

How Relationship Marketing Saved My Business.



**BY DANNY
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IN 2004, I BECAME THE PROUD OWNER OF A ONCE THRIVING FUNERAL HOME

which had diminished to serving just 61 families. Fourteen years later, our funeral home now serves more than 300 families a year from one facility - a 35% per year average growth rate! How did we achieve that sort of comeback? Well, I am glad you asked.

You may not realize it, but there are two words that can get you a seat in any restaurant in America, without a reservation, on any given day. These same two words, when used in the proper context, attitude, and judgement, can begin a relationship, find the answer to a problem, resolve a conflict, or even re-grow a business. These two words became the hallmark of my turnaround strategy and continues to help my business thrive today.

In 1960, Jack Pierce purchased the former Ragland Funeral Home located in Kernersville, North Carolina. He would later sell the Pierce Funeral Home in 1982 to the Lineberry Group of Greensboro,

NC. While Jack continued to manage the location, the Lineberry Group chose to sell their interests to the Loewen Group. Jack retired shortly after the time of sale in 1996, and for the next eight years, the changes in ownership and lack of consistent leadership had an adverse effect on the business and the perception of the firm within the community. The business was failing...and it was dramatic.

I asked Jack, who I had known through the industry and the Lineberry Group where I worked for over 25 years, to help me repurchase the business and restore what was once a trusted brand name in the community. We were able to do so December 1, 2004. That year the funeral home had reached its low point of 61 services. There was a gaping market share disparity between the families entrusting their loved ones to the now Pierce-Jefferson Funeral & Cremation Service compared to the competition.

And as if that was not enough of an uphill

challenge, my trusted partner in the endeavor, Jack Pierce, died. His health was failing, and he died less than a year after the purchase, October 30, 2005.

Where would you start? What do you do when you are now the owner of a once thriving business that was failing and your principle source of information, guidance, and connection to the legacy of the firm is no longer available? I was new to the community, lived by myself in the funeral home, had few friends in town, and had very little monetary resources to invest in traditional marketing channels. I knew I could not make this business thrive on my own, so I began to use those two words in earnest!

At 61 calls I clearly had some time on my hands. Instead of sitting at the funeral home, hoping the phone would ring, I concocted a simple plan to meet and greet as many people as possible every day. I had a goal to introduce myself to three new people a day. If I met more,

it would be a bonus. I literally immersed myself in the community. I stopped at the Chamber of Commerce, became involved in the Lions Club, and joined a local church of which I am still a member. I even met my wife at my church on the very first Sunday I attended.

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Meeting new people every day provided numerous opportunities to share my funeral home's vision and philosophy. I began to build a network of people around me. I was careful not to make it all about me. Most people automatically like people who are interested in THEM. I would find that people liked to talk about their philosophy as well. I would imagine them wearing a sign around

their neck that said "know me and make me feel important." We would become friends, and they would tell their friends about me and my funeral home. Relationships in the community are the growth and sustainability catalyst for any funeral home whether new or old, because recommendations always matter more than shallow paid referrals. It is not only about securing our market share, it is also connecting to the people in the community we need as partners and mentors to help us operate a successful business. These are leaders and providers who can help us solve for real day to day challenges like – who can paint my building? who can do my taxes? who can I trust to help with business decisions? I remember sitting

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in the diner and no one knowing who I was, what I cared about, what I did for a living, or my religion. Now I cannot go to any restaurant in town without seeing friends, waving at others, patting children on the head, and basically feeling very

warm about and connected within my community. Each new interaction led to more interactions and these relationships are the cornerstone of the success of Pierce-Jefferson Funeral Home.

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Last year we served almost 300 families, we have the only crematory in our town, operate a full-service florist, a monument service, and have a multi-purpose event center onsite. Our entire staff is involved in the community, and they participate in a large number of events annually. We are proud of the connections we make, and each team member has their own personal goals to meet a certain number of people every day. Our entire team strives to be community oriented. Every day we check upcoming events in our community and discuss who is interested in a particular event and the funeral home assists with making sure they have the time and monetary resources enough to not only attend, but to become involved. Each team member has their

own personal goals of how many people to meet, but we do support each other in being consistent in meeting new people every day!

Oh, I guess I need to reveal those two words. Those two words got a friend of mine a seat in the original Ryman Auditorium in Nashville to a Vince Gill/ Amy Grant show that had been sold out for weeks. It got another friend of mine a room in a Nashville Downtown Hotel that had been overbooked for three days. The two words are simply "help me". This is my situation, are you able to "help me". We all need assistance from time to time, and we may struggle finding all of the help we need through common and convenient sources such as family, friends, or even the internet. Humble yourself, adjust your attitude, don't judge people, and simply ask for help. Believe it or not, people want to help and when you give them an open door to do so, they usually walk through it. You will be amazed at how many doors will open, friends you will make, and families willing to trust you to care for their needs.

Danny Jefferson is a Licensed Funeral Director and Embalmer. His efforts in the community have led to local recognition through the Duke Energy Business Award and numerous other honors. Among his most proud accomplishments is being selected as "Funeral Director of the Year 2017" by The American Funeral Director Magazine. Danny continues to serve the people of Kernersville, NC and the surrounding area by setting the standard for service in his community both in his business and as a citizen.