

A photograph of a dirt road winding through a field at sunset. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a bright, golden glow that illuminates the sky and the road. The road curves to the right and then back to the left, disappearing into the distance. The field is lush and green, and the overall atmosphere is peaceful and contemplative.

Creating an Atmosphere of Choice for Cremation Families

by Michael Devaney

When it comes to the ever changing landscape of memorialization practices, we as funeral professionals all know that cremation is at the forefront of that change. It is common knowledge that cremation has grown tremendously in the past several years (doubling in the last fifteen years) and will continue to grow for the foreseeable future.

According to CANA, by 2019 two out of four Americans will choose cremation for their loved ones, as well as three out of four Canadians. What is this telling us? **Cremation is becoming the new tradition.** While we can sit back and lament that fact, the reality is we need to use every tool possible to continue our tradition of serving families when they call on us. The notion of equating cremation with “less” service must be eliminated from our mindset.

Although the method of final disposition may change, that does not mean the needs and desires of families to give meaning and respect to their loved ones suddenly has shifted to a strict utilitarian style without service, personalization or any form of remembrance. In fact the opposite is the real truth. Cremation actually allows for a wider range of memorial options. Families still want ritual to remember their loved ones. It may not be the “traditional” ritual we have been accustomed to for several generations. But unless we embrace the paradigm shift we will never fully allow the family to express what it is they really want. We will continue to only worry about lost revenue in service and products because we have convinced ourselves cremation families only want the “quickest, cheapest and least” service we can offer.

There will always be that fractionally small segment of people who truly do not desire anything other than walking in our door, giving the requisite information,

signing papers and walking out without any thought other than “disposing” of the person that died. It is our responsibility as funeral professionals in the 21st century to realize there is a much larger majority of people who embrace the idea of commemoration for their loved ones. It is our obligation to offer them the guidance, expertise and respect they deserve.

The question becomes how best we can accomplish the task of providing value and meaning to families. They may use the words, “we just want a cremation,” but it is up to us to provide the environment for them to define what it is they really want. Truth be told, most the time they don’t know what they want until given options. We must be inquirers, not order takers. We must first listen and then provide choices in service, product and personalization based on our open-ended conversation with the family about the life of their loved one.

Here are a few basic practices we should follow for all families desiring cremation:

1. CREMATION MERCHANDISING DOES NOT START WHEN THE FAMILY CALLS ON YOU

Make sure you speak to the cremation customer in everything you do. Your facility name (do you include “Cremation Services” in your name), staff communication, website and marketing messages should all embrace the cremation family as a valued customer. Never make them feel less important.

There are some funeral professionals who think showing only caskets on their website, and not cremation products, will somehow steer families to choose burial over cremation. This is a flawed assumption. It is like leading a family through a casket selection room only to begrudgingly pull back a curtain in the corner to show a few urns on shelves. It only alienates the discerning

cremation customer to bypass that funeral home in favor of one that embraces the cremation family.

Do you show more than just static photos of your cremation products? With improved technology it is possible to offer your complete cremation catalog in a digital “flipbook” format on your website. This gives families time to page through your cremation catalog without the pressure of needing to make an immediate buying decision. This also puts them in the frame of mind that various retail purchase options are available including urns, mementos, jewelry and other keepsake items.



2. FAMILIARIZE FAMILIES WITH YOUR FACILITIES

Introduce the family to your staff and show them your facility (especially if you have a crematory.) This will help them see what they will be paying for as well as imagining possibilities for service options. Focus on how a family will view your facility as a cremation oriented memorial center meeting their specific and unique needs.

Many funeral homes are now adapting traditional visitation rooms which traditionally feature rows of folding chairs facing a curtained wall with torchiere lamps, to a more modern center-focused casual environment with living room style furniture facing inward toward a memorial tribute area.

