

by **Wayne Stellmach**

ICCFA Magazine author spotlight



WStellmach
@Wilbert.com

► Stellmach is director of marketing for Wilbert Funeral Services Inc., Broadview, Illinois. He has been with Wilbert since 2001 and has 38 years of marketing, sales and management experience in manufacturing,

distribution, professional services and trade association work.

► He also provides marketing support for other organizations under The Wilbert Group, including Pierce Chemical, Pierce Colleges and Wilbert Memorials.

► He serves on the boards of the International Memorialization Supply Association (IMSA) and the Funeral and Memorial Information Council (FAMIC) and is a frequent contributor of articles for funeral service publications.

► **Wilbert Funeral Services Inc.** is the largest provider of burial vaults in North America and one of the top providers of cremation products.

www.wilbert.com

VAULTS

Amazing personalization is available on today's burial vaults, and families love it—but they need to know it's available. Funeral professionals who educate families about options are doing the right thing for families as well as the funeral profession.



Family members write their own tributes on a highly personalized vault.

Appreciating and sharing the 'wow' factor of burial vaults

The emotions experienced by family members throughout the process of making and carrying out funeral and cemetery arrangements are naturally draining. Yet while sadness and even fear of the future and worry about how they will cope without their departed loved one may dominate, there can be room for moments of comfort and even joy.

The bereaved can derive comfort from visiting with friends and family and sharing stories about how much the person meant to them. Spirits can be lifted as they share fond memories and tales of happy times, funny incidents or inspiring things their loved one did. Tender connections with their loved one are often demonstrated through personal items on display, photographs, slideshows or videos.

None of this is news to the funeral professional. However, what may be surprising even to veteran funeral professionals is how powerfully the burial vault can impact families. Yes, that mundane, practical burial vault can actually provide the big "wow" factor at the committal service, and even beyond.

"His mom and dad lost it when they saw the vault cover with logos of his favorite sports teams and everyone began taking pictures of the vault cover. Before we even left the graveside, it was posted all over Facebook."

—Tara Havard, *Speaks Family Legacy Chapels, Independence, Missouri*

Reactions such as this are the norm rather than the exception when family and friends see a personalized burial vault carapace. It truly does often become the "wow" factor that people gather around and later remember about the committal service.

Personalization has been offered on burial vaults for decades, but recently seems to be gaining traction. Part of the reason is certainly more awareness of its availability among funeral professionals, who then educate families on options.

However, more of a mega-trend may underlie this trend. Consumers are demanding better experiences and better experiences are often those that recognize individuality and deliver customized products and services. Consumers want personalized content in their digital news, and they disdain marketers and

companies who insist on pushing cookie-cutter products.

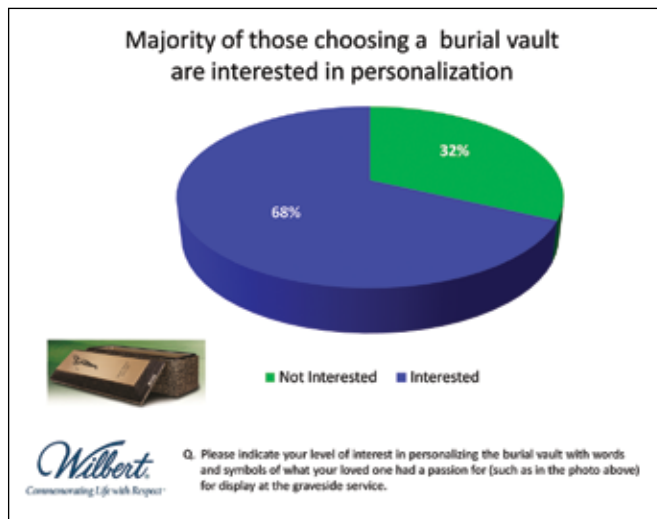
Why would this be any different when it comes time for them to make decisions on funeral products or services? One could even argue that a funeral is a particularly singular event that is—or should be—entirely built around the individual. Perhaps all along funerals should have been planned with “personalization on steroids” in mind, but funeral practitioners have instead built constructs around how a funeral “should be done.”

In their “2017 Marketing Trends” report, Forbes identifies personalization as a strategy that smart marketers will employ to reach and best serve customers. The Forbes report says that “personalization is a huge win for brands looking to earn the attention of consumers,” and if delivered well, earn their loyalty.

