

The Experience *is* the Marketing

by Shannon Cummings-Plotkin



It's a typical day at the funeral home for you as a funeral director; you're zipping around the building keeping track of families, death certificates, and your company Facebook page. Even though you are busy, things are slightly mundane; you've been a funeral director for years and lately you've been a little bored and uninspired. Suddenly, your secretary buzzes your office line and she sounds rather excited. You learn that the town mayor has unexpectedly died, and you have the death call. Immediately, pieces and bits of the future funeral are swirling through your head. You see lines around the building, newspaper bulbs flashing, and an entire town watching—no judging—how you will honor the life of the young mayor. All eyes will be on you and your business.

You meet with the mayor's family: his lovely wife and two children, college age. Throughout the arrangement conference you are particularly attentive to every bit of information the grieving family shares, from his love of 'Wheel of Fortune', to his days of playing little league. You furiously write down every detail. You are focused and attentive to that family at that time. You dive into planning the most elaborate funeral your town has ever seen, reaching out to local vendors and calling in resources to provide an unforgettable tribute.

The day of the viewing arrives and you barely recognize your funeral home. It is artfully covered in photographs and memorabilia. You expect a large crowd so you plan out small exhibits during stopping points for viewing attendees to admire while they wait in line. No "i" is left un-dotted, not a "t" uncrossed. You have exceeded your own expectations. You receive praise and thanks throughout the entire process from the family, clergy and strangers alike; you are the town hero, this is an unforgettable event.

It would be a likely estimation that most funeral directors today would have acted in the same manner in the above scenario. It's an unparalleled marketing opportunity;

more people will be marching through your funeral home in one night than in a typical month. "It's the mayor, this sort of thing only happens once, so we're going to do things differently for this one." But why only the mayor, why not everyone? It is believed that every life has the right to be honored and their memory celebrated. So why not put in the same amount of attention and dedication to every family that walks through the door? After all, every "average Joe" is just as important as the mayor to the families you serve.

It is no secret that word spreads fast, if you start "staging" your funeral home for every viewing, your call numbers will escalate and your competition will be scrambling to imitate your newfound creativity. More than that, the families you serve will be surprised, delighted, and unabashedly grateful. They will feel satisfied that their loved one was honored and celebrated, their memory intact and alive. Their story shared for a final time for all to see.

So how do you get started? The first thing is getting to know the deceased. You achieve this by asking open-ended questions and listening during the arrangement conference. It doesn't take much for the families to start relaxing, at that point, the dialogue flows naturally and you have an eyewitness account of the person's likes and hobbies. From those questions a dominant theme will appear, this is where the creativity begins. Keep in mind that staging your funeral home does not have to be an expensive, time-consuming chore. It can be a rather simple task. Here is an example-staged funeral: You find out that Mrs. Smith loved movies. She would go to the theatre every week, sometimes more than once, "Gone with the Wind" was her favorite. She also was a trivia buff and couldn't be beat at a game of trivial pursuit. When you begin planning out your staged event, remind yourself to engage all five senses. How entertaining would it be if you had trivia questions placed on the tables throughout the funeral home? Can you rent a popcorn maker? Turn part of your funeral home into a

concession stand, where Mrs. Smith is the star. If you're able, hang up some of her favorite movie posters. Can guests hear the soundtrack to Mrs. Smith's life in the background as they wait to pay their respects?

Extend the event by including branded keepsakes for attendees to take away. The family will proudly show off a theatre ticket with a photograph of their beloved mother on the front, and your funeral home logo on the back. The possibilities are endless and better yet inexpensive. Through the act of staging, your funeral home rises above the rest. You are differentiated. You are memorable. Your funeral home is remarkable.

We as humans have a need for remembrance; we want to leave an everlasting mark before we leave the earth. The wheels begin to turn when attendees visit your funeral

home and see the personalized events taking place. They put themselves in the moment feeling nostalgic about their own lives thinking, "I want my funeral to be full works of art. I hope everyone remembers how much I loved that trip to Paris when I visited the Louvre." If one person stops you and asks how they can be sure their funeral is staged, that's worth the weight of putting up a few props.

Reignite your passion for the funeral profession, think of yourself as a director of a play, your funeral home the stage, and watch, as the crowd will most certainly give you a standing ovation. Try it once and see the results yourself, if you don't your competition will and in the words of Abraham Lincoln, "Things may come to those who wait, but only the things left by those who hustle." **FBA**



Shannon Cummings-Plotkin is the Creative Thinking Writer and Storyteller for Life Celebration, Inc, a company that specializes in experience staging, training, and custom print design and production. Shannon can be reached at 888.887.3782 or s.cummings_plotkin@lifecelebration.com or visit www.lifecelebrationinc.com.



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