This area can be specifically designed to feature personal artifacts along with photo and video display. Encourage the family to display an urn holding their loved one’s cremated remains as the focal point of the memorial area. Utilize new cremation products like the Wilbert ClearVault™ which provides the flexibility of prominently displaying the urn during a visitation and

memorial service in an attractive acrylic case, while still meeting the strict protective needs of an urn vault for burial. If the family has selected an engraveable urn make sure to guide them as to the possibilities of creating an even more personalized engraved tribute.



3. CONSIDER HOLDING A “CREMATION OPEN HOUSE”

Provide an opportunity to educate the public BEFORE the need arises. What better way to frame the experience of cremation as more than a method of final disposition, but rather an expression of life events commemorated in a personalized ritual.

ANDOVER LOT MARKERS

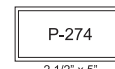
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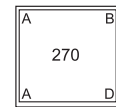
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4. MAKE THE ARRANGEMENT CONFERENCE AN OPPORTUNITY TO SERVE

If a family states, “We just want a cremation”, create an atmosphere of communication. Ask open-ended questions. “Have you thought about what type of cremation service you would prefer?” If their answer is “direct cremation”, ask them “Can you help me understand what you mean by a direct cremation?” They may think this is the only option. Never assume they know all service options available to them.

Don’t just be vital statistics collectors. Avoid asking only yes or no questions. Learn as much as you can about their loved one. It is very difficult to make suggestions or offer valuable assistance in planning a customized service experience when you do not know anything about the deceased or their family.

Even if you are meeting with a family that has expressed a strong desire for a cremation without viewing or services, it is important to collect their story. Take time to listen to what they feel is important about the life of their loved one. Use phrases like, “I unfortunately did not have the privilege of knowing your mother, so I would like to spend a little bit of time getting to know her better through you...this will help me to make suggestions as we proceed.”

Often it is this time with a family that helps them to understand and see the need for a specific type of a personalized cremation product, ceremony, or some other sort of remembrance service. You never know how this may help them focus in on what was truly meaningful about their loved one

Families look to you as the expert. Use this time not only to listen, but to make suggestions based on their insights about their loved one. Providing answers does not mean telling families “what they want,” but rather helping them understand the many options that are available and suggesting ways in which they may fulfill their needs.

The last thing you ever want to hear from a family is, “I never thought of that and the funeral director did not mention it.”

Cremation Service Package

Graveside



Commemoration Graveside Service

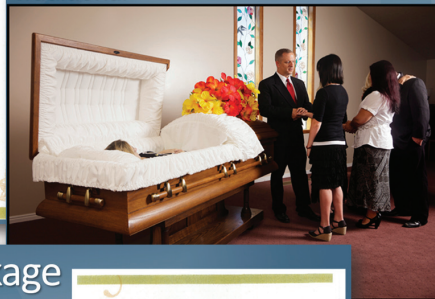
This complete package includes:

- Professional services of funeral director and staff
- Local transportation of the deceased
- Preparation and care of the deceased
- Cremation container to be placed in family vault
- Service as requested by family
- Use of vault, no urn and no casket
- Use of urn
- Cremation of the deceased
- When Venues Memory Care is an option
- Commemorative Graveside Service
- Memorial service (optional)

Complete Package Price: \$1,400

Cremation Service Package

Traditional



Ceremonial Tribute Service

This complete package includes:

- Professional services of funeral director and staff
- Local transportation of the deceased
- Preparation and care of the deceased
- Heated casket for service
- Selection of casket (page 11)
- Printed memorial package
- Selection of urn (page 11)
- Use of vault
- Cremation of the deceased
- When Venues Memory Care is an option
- Commemorative Graveside Service at a later date (see page 6)
- Temporary vault (page 11)

Complete Package Price: \$1,100

Cremation Service Package

Memorial



Remembrance Service

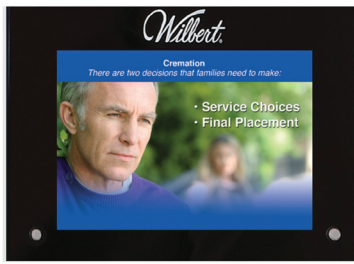
This complete package includes:

- Professional services of funeral director and staff
- Local transportation of the deceased
- Preparation and care of the deceased
- Cremation container to be placed in family vault (page 11)
- Selection of casket (page 11)
- Printed memorial package
- Selection of urn (page 11)
- Use of vault
- Memorial service (page 11)
- Cremation of the deceased
- Commemorative Graveside Service at a later date (see page 6)
- Temporary vault (page 11)

Complete Package Price: \$1,400

5. USE AUDIO-VISUAL TOOLS

It is always helpful to use short, informational videos during the arrangement conference to help families understand available service options, as well as decisions regarding



final placement of cremains. Having these videos on your website can also be extremely helpful for families to view BEFORE the time of need. They will have more confidence in knowing what to expect from your funeral home.

6. PRESENT YOUR CREMATION SERVICES IN A PERSONALIZED FORMAT

Once the family knows the type of service they want, it is helpful to offer them a group of cremation service packages in a customized printed booklet that has simple, easy-to-understand bullet points and visual photo references that help communicate different types of services. This should be separate from the lengthy worded General Price List.

7. MAKE SURE YOU HAVE A FULL LINE OF CREMATION PRODUCTS DISPLAYED IN AN ATTRACTIVE SETTING, YET GEARED TOWARD THE RETAIL SELLING ENVIRONMENT

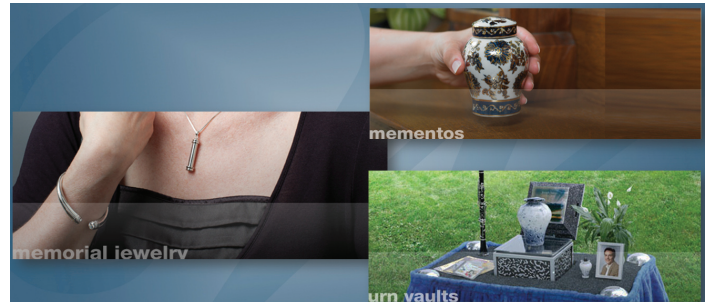
Product merchandising theory can take up an entire article or classroom course. Suffice it to say -cremation products are not there just to look nice on your display. They are there to SELL. "If you don't have the right display, don't expect to sell the products." Make sure you are offering variety in color, material, function, eye appeal and price in an attractive, well-lit retail display environment.

Don't just display urns on a wall, but show the relationship of how mementos, jewelry, keepsakes, urn vaults and other accessories can add value to the overall purchase decision. Do not assume families know these are available if you don't feature them.

Always look for ways to do more for your cremation families. You are not promoting cremation per se, but rather promoting service and value. Cremation will be at your doorstep no matter what you do. So why not be proactive and add value in everything you do? Family

preferences may have changed, but your business model of service should not.

Today's funeral professional will need to be alert to on-going changes in family preferences toward memorialization.



We must also be flexible enough to offer multiple options in products and services while maintaining our commitment to serve the family with respect and dignity. It is only then that we will continue to be successful business enterprises. If not, families will not see the value you bring. They will quickly find other alternatives, as loyalty to your business (just because you may have been around the longest) is waning in today's transitory, internet world. Or worse, they could become part of that small minority that only view funeral professionals as a conduit for body disposal.

Michael Devaney is a nationally recognized funeral industry professional with over 30 years of experience in funeral home management, training and funeral supply management. His broad-based career includes corporate executive positions, trade association leadership and management of a leading independent funeral and cemetery operation. Expertise comprises developing and implementing training programs for a national chain of funeral homes, overseeing direction of an international trade association as board president, developing national supply accounts and managing cremation and casket merchandising strategy for a leading provider of funeral related products and services in North America.