Why wouldn’t this pertain just as powerfully to delivering meaningful, personalized funeral services and products? Customization of the burial vault—and of other funeral merchandise, for that matter—taps into this desire for individualization, and in so doing helps create a more meaningful experience that will be remembered by all who attend.

In the long run, the family is much more satisfied with their experience, more inclined to feel that they received value, and more likely to share with others their positive experience with the funeral services provider.

“The man was an avid motorcyclist and built motorcycles with his son. We put on the carapace an image of a motorcycle riding off into the sunset. When the family came to the cemetery for the burial, they just could not believe that we had done that for them and felt that it was such a special gift. We could not even begin the service until everyone had a chance to see the vault and compose themselves. They had one complaint though. The image on the vault



An independent study commissioned by Wilbert found that a majority of people choosing a burial vault are interested in personalization.

cover was looking at the motorcycle from behind so that you could see the speedometer, and they said the speed wasn't high enough.”

—Valery Bayliff Fultz, Bayliff & Son Funeral Home, Cridersville, Ohio

These types of reports about how much the burial vault can mean to families when it is personalized for their loved one are abundant. And when families are made aware that the burial vault can be personalized, a great majority say they would choose personalization, according to an independent study commissioned by Wilbert Funeral Services Inc.

However, the first order of business is to make families aware that they can have a graveside committal service, or,

for cremation families who do not choose burial, an inurnment service near the columbarium. There’s a good chance that funeral professionals who tell families about the option of a committal service have heard reactions such as, “I didn’t know you could do that.”

When you consider the average age of people making funeral arrangements and the likelihood that they have attended a number of funerals, it’s a shame that it comes as such a surprise to them.

In its 2015 study of “American Attitudes toward Ritualization and Memorialization,” the Funeral and Memorial Information Council (FAMIC) found that 82 percent of respondents age 40 and older felt

that a service is helpful in paying tribute to or commemorating the life of their loved one. Seventy-eight percent said that that it helped them remember the individual and say good-bye.

While this study did not differentiate graveside or inurnment committal services from services held elsewhere, the findings nonetheless tell us that families want memorialization services, and telling them about the availability of this final service would likely be appreciated.

One other finding from the FAMIC study is worth noting as it pertains to cremation. Though cremation is often viewed as a choice driven by cost concerns and therefore some funeral professionals, with that preconception in mind, fail to suggest services, 86 percent of respondents age 40 and older said they would opt to have a ceremony if their loved one were cremated.

At the same time, 65 percent report that funeral homes or funeral directors are top sources of information on arrangements. Opportunity knocks. Let families know what can be done. Give them some ideas

“We never knew we could do this. We took pictures of the vault, we participated, we cried, we



A highly personalized graveside service.

VAULTS

laughed. We're so grateful you told us."
—a family served by Mel Wideman,
LaGrone Funeral Chapel, Roswell,
New Mexico

Find out if the family prefers a religious committal service or something more secular, focusing on celebrating the loved one's life, hobbies, interests and accomplishments. When a family says their father "didn't want to have a funeral or be mourned," ask if he would have liked to be remembered in a celebration of who he was and what he meant to people.

Everyone wants to distinguish themselves from others somehow. Fierce individualism characterizes baby boomers, those born between 1946 and 1964, and that translates into wanting funeral experiences to feel personal.

Individualism is reflected in the service and in personalization of products. Indeed, in today's world of empowered consumers, the expectation is that products can be customized or personalized, and many are willing to pay a premium to get it done.

That said, when it comes to the burial vault or urn vault, personalization is often included on certain units at no charge or at a very nominal cost.

Options can include special exterior paint colors, beautiful stock images placed on the carapace of nature, hobbies or interests, or a collage of photos on the cover showing the loved one with family and friends or pursuing favorite interests.

"Personalizing the vault with pictures makes a very big impression on families. We sometimes just do this as a surprise to the family, and the response is just overwhelming. Personalization has been one of our biggest successes as a funeral home. When that family walks away from our funeral home, we want to say, without a doubt, that we have exceeded their expectations. Even when they came in not really knowing what those expectations were, they are going to know, "Wow, we got more than we expected."

—Kenneth Howe & Matt Shannon,
Holman-Howe Funeral Home, Lebanon,
Missouri

Families have many choices, but the first choice lies with the funeral professional, who must choose to tell them about all of their options, including the option to hold a service at the cemetery and to personalize the burial vault. □