

THE STRATEGIC MARKETING PROCESS FOR FUNERAL SERVICE PROFESSIONALS

Learn the Step-by-Step Process for
Fixing Your Marketing and
Winning More Calls



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Introduction

Welcome to The Strategic Marketing Process for Funeral Service Professionals - Learn the Step-by-Step process to Fix Your Marketing and Winning More Calls.

I realize that my choice of title puts your expectations at a pretty high level. That's ok with me because I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that if you follow the process that I lay out in this book you will transform your funeral home and your life.

For those of you who are reading this document for the first time, my name is John Callaghan and I am a professional marketer specializing in the funeral home industry. Many of the people who have purchased this book are already familiar with my background, but for those of you who are not, I've included my story as the last chapter in this book.

You will notice that this document is written in a very casual conversational style. I did this intentionally so that you could read it quickly, understand the material and begin applying this plan to your own funeral home.

Sadly, when most funeral home owners think of marketing, they only think about advertising, which is a common mistake. Unfortunately, the well entrenched "marketing" firms in this industry perpetuate this error by only offering advertising services and the odd training class at a ski resort or tropical location.

You will also notice when reading this book that I have a very different view of the scope of marketing. To understand my view you need to understand the definition of marketing.

Here's the definition according to the American Marketing Association...

“Marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large.”

As you can see Marketing is an all-encompassing term. In a funeral home, my rule of thumb is ... if it happens outside of the prep room ... It's marketing!

Every interaction you have with a family, whether it been spoken, written, or a pre-recorded website video ... it's all marketing. If your business has not grown the way you would have liked it to ... it's a marketing problem.

My use of the term “Strategic” in the title is very important. Strategic marketing focusses on two key issues; the core message that will connect with your audience and the step by step process that you will use to get their attention and bring them into your funeral home.

In contrast, tactical marketing focusses on the specific tool or media that you will use such a radio ad or your website. It's been my experience that 99% of tactical marketing is wasted if you do not have a good strategic marketing plan.

Over the past few years, my new clients have described the following common problems:

- Families who had very little money and could barely afford a direct cremation.
- Families who had plenty of money but still decided to hold no memorial service or tribute of any kind for their loved one.
- Families who recognized the need for a memorial service and gathering time but had decided to hold it at their country club instead of the funeral home.
- Families who started the conversation with “how much will this cost”
- Families who were so fragmented that they could not agree on what to do and therefore....did nothing.

- Families who just wanted to “keep it simple” and therefore...did nothing.
- Families who did nothing ... And regretted it later.
- Employees who struggled to explain the value of a service to a family.
- Employees who saw this profession as a 9 to 5 job rather than a 24 hour vocation.

Sound familiar?

One of my coaching clients relayed the following story to me recently:

He had placed a follow-up call to the matriarch of a family he had served. Her response was “you did what I asked you to do ... But I needed so much more”.

Unfortunately, I have heard similar statements from other clients and from families that I have personally surveyed. The clear message is that today's families do not understand what they need at the time of a loss. They fall into the “Keep It Simple” trap only to find out later that their emotional needs were not met. Sadly, the funeral director often takes the blame even though you delivered exactly what was asked of you.

The fact is that there is an increasingly large segment of society that no longer sees value in a traditional funeral service, so instead they are choosing to do nothing at all. In some parts of the country this trend is still at the early phase, but in other parts of the country a traditional funeral is rare. Most of the country is somewhere in between, but the trend is undeniable.

The trend is not a problem, the trend is a fact. The problem lies in how a business owner chooses to respond to the problem.

In general, business owners and managers tend to be hesitant to recognize, embrace and respond to changing consumer preferences. This is true in every industry. When the established businesses do not evolve to meet the changing

needs of their customers, an opportunity is created for new competitors to enter the market.

The American car companies did not change, so lost a large segment of their market to Japanese and Korean competitors. The original smart phone battle was Palm-vs-Blackberry. But now Palm is gone and Blackberry is struggling while consumers buy the latest iPhone or Android.

As a funeral home owner you face a very basic business decision. Do you want to change to meet the needs of your customers? Or, do you want to accept a smaller piece of a constantly shrinking market?

I believe every funeral home owner must choose from the following three options.

1

Become the discount firm in your community. Someone is going to take on that roll and it could be you. You will need to close down your funeral home, open a storefront with minimal overhead. Slash your prices as low as possible and try to make it up with volume. I will refer to this as the “dollar store strategy”. You will offer an inferior substitute product at very low prices and count every penny.

