generations of devotion. However, as families have become more transient and information more readily available from the smart phones in their hands, that loyalty is being tested like never before. This proliferation of easily accessible information, along with a growing number of people unfamiliar with local funeral home brands is making it increasingly difficult to differentiate offerings from the competitor down the street.

Instead of racing to the bottom by competing on price, many businesses are looking to differentiate by delivering a superior customer experience. Businesses that focus on the complete customer experience are more attentive to their customers' needs and are more willing to adjust their services to meet them. This shift ultimately helps you create loyal customers who feel "heard" and valued and can help you compete on customer experience rather than on price.

Although some still view customer experience as a synonym for customer service, those who are delivering the best experiences know customer service is just one piece of the puzzle. Customer experience (CX) is much more comprehensive – it's everything that touches a customer as they interact with a brand. And it begins long before they call or walk through the door.

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There are many different ways CX affects your brand before a potential customer ever reaches out to you – the curb appeal of your facility, the quality of your website, paid advertising, community outreach, attending one of your funeral services, and increasingly your online

reputation. Of all the things on this list, it may seem that online reputation – reviews on Google, Facebook, Yelp, etc. – would be something you couldn't influence, let alone manage. However, by actively engaging in these channels, you'll find that there is no more powerful tool to build trust and brand loyalty than the voice of your customer sharing why they love your brand.

SHOPPING HAS CHANGED

If you think about how people shop for goods and services today, the first thing they do is "Google It". Whether it's a new car or a dry cleaner, shoppers want to know what other people in their community think. What kind of experience did they have? Would they recommend that business to their friends? Would they buy that product again? The number of reviews and stars on search and social media sites can determine if your brand even makes it into a customer's consideration set.

Would you visit a restaurant with no reviews? How about one with 50 reviews but 2 out of 5 stars? This ability to quickly and easily discover the reputation of a business is the first interaction many people may have with a brand and a key element in their customer experience. In fact, the quality of online reviews can make or break a business.

In the 2017 Local Consumer Review Survey from BrightLocal that measures ways consumers seek out and use customer reviews when choosing a local business, they found more people are looking for online reviews than ever before.

- 97% of consumers looked online for local businesses in 2017, with 12% looking for a local business online every day
- 85% of consumers trust online reviews as much as personal recommendations
- Positive reviews make 73% of

consumers trust a local business more

- 49% of consumers need at least a four-star rating before they choose to use a business
- Responding to reviews is more important than ever, with 30% naming this as key when judging local businesses
- 32% of consumers read local reviews on mobile apps in 2017
- Consumers read an average of 7 reviews before trusting a business

They also found that nearly every consumer has searched online for a local business at least once in 2017. Overall, online shoppers are becoming more sophisticated in the way they use reviews and prefer businesses that have a large number of higher scoring reviews.

A CHANNEL YOU CAN MANAGE

Online reviews are not just a one-way street of praise or complaint. It's a communication channel that allows you to not only engage with your customers but also show the broader community you care about both the happy and the dissatisfied ones.

When someone leaves a positive review, it's essential that you follow up with a personal greeting, or a simple thank you for taking the time to share their experience. This simple act accomplishes several things for your brand. First, it shows that you are paying attention and care enough to read each individual review. Second, it will make that customer more likely to come back again knowing they have been heard. Finally, it encourages more customers to leave positive feedback knowing that someone is listening.

Every business has customers that are difficult to please and unfortunately, they tend to be the ones that are quick to post a negative review. There is no way to remove negative comments from review sites – you can only push them down the list with more positive reviews. So, until those positive reviews are posted, the best way to counteract them is to respond. By responding to their post – either addressing their issue or inviting them to contact you offline – you are demonstrating that their opinions are important and you are committed to trying to make things right. Never get into an online argument about who was right or wrong in the situation. Taking the high road by recognizing their concern

and looking for a solution is always the best approach. Who knows, your prompt response might even earn you a review revision if you make the customer happy.

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Responding to a negative comment even has a proven positive impact. A recent study published in The Harvard Business Review titled, *Replying to Customer Reviews Results in Better Ratings*, by Davide Proserpio and Girgo Zervas, found that improved ratings can be directly linked to responses to negative online reviews. They also found similar ratings improvement when responding to positive reviews as well.

Actively monitoring and responding to every comment – positive or negative – shows a commitment to your customers' experiences – something non-customers notice and value. Even if you don't have a perfect 5-star rating, the fact that you are actively trying to solve issues as they arise can demonstrate greater credibility than a perfect score. In fact, too many five-star ratings can raise the suspicion of reviews being fake – something that can destroy a brand's reputation.

Unfortunately, funeral home customers do not naturally post reviews, so it can be a struggle to get the positive ones you want. You may have a wall full of thank-you cards praising the service you provided, but not a single online review.

So, what's the best way to get reviews? There's no better way to ask for, and get, reviews than to do it in person. The in-person request can be incredibly effective, particularly when it's part of your aftercare conversations. And there's no one better positioned to ask for the review than the funeral director who was with the family every step of the way.

The simple act of asking for reviews starts to shift the power back into your hands. Asking for reviews doesn't require any special tools or technology, just a commitment to making it part of your aftercare practices.

A LEARNING OPPORTUNITY

Monitoring your online reputation is more than just reading reviews and posting responses. Instead of looking at reviews as an end point, it's more useful to look at them as a starting point. Each one

offers you an opportunity to measure and improve your business either through reinforcing positive experiences or changing behaviors and processes.

If there's a positive review about someone on your staff going the extra mile to make a family's experience extra special, make sure your team member is recognized publicly and see if what they did can be extended to all your families. If there's a negative review about how you handled a service, work with your staff to identify the issue and adjust your procedures accordingly. You don't have to bend over backwards to make everyone happy, but you should actively listen to your customers' comments and concerns.

“It's better to get some negative feedback that alerts you to issues that need to be fixed than to get no feedback and assume everything is fine.”

Although online reputation is only one part of crafting a differentiating CX, it's one that is becoming more powerful everyday. And unlike many other CX elements, it's one that only takes a commitment of time, not money. As your customers put more faith in the experiences of their local community, this collective voice of the customer is something that should not be ignored.

If one of your business objective is to build a strong network of local advocates for your brand, you must focus on the full customer experience – not just customer service. By actively engaging with your community in online reviews you begin to sow the seeds of trust and brand loyalty long before they walk through your door.

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