

Cremation

By Michael Devaney

Responding to 'We Just Want a Cremation'



“We just want a cremation” is certainly a statement that every funeral professional has heard. How you respond is critically important – for the families you serve as well as your business. By jumping right into your direct cremation-only pricing, you are shortchanging both.

First, let’s acknowledge that cremation is at the forefront of a changing landscape of memorialization practices. The cremation rate has doubled over the last 15 years, and projections are for that growth to continue. According to the Cremation Association of North America, by 2020 the cremation rate in the United States will climb to 54.3 percent, while in Canada, it will be 74.2 percent. Clearly, cremation is becoming the new tradition, so it behooves us to not only accept that fact but to also focus on the best way to help cremation families. Families still need guidance when they call on us. Therefore, the notion of equating cremation with less service must be eliminated from our mindset.

We need to remind ourselves that cremation is simply a method of final disposition. Most families still want to give meaning and respect to their loved ones. If you don’t provide a range of memorial options and services for them to consider, they will likely still do something ... only somewhere else.

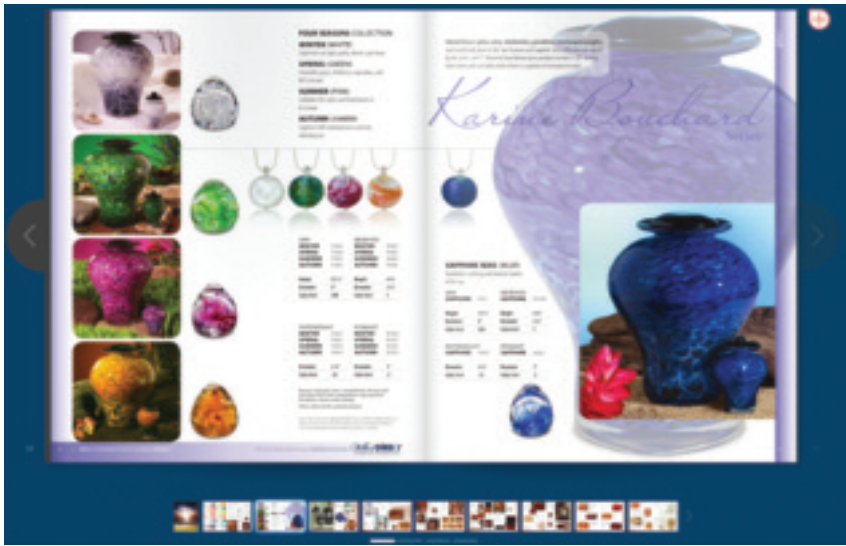
Families still want ritual to remember their loved ones. It may not be the “traditional” ritual we have been accustomed to for generations. But it also isn’t strictly utilitarian without service, personalization or any form of remembrance. While there are certainly some families who truly do not desire anything other than basic disposition, the majority of families embrace the idea of commemo-

ration for their loved ones. It is our obligation as funeral professionals to offer them the guidance, expertise and respect they deserve.

So how do we answer a family’s opening statement, “We just want a cremation?”

Simply provide the environment for them to define what it is they really want. Be an inquirer, not an order-taker by listening and having an open-ended conversation about the life of their loved one. Then provide choices in services, products and personalization based upon that.

Here are seven basic practices we should follow for all families desiring cremation ... you may find them to be quite similar to those you follow for burial families:



Online tools allow families to browse merchandise on their own time.

1. Cremation merchandising starts long before the family calls you.

Your cremation merchandising and overall messaging must be incorporated in everything you do – even in your business or facility name, which should include “cremation” or “cremation services.” Be sure that every one of your staff is adept at discussing cremation and offering your array of cremation services and products. All of your advertising and marketing messages should include references to your ability to serve cremation families as well as burial families.

Take a critical look at your website, the first point of research for most people these days, to make sure it embraces and speaks to cremation families. Consider including educational information on cremation such as videos to help families understand cremation products, services and final placement options. Make your website as interactive as possible by incorporating digital flipbooks of your cremation products instead of simply showing static photos. In addition to better engaging families, this type of presentation 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. Showcase your cremation facilities.

When you meet with cremation families, be sure to walk them through your facilities where they can see what you have to offer and gain an appreciation for the attention you place on cremation. If you have a crematory, you can illustrate how you provide a dignified environment that respects their loved one every step of the way.

Consider updating visitation

rooms for cremation services to more open, casual areas with living room-style furniture. Some funeral homes have even gone away from the chairs-facing-a-wall setup to the memorial tribute area in the center of the room. In addition to the display of the urn, this area can feature personal objects along with photos and video depicting and celebrating the life of their loved one. Utilize products that can complement the display of the urn such as the Wilbert ClearVault, which provides a clear acrylic case that both highlights the quiet beauty of the urn, and later protects the urn when buried. Engraving or other features of the urn are highlighted and make the commemoration truly personal and special. All of these components work together to keep the focal point on their loved one, yet in a less formal environment.

Don't forget to introduce families to your staff as you are showing them around. From staff receptiveness to facility design, focus on how a family will view your facility as a cremation-oriented memorial center meeting their specific needs.