2

Offer traditional funerals at lower prices. There are a handful of firms that have quickly expanded around the country using this strategy (e.g., check out www.NewcomerFamily.com). You will need to cut your overheads as much as possible, while still providing a clean and comfortable facility, and a reasonable level of service. I refer to this as the “Walmart strategy”. You will offer the same product as traditional funeral homes but at lower prices.

3

Re-invent your funeral home to offer a style of memorial service that today's family values. You will need to change things inside your business and adopt a new style of marketing. I refer to this as the "Farewell Experience strategy". You will offer a superior funeral experience that your families will cherish ... Regardless of the price!

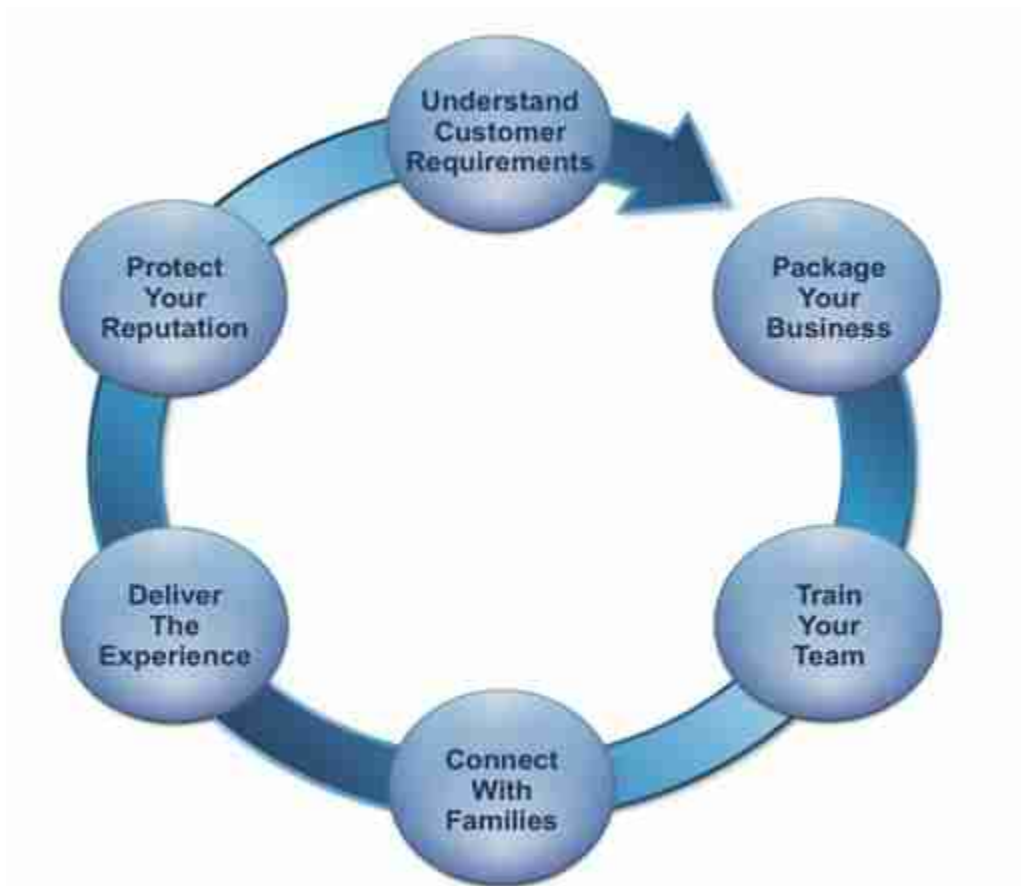
The balance of this document is based on a funeral home choosing option 3 – the Farewell Experience Strategy.

If you want to become the discount firm in town, this document is not for you.

If you want to stay in the traditional funeral business and compete solely on price, this document is not for you.

If you want to have a funeral business that delivers value to today's family and secures your own future, this document is for you. So let's get started!!

First you'll need a roadmap for this journey. The following diagram is called the Strategic Marketing Process.



I'll give you a brief overview of each of these areas in this introduction and the rest of this book will discuss the topics in detail.

The starting point for any marketing process is to clearly **understand your customers' requirements**. This requires that you begin by asking yourself "who do I want as a customer?". Most funeral home owners fight over every single call because they see all calls as being equal. This is a huge mistake! All calls were equal when everyone wanted a traditional funeral. But that is not the case any more.

