

Orchestrating

From arrangements to pricing to social media and your funeral home's ambiance, some simple solutions to potentially off-putting problems.

The experience of buying anything in the sales arena can be as scary as diving into shark-infested waters. Whether it's furniture, jewelry or a car (new or used), the consumer is prey to the wickedly eager and overbearing salesperson. Unfortunately, at some point along the way, the public began driving past funeral homes and hearing John Williams' haunting two-note melody.

After talking with a dozen or so funeral directors, it became clear they did not want to be grouped with "Larry" at Discount Auto Mart or "Shelly" at Sofas & Loveseats Unlimited. So, in which areas can funeral professionals make the best impression and have the most authentic approach? The arrangement conference, the funeral home environment, internal and external, and training and development. Presented below are problem scenarios followed by strategic solutions to help funeral professionals reclaim the respect and dignity that, in the eyes of the public, has seemed to decline.

Problem: Arrangement Conference

Consumers are more informed now than ever. Simply Google "average funeral cost" and all of the prices appear – from non-declinables to urn prices to casket and vault prices. Families come armed and ready with a preconceived spending agenda. The arrangement conference has turned from planning a loved one's final tribute to haggling over dollars and cents, with everyone watching to see who will break first. Families may even come with a printed-out sheet of these facts and figures. Suddenly, though you haven't even sat down to begin the arrangements, a family member, usually the token "expert," is thrusting a document in your face and demanding to see your price list for comparison. Instead of being in control, you have become a victim of interrogation, scrutiny and skepticism. It's a runaway train and all you can do is watch. It's here that you realize funeral service has become commoditized; there is no differentiation between you and the funeral home nearest you. However, this is also the biggest area of opportunity for you to stand out in your marketplace.

Solution

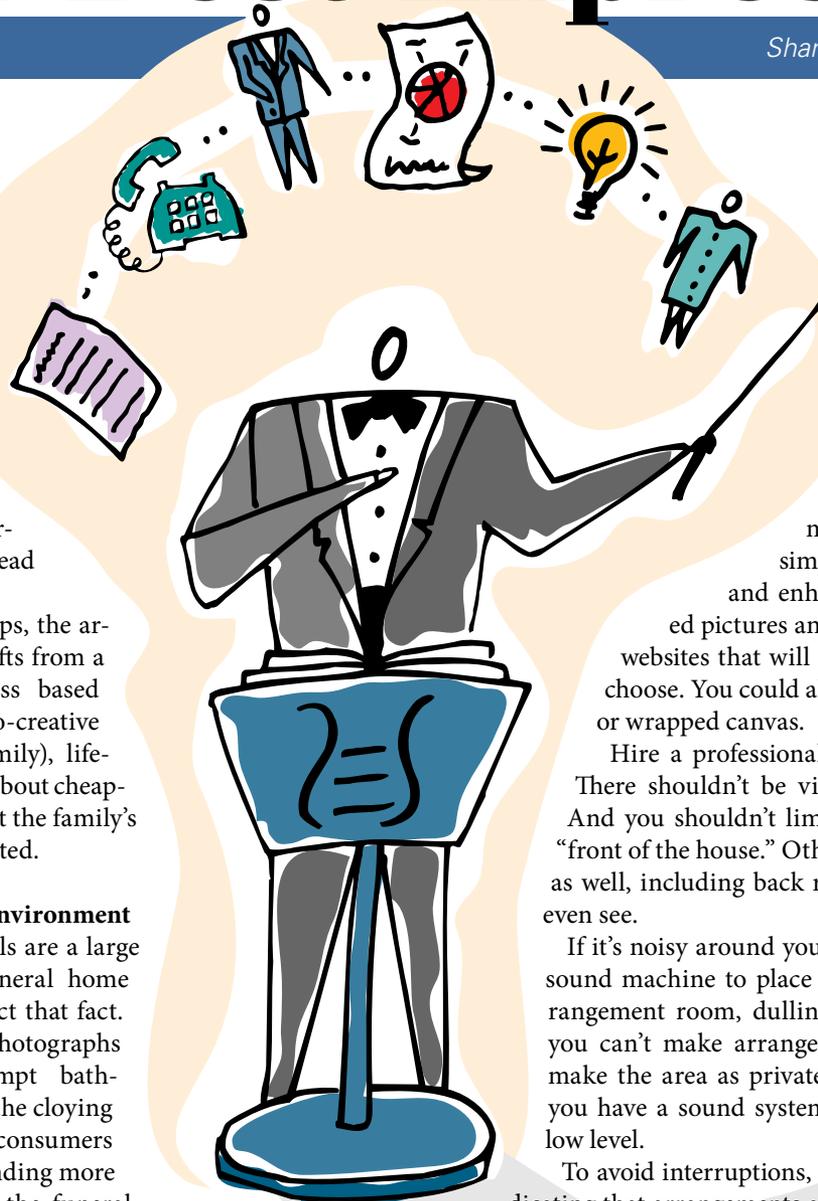
Let's start with the basics. The way we treat customers from the very first hello can make all the difference. Did you greet everyone with a warm smile and genuine eye contact? Have you made any connections with family members by asking open-ended questions?

