



Educating Families on Burial Vaults Just Got Easier

In the mid-1970s, a well-known clothier by the name of Sy Syms proclaimed in a commercial that “an educated consumer is our best customer,” a phrase he astutely trademarked because it could well be applied to many good businesses, including the funeral services industry. The better educated families are, the better decisions they make and the more satisfied they are with the services. The role of the funeral professional, among other things, is to provide guidance — or to put it another way, education.

Wilbert Funeral Services, Inc., the industry leader in burial vaults and related products, is taking a lead role today in finding new ways to help funeral professionals educate families on burial vaults. In the following interview, Dennis Welzenbach, President of Wilbert Funeral Services, explains these initiatives, why they are important and their impact on both funeral professionals and families.



Dennis Welzenbach

Q: Why do you think families need to be better educated on burial vaults?

A: Wilbert recently commissioned an outside research firm to conduct a study on consumer awareness of burial vaults, and we found a significant shortfall in knowledge. Only 42 percent of families in the United States and Canada know that an outer burial container is generally required — and even among those who were aware of this, most did not understand the differences in outer burial containers and various types of burial vaults.

Q: Isn't this consistent with the fact that many consumers don't think about funeral arrangements until they need to?

A: Definitely. This study validated what we suspected — but more importantly, it underscored the necessity for good, ob-

jective, comprehensive information for families when they are faced with the need.

Q: Don't funeral directors already have ways to educate families about burial vaults?

A: Of course, and Wilbert has always been instrumental in providing tools to support funeral directors such as literature, posters, graphics and miniature vault units for selection rooms. However, this study also revealed an interesting statistic that hinted at a pervasive struggle that funeral professionals may have in educating families: 91 percent of funeral professionals surveyed would choose a lined concrete vault for themselves, yet only 60 percent of families would choose a lined vault. Why aren't these numbers closer? Certainly there are reasons such as real or perceived economics, but this is a pretty wide gap. We feel part of the reason is defi-

cient education — families are unaware of their options or don't perceive the value to the same degree as the majority of funeral professionals.

Q: Are you saying that funeral professionals are not doing their job?

A: No, I'm saying that funeral professionals have so much to do and not enough time to do it, plus they are dealing with families who are mentally and emotionally wrought. It is often very difficult to break through and get their attention, particularly towards the end of the arrangement conference — which is typically when burial vaults are discussed. Our new educational tools can help do this in a way that existing tools cannot.

Q: What are these new educational tools?

A: The first is a technology that is “tried and true” and yet is new in the environment of a selection room: video. Video has a way of engaging the family, educating them and opening up their minds to options that can enhance the service and tribute for their loved one. The videos not only educate in an objective manner but also provide ideas for their consideration, such as personalization and memorialization. In an era of YouTube and video sharing, today's consumers are receptive to video, more so perhaps than they are receptive to a verbal presentation.

Q: Have funeral professionals embraced these videos?

A: Wholeheartedly! These videos educate families and empower them to make their own choices without feeling pressured — the funeral professional is seen as a counselor, not a salesperson. The expertise of the funeral professional then becomes a value-add, which is greatly appreciated by the family. And these videos are making a difference in the choices families make — more personalization, for example, which in turn leads to more memorable services and greater satisfaction.

Q: We keep talking about videos — there's more than one?

A: We have two that can be played in the selection room on a special monitor. One video explains why an outer burial container is required and how a lined burial vault compares to a standard gravebox. The second video outlines the differences among Wilbert burial vaults.

Q: Can you tell me more about the special monitor used to play these videos?

A: Wilbert offers an LCD unit called Display Animation that displays a silent slideshow until a family — or the funeral professional — activates either video. The beauty of the slideshow is that it draws the family's attention while answering some common questions regarding vaults. This is a remarkably simple concept with remarkable impact.

Q: What if a family wants to learn about vaults before the arrangement conference...or for preneed?

A: These videos can also be placed on the funeral home Web site. In fact, another technology that we are utilizing — and making available to funeral professionals — is the Quick Response, or QR code. We offer the funeral professional QR codes, which can be given to families who can then access and view these videos on mobile devices. An increasing number of today's consumers have smartphones and we are seeing huge percentages of the online viewing of these videos being done on smartphones.

Q: Do you envision expanding on your video offerings?

A: We already have. We have an excellent video called *The Value of a Committal Service*, which is ideal for families to watch on the funeral home's Web site prior to coming in for the arrangement conference. This explains the merits and rewards of a committal service as well as providing ideas. This is an entirely informational video with no Wilbert-specific products discussed at all.

Q: Where can one go for more information?

A: We have set up a special Web site for funeral professionals to view and then download or link to the videos: www.wilbert.com/FPvideos

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

A: I just can't emphasize enough the importance of educating families. There are numerous articles about today's society devaluing funerals and what we as an industry need to do to address that. The answer, I believe, is better education. Wilbert will continue to focus on facilitating better education and seek additional ways to support the funeral professional in this mutual goal. *MM*