The reality of today's economy is that some people simply do not have the money for a funeral of any kind. Discount firms need to exist to take care of these people.

But there are still plenty of people who have money and would gladly choose to have a funeral, if they clearly understood how the experience would meet their needs. There is an even larger segment of the market who would like to do something but do not want a traditional funeral. These people are your target market for the farewell experience.

After you have defined your target market and have a clear understanding of their requirements, the next step is to **package your business**. You have to package your business in such a way that your target customers see you as their best possible choice ... Regardless of Price!

Packaging your business begins with looking at the unique things that your funeral home can do for a family. If there is nothing unique, then it's time to innovate your business and become unique.

Packaging also addresses issues, such as what you call the 'memorial' event. Throughout this document I will refer to it as a farewell rather than a funeral. The reason is simple ... If families do not want a funeral then stop calling the event a funeral!

Leading firms around the country have already made this shift. Call it a farewell, call it a send off, call it a goodbye service ... call it anything you want but do not call it a funeral!

The next step is to develop effective ways to communicate your unique attributes to your market. This involves creating a Consistent Family Message plus supporting materials such as website content, arrangement brochures, educational content, etc.

The next step in the Strategic Marketing Process is to **train your team**. Most funeral homes are staffed with a compassionate team of long term employees. This can be a mixed blessing. You value their compassion and commitment to

service, but changing the way things have been doing for decades, can be a challenge to say the least. That's why training is so important!

At this point in the process it's time to **connect with families**. In the “good old days” this meant joining the right community service clubs, being active in your church, and shaking as many hands as possible. It also meant allocating your advertising budget to get your message in front of as many people as possible. All of these actions are still required but they are only ‘part’ of the solution.

In today's world more and more families are connecting with you online before they would even consider calling you in person. They are checking out your website, your FaceBook page, your YouTube videos, and your reviews.

If you have successfully connected with the family they will give you the opportunity to help them **deliver the experience**. Notice that I said “help them”, that's because today's baby boomer consumer places highest the value on things in which they are actively involved.

Do you know the absolute best way to ensure the long term success of your funeral home? The solution is to deliver transformational experiences that families and friends will talk about for years. That may sound abstract but in this section I will discuss some of the key elements of “The Experience Economy – by Pine & Gilmore” and explains how they impact the funeral home market.

The final step in the strategic marketing process is to **protect your reputation**. One of the unavoidable realities of today's internet-driven world is that anyone with a computer and an axe to grind can slander your funeral home and ruin your hard-earned reputation.

You have probably already observed this in the restaurant industry, where it's common to see ten or twenty reviews posted online. Glowing reviews help draw new diners while negative reviews can send a restaurant into foreclosure.

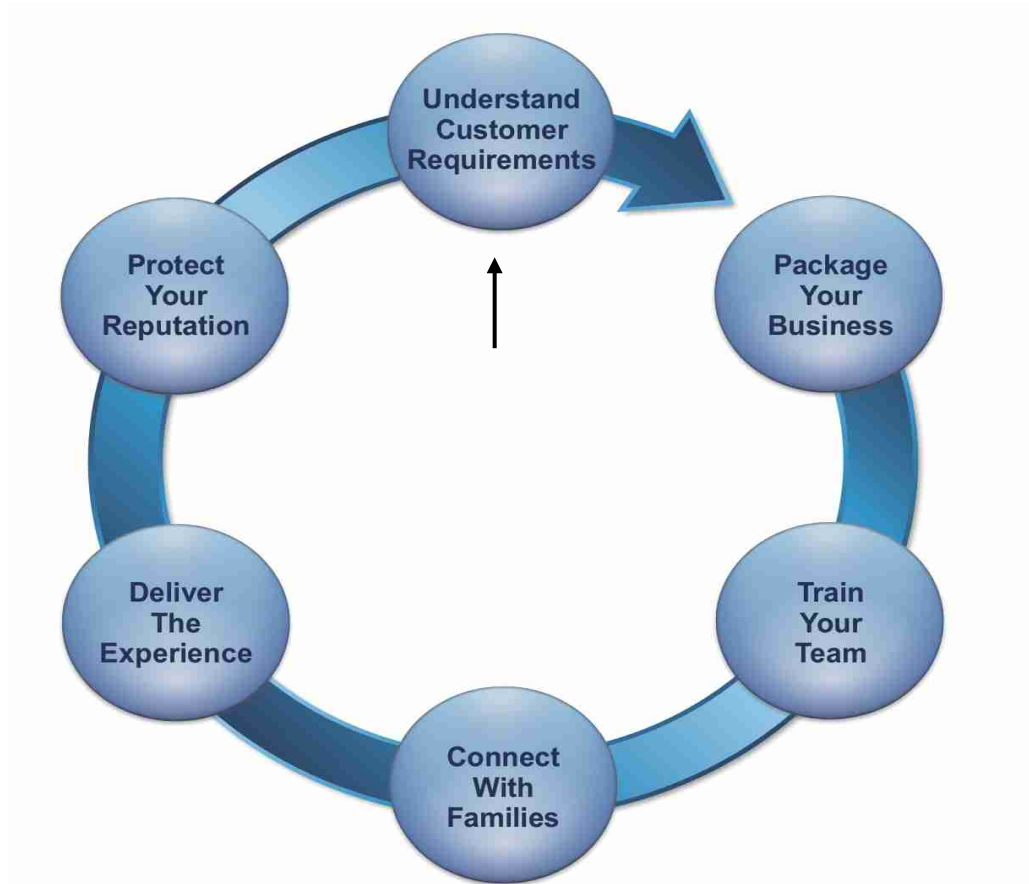
This trend is only now starting to hit the funeral home market and I believe that this wave will hit hard in near future. You have a choice; you can ignore it and be pummeled or be proactive and start building your online reputation today.