Instead of briskly ushering the family into an arrangement room, ask them if they would like coffee or refreshments, if possible. In other words, make them feel as if they are guests at the Ritz Carlton with a sensory experience of taste, class and high-end finishes. You would not walk into the Ritz with the preconceived notion that you will get a bargain; instead, you are enticed not to worry about price as you are more so imagining the experience you will have and the services you will receive.

Be mindful of your pace and tone when speaking with a family. You are the leader, the expert – if you slow down, so will they. The more time we spend with families, the better they feel emotionally and mentally. We steer the family back to think-

Your Best Impression

Shannon Cummings-Plotkin



ing about and remembering a loved one's life instead of their spending limit.

Following the above steps, the arrangement conference shifts from a commodity-driven process based on price to planning a co-creative (funeral director and family), life-centric memorial. It's not about cheaper caskets or urns but what the family's loved one would have wanted.

Problem: Unappealing Environment

It is no secret that funerals are a large expenditure, and the funeral home environment should reflect that fact. If there are outdated photographs and decorations, unkempt bathrooms, torn carpeting or the cloying scent of cigarette smoke, consumers are going to question spending more than necessary. The way the funeral home looks is a reflection of how customers are valued.

It isn't all about the looks and appearance of the building; there are other deterrents at play. There shouldn't be any interruptions during the arrangement conference. One simple opening of the door can distract you and the family from what you have worked so hard to focus them on – the life of their loved one. What do your printed materials look like: casket and cremation books, general price lists? Are they professionally designed and constructed or did they come off an office printer? All of these elements make up the environment of your business. Here is a provocation: Would you be proud if your biggest competitor walked through the door unexpectedly?

Solution

With budget in mind, it's not about taking down walls or adding

more windows. Instead, take simple approaches to upgrades and enhancements. Replace outdated pictures and prints. There are plenty of websites that will print almost any photo you choose. You could also invest in updated frames or wrapped canvas.

Hire a professional cleaning service to clean. There shouldn't be visible dust on faux flowers. And you shouldn't limit the cleaning to only the "front of the house." Other areas should be kept tidy as well, including back rooms the public might not even see.

If it's noisy around your funeral home, purchase a sound machine to place outside the door of the arrangement room, dulling sounds on both sides. If you can't make arrangements in a separate room, make the area as private as possible beforehand. If you have a sound system, play soothing music at a low level.

To avoid interruptions, place a sign on the door indicating that arrangements are in progress. Again, if you can't make the arrangements in a separate room, let everyone know there are arrangements in progress ahead of time.

If you know you may have to step out for a few moments for a signature or phone call, plan it in advance and know that at 1 p.m. you will suggest a break for everyone, so it won't look as if you stepped away on a whim.

Problem: Lack of Training, Development and Social Media Presence

As discussed previously, the number of qualified and educated consumers is not on a downtrend but a steady rise. But have funeral directors and the profession at large become more educated? Could you list 10 features and benefits on your merchandise? Because chances are, consumers can, and they know the difference between bronze, copper and 18-gauge steel caskets. More importantly, are you as funeral directors equipped with

all of the knowledge to explain processes efficiently, specifically cremation? So efficiently that you could convince a family to transition from what they initially wanted, a cremation, to a traditional burial?

Are you social media conscious? Is it encouraged to brand your funeral home on Facebook and other social networks? Are you requesting that families engage on the funeral home's page? Are you asking for testimonials? Do you have a Google Plus page? Consumers do their re-

search outside of funeral facts and prices. They do a great job reading about individual businesses on the Internet. Families are making considerations based on your Facebook page activity, online reviews and the look of your website. All of these elements are extensions of the environment your funeral home evokes.