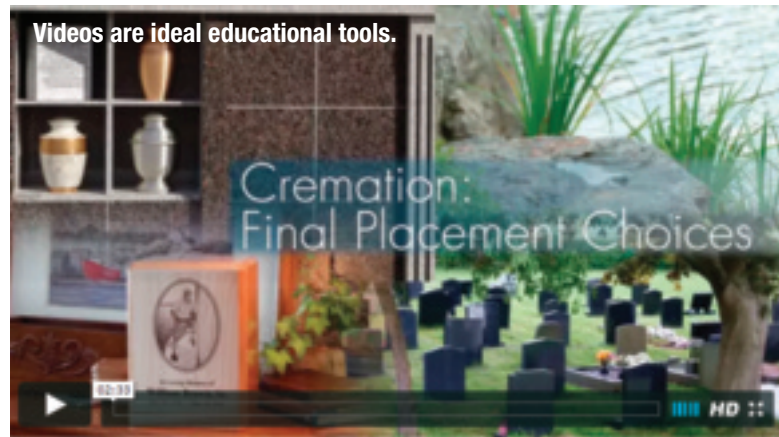


A memory table creates a beautiful commemoration experience.
(All photos courtesy of Wilbert Funeral Services)

3. Remember the basics of an effective arrangement conference.

As basic as it may seem, remember that good communication with families transcends the choice of burial or cremation. Effective communication starts with listening to the family, asking open-ended questions and finding out what made their loved one special. Even if they state “we just want a direct cremation” be sure to ask them to help you understand what exactly they mean by that. Ask them if they have thought about the type of cremation service that they would like to have for their loved one. Don’t just tell families what you think they want, but instead help them understand the many options that are available. Never assume they know all service options available to them. Suggest various ways that they can commemorate and celebrate their loved one based on the insights they provide about their loved one and what made him or her special.

Again, this approach is really the same as a good arrangements conference for burial. Simply collecting the vital statistics and checking off items does not make a good impression on any family. Learn as much as you can about their



loved one. Collect their story. Take the time to listen. Then offer your expertise and assistance in helping them create a service experience that will be personal and meaningful. It is often this focused time with a family that opens a flow of ideas on what they can do and what types of personalized cremation products and services would best accommodate them.

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.”

4. Use engaging presentation tools.

As mentioned earlier, educational videos on cremation should be placed on your website to help those who

are doing general research or are at the start of arrangements. They will have more confidence in your funeral home, and you will be positioned as an expert in cremation services. However, these same videos should be used during the arrangement conference to help families understand service options, product choices, and decisions regarding the final placement of their loved one’s cremated remains. Video engages and connects with nearly all people and ages and is widely accepted as a way to learn about things (witness the tremendous use of YouTube). Good video also presents things in a calm, objective manner. Remember, making funeral arrangements is a new and unnerving experience for most people.

Cremation Service Package Graveside

Cremation Service Package Traditional

Cremation Service Package Memorial

Cremation Service Package Commemorative Graveside Service

Cremation Service Package Ceremonial Tribute Service

Remembrance Service

Cremation service packages make the choice easier for families.

Printed material should also be designed with simple bullets and supporting visuals that can convey the many cremation options in an easy-to-understand fashion. Consider a full-color printed piece that offers cremation service packages to make the choice easier for families. Don't simply rely on the dry and lengthy-worded General Price List – that pulls you back into the perception of an order-taker versus a funeral director.

5. Learn a lesson from retailers.

Let's be honest – cremation products in your display area are there to sell. Just like a good retailer, you need to have a good display if you expect to sell products. While making sure not to overwhelm families with too many product choices, offer some variety in color, material, function, eye appeal and price. Show samples of personalized, engraved products to give families ideas on what they might do.

Make sure your display is well-lit, uncluttered, and easily accessible so that they can both see and touch products. This can elicit feelings of emotion that will help guide their choices. Don't just display urns on a wall, but design your display room in a way that shows the relationship of mementos, jewelry, keepsakes, urn vaults and other accessories that add value to the family. You cannot assume families know these are available if you don't feature them.



6. Have a cremation open house.

Be proactive by inviting the community into your facility in the nonpressure environment of an open house. Provide some food and drinks, have videos playing, and showcase everything you have to offer before their need arises. Provide a guest speaker focusing on the importance of preplanning. Have members of the community give testimonials about the value of creating and personalizing the service for their loved ones. This also provides a framework of an “experience” just as a meaningful cremation service is a personalized experience and commemoration of life, not just a means of “direct” final disposition.

7. Always look for ways to do more for your cremation families.

You need to stay informed and alert to changing family preferences and to remain flexible in offering options that meet those preferences. After all, cremation is here and will continue to grow, so why not be proactive and add value in everything you do for cremation families? Help create meaningful events. By so doing, you will create value for your families as well as be perceived as providing value as a funeral professional. If families do not see the value that you bring, they will find other alternatives.

In today's transitory and internet-enabled world where consumers can find many competing alternatives, the fact that you may have been around a long time is not as much of a factor to consumers as it used to be. Google “cremation” or “urns” and you will see a race to the cheapest and simplest as the common denominator. Don't fall into this trap as the race to the bottom only ensures more families becoming part of that small minority who only view funeral professionals as a conduit for body disposal. The funeral service business is still about service, and while consumer preferences may be changing, your essential business model of service should not. •

Show all your merchandise offerings in your display room.