As I mentioned earlier, this new marketing process is intentionally circular in nature. You should always be asking yourself...

1. Do I understand what my customer needs?
2. Have I packaged my funeral home business in such a way that potential customers see us as the logical choice?
3. Have I trained my team to deliver the message and fulfill the promises?
4. Am I connecting with families and leading them through this process?
5. Have we worked together to deliver a transformational farewell experience?
6. Is my reputation protected so that my business will survive?

Learn how to answer these questions by studying the rest of this document. But don't just study it ... apply it and put your business on the path of growth and prosperity!

Chapter 1 – Understand Customer Requirements



In the Introduction section I mentioned that there is an increasingly large segment of society that no longer sees the value in a traditional funeral service and instead they are choosing to do nothing at all. Unfortunately, that experience leaves them emotionally empty and often prolongs grief for years.

It's easy, and convenient, to blame today's business woes on the weak economy that we have all experienced since 2007 or 2008. But the reality is that families have been moving away from traditional funerals for many decades.

The key question for this chapter is ... What do today's customers need at the time of a loss?

The families you serve have a large variety of needs and yes you will be responsible for satisfying as many as possible. However, the important thing is to always satisfy the needs of the key decision maker. Which begs the question ... Who is today's decision maker when it comes to making funeral arrangements?

From my work with successful funeral homes around the country I can tell you with absolute certainty that the key decision maker today is ... A baby boomer woman.

How do I know this? Because researches have found that baby boom woman control...

94% of home furnishing decisions

92% of vacations

89% of bank accounts

83% of all consumer purchases

80% of healthcare decisions



Gentlemen ... Do you really think she's not in control of this decision???

She may not be the most vocal person in the arrangement room, but nothing will happen without her blessing. The better you can understand her and what she needs at this time in life, the better you will be able to serve her and her family.

Keep in mind that she may be dealing with some very stressful issues at this time. For example ...

- She was probably told by her parent to “not make a fuss” or “I don't want you to do anything”. She wants to honor their wishes but would really like to do something, so she now feels trapped.
- She is probably dealing with siblings who she has not had to interact with in decades. They didn't get along 20 years ago and it's no easier now.

- She may be dealing with a divorced or blended family situation. The real reason she doesn't want a funeral has nothing to do with money and everything to do with the fact that she really doesn't want to see that side of the family.

Consider the fact that the typical funeral arranger is a 50 to 65 year old man. She's never met him before, he's dressed very formally which makes her cautious and he begins by focusing on minutia like the social security number and date of birth. No wonder there's a disconnection!!

There are a lot of very good books available today on the topic of marketing to baby boomer woman. I highly recommend that every funeral home owner (especially if you're a male) buy a stack of these books and begin studying.

One of my favorite books on this topic is “Why She Buys – The New Strategy for Reaching The World's Most Powerful Consumers” by Bridget Brennan. Page 82 of this book contains a table that does a great job of summarizing how men and woman view the world differently.