Solution

Practice is necessary in so many other fields, but why isn't it valued or expected in the funeral profession? It's not neces-

sarily about reading the latest white paper or book on funeral service, but how about reading a general business book such as Simon Sinek's *Start With Why* or B. Joseph Pine and James H. Gilmore's *The Experience Economy*?

There are also outside consulting firms that can get staff in order as well. If funeral professionals want to remain a trusted and knowledgeable group, then you need to stay ahead of consumers. Information learned in school 25 years ago will not do that.

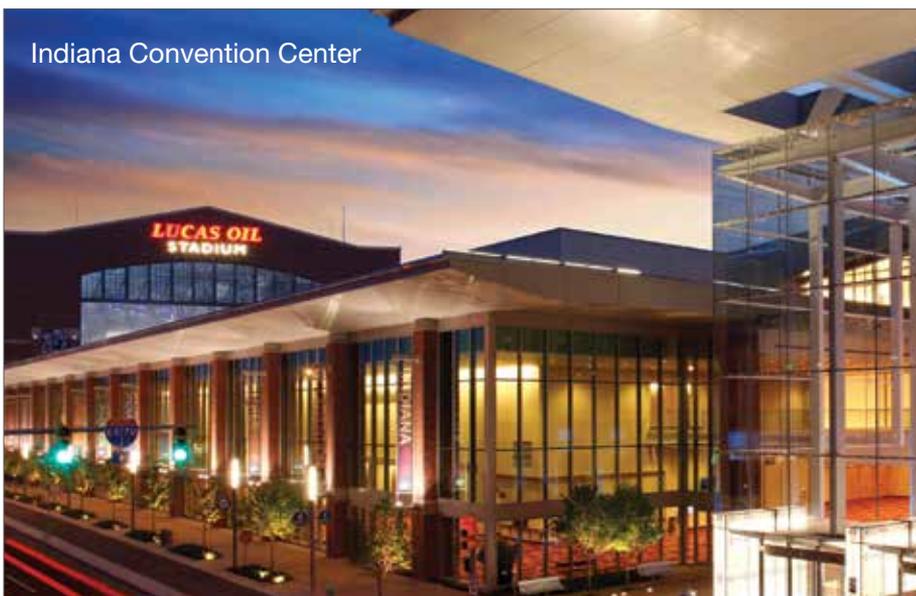
If you are an owner or general manager and can't depend on your staff to do the work, then it should be your job to supply employees with updated information and training materials.

Create a social media presence. It isn't hard to make profiles on different networks and encourage employees, friends and family to get involved in promoting the page. Ask for testimonials and reviews from families you have served – it's a great way to re-establish a connection as well. Invest in having your website designed professionally, including updated photos and staff information. Give your business a friendly face.

Embracing change throughout each process of the funeral experience will have the most influence on how you are perceived in your community. "We've always done it this way" attitudes will not provide a positive space for growth. Consumers will only continue to march away from what a traditional funeral used to mean.

One way to capture consumers is to become needed. The only way you can do that is by doing your best every day and providing that wow factor. After a family has a funeral at your funeral home, there shouldn't be a doubt in their minds as to whether they will recommend you to family and friends, and they will definitely come back to see you the next time services are needed. ★

Shannon Cummings-Plotkin is a creative thinking writer and marketing communications manager for Life Celebration Inc., a company that specializes in training, experience staging and custom print design and production for funeral homes in the United States and Canada. She can be reached at s.cummings_plotkin@lifecelebration.com or 888-887-3782.



Indiana Convention Center



Get revved up for the 2015 NFDA International Convention & Expo!

Join us in Indy – the #1 convention city (*USA Today*) – for the 2015 NFDA International Convention & Expo, October 18-21!

You won't want to miss this year's engaging educational sessions led by industry experts, the world's largest funeral service expo and networking opportunities with exhibitors and funeral directors from more than 40 countries.

Plan to stay through Wednesday evening and join your friends and colleagues for an exclusive experience at Lucas Oil Stadium, home of the NFL Colts and Superbowl 2012!

Register today! www.nfda.org/indy2015

NFDA

NATIONAL
FUNERAL
DIRECTORS
ASSOCIATION