



Customizing for Your Customers

By: Shannon Cummings-Plotkin

What if there was a magic pill to instantly improve your business not only in dollar signs but also in customer satisfaction? Wouldn't you take it? Unfortunately, that pill hasn't yet been discovered, but another cure-all has. It is a simple philosophy consisting of eliminating customer sacrifice and personalizing services.

You do everything you can to be the forefront funeral home within your community. You advertise in the newspaper and church bulletin, you sponsor youth leagues, you're the Rotary Club president, and you volunteer for local organizations. It seems like you have two jobs, doesn't it? Funeral-Director-by-day and community-super-hero-by-night (and-weekend). You are most likely exhausted and frustrated because you aren't seeing the results you would expect to see with all of that dedicated face time and friendliness. At what point do you ask yourself, "If it isn't me then what is it?" The bear of an answer is your customer. You have spent so much time on marketing, advertising, and glad-handing that you have forgotten about why you do what you do. You are responsible for taking care of the families you serve- past and present- and learning how to master these relationships is incredibly valuable.

Driving business and customer loyalty is not necessarily through advertising budgets and club participation. It is through maximizing the opportunities to get to know client families and more importantly their loved-one that has passed away on an inherently personal level. This means documenting and learning about family dynamics, history and customs. If you find out exactly what your families desire and give it to them every time, you will find unmatched success. You will begin to tailor a new funeral experience for each family you serve; you will achieve the positive reputation and notoriety by providing individualized services to each family you serve and avoiding customer sacrifice.

If you are doing the bare minimum to personalize each funeral service, then how are you branding and differentiating yourself from your competitors? Providing the same stagnant services is why funeral homes are

forced to advertise. The secret is that the customized services you could offer would provide the marketing for you. Each of these uniquely served families will be your own personal marketing manager; spreading the good word everywhere they go. Truthful testimonials are much more powerful than an ad in the local paper once a week.

More interesting, when we find out exactly what customers want, we'll see they are willing to pay a premium to get it. Funeral homes get it wrong when they try to standardize events to fit an average group; that is the definition of customer sacrifice. The minute the customer hears a phrase akin to "I'm sorry we don't offer that service here" they are immediately turned off and dejected. If you have ever found yourself in a restaurant and wanted a Coke and heard "Is Pepsi Ok?" didn't you feel deflated? It's the same for your client families, but on a scale far greater than anything else. The moment the customer sacrifice is made the doubt, the skepticism and the feeling as though they could've gotten a better deal surfaces. Customers don't feel good about the purchase they have made and it could affect if they ever come back again. It takes work to provide a personalized service for families, but the return on the investment outweighs the effort and eliminates the sacrifice.

So, how do you get there; what do you do to provide the personalized services? The first thing you must do is to ask open-ended questions. The answers you hear will help you to uncover what the family actually desires for their loved one. If you hear a response such as, "Pop didn't want anything special. He just wanted the whole thing over quickly-not to tie us up-and either bury him or burn him. He's gone; what does he care." Ask what they want for their father's services. Chances are the family has their own desires in mind for a memorable funeral service, but it's your job to use open-ended questions to gain the knowledge. While you're having this dialogue with the family, a few things are happening:

1. You are allowing the family time to walk down the path of their loved one's life and to establish a story for you-the Funeral Director-to tell in a life-centric manner.

2. You are getting to know not only the loved one but, also the family making the arrangements. You are building a relationship that is invaluable to you as a business owner and for the family; they will have a familiar person to share and relive the details of their family member the next time a death occurs.

3. The family will see the value in planning their own services ahead of time, so that everyone knows exactly what to do the next time they have to make funeral arrangements. Again, your attention is entirely on the families you are serving at that moment and the bonus is sure to be an inevitable pre-need or returning client.

You will notice that you start co-creating each event with the family. When you suggest they bring in items aside from photos of their family members, they begin to get excited and involved. You have given each family member a role to play in staging the event or as it will

soon become, the experience. Soon the families begin to see a theme emerge and this will effect the entire tone of the funeral, engaging not only the family but also every guest that comes through the door. The foot traffic that comes through your doors should be treated like future customers; they are your potential client-base, not someone breezing through the Sunday paper.

When you make the change to a customer-centralized business, you should identify core company values. All employees should be supportive and willing to pursue new ways of performing. The opportunity to make a positive impression on families and other attendees happens throughout each process of the funeral event. For total success to take place, everyone from the ownership to the limo drivers need to be on board with the new environment. Think of this process as an inexpensive makeover to your funeral home. A makeover that will have a lasting impression on the families you serve and your community. **FBA**



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