Inside Women's Minds	Inside Men's Minds
Desire to be indispensable Desire to be connected Wishes to minimize status differences	Desires to be independent Desires to be respected Awareness of rank in the pack
Disclose feelings and vulnerabilities Connects with other people by talking	Hide vulnerabilities. Do not discuss feelings. Connect with others people through activities, or by talking about business, politics or sports
Feel powerful when they can help others	Feel powerful when they're in charge of others
Details about people are the best part of any conversation. There can never be enough detail.	Yawn. Details about people are boring. Technical and sports-related details – now those are what's interesting.
Conflict can be stressful. Collaboration is more fun.	Conflict is great; it gets the blood going. Collaboration is exciting only if there's a goal to win and someone to beat.

Self-esteem is derived from the quality of relationships in their lives. Achievement is based on internal goals.	Self-esteem is derived from achieving things independently, without help or handouts from others
What a product does for me is what's most interesting.	How a product works is most interesting.

Study this table and consider how this impacts the dynamics in your arrangement room.

If you are dressed in a way that tells her that you are above her in rank ... You've lost her.

If you are unwilling to take the time to talk about her feelings ... You've lost her.

If you position yourself as being in charge instead of being there to help her help her family ... You've lost her.

But the bad news is that if you lose her... She loses! She loses the chance to say goodbye one last time, she loses the chance to have a healing time with her family and friends, she loses the chance to celebrate the life of her loved one, and she loses the chance to begin the healing process.

So what does she need at the time of a loss?

- She needs emotional support
- She needs to feel like she's in control because she feels totally out of control right now
- She needs to understand how to help her entire family
- She needs an option when her parent told her "just have me cremated"
- She needs easy choices
- She needs to know that you have a proven plan ... Because she doesn't know how to do this

We like to think of ourselves as a homogeneous society (i.e. we're all the same). But the reality is that what customers need in your market may be very different from what they need in another market. At the highest level such as what I've discussed above, it's the same. But as the old saying goes ..."The devil is in the detail"

During 2011, I had the pleasure of helping two clients who were both in the same western U.S. state. One client is located right on the coast while the other is approximately 200 miles inland. Two markets that were reasonably close together, yet they were completely different.

The process I use to uncover your customers' requirements is simple, yet powerful. It boils down to answering the following four questions:

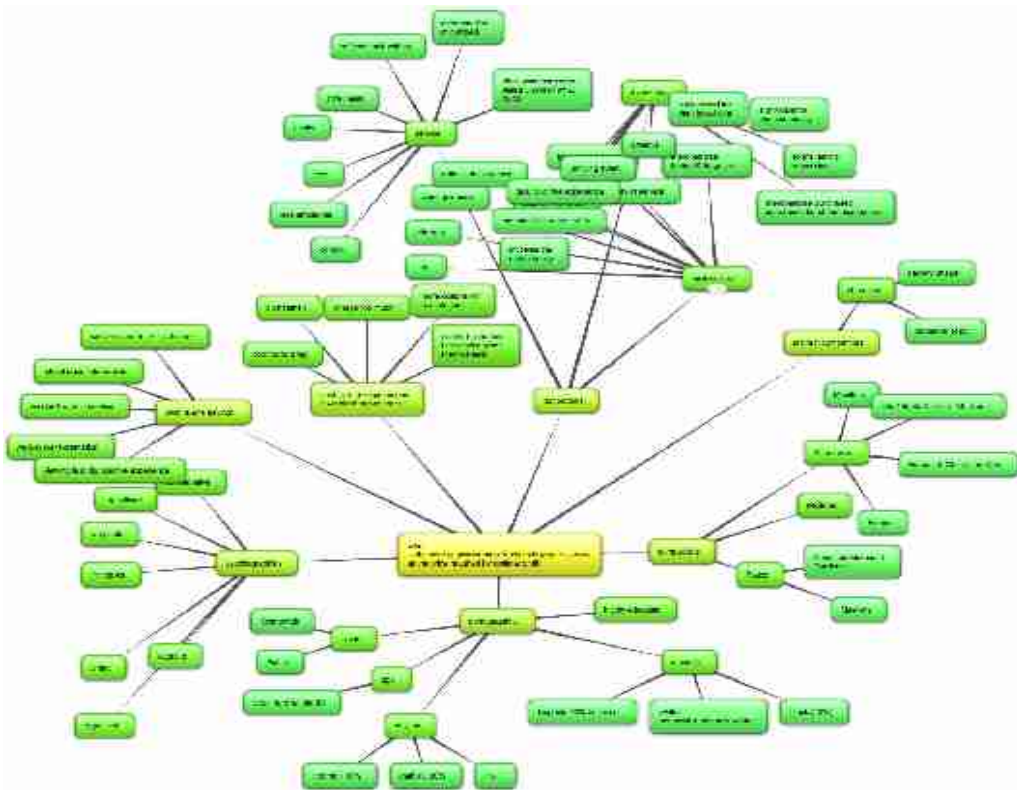
1. Who is your ideal family and who is the decision maker? Describe this person in as much detail as possible. Demographics, emotional hot buttons, etc.
2. What past experiences have they had with funeral service providers? This tells you their current opinion of you.
3. What are all of the things going on in their life while they are experiencing the loss?
4. How would they describe their ideal outcome of this event?

Just so there is no confusion, an "ideal family" is the family that gives you the opportunity to arrange and conduct a farewell event with them and enjoys the experience so much that they become eternally loyal to your funeral home.

Even though I am based in Michigan, most of my clients are scattered throughout North America. Sometimes I will travel to their funeral home for a few days of intensive meetings. But quite often we will conduct our meetings spread out over a few months and use internet technologies such as Skype or WebEx to avoid air travel. One of my favorite tools for remote coaching sessions is a website called Bubbl.us. Basically this is a great collaboration tools that lets us brainstorm as if

we were standing in front of the same white board. We begin by drawing the opening question.

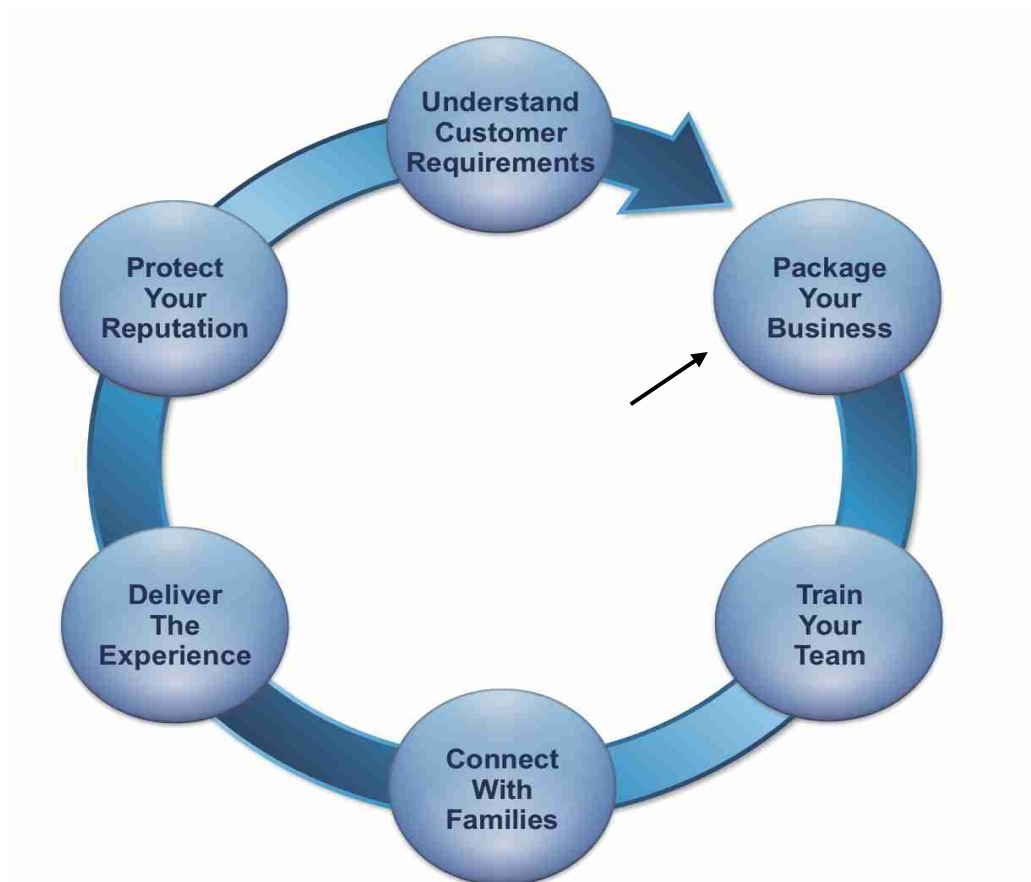
By the time we're finished we've created a detailed diagram that paints a pretty clear picture of who your ideal family is and what they need from you at the time of a loss. (sorry, I had to blur out the confidential details)



When you go through this exercise you develop a very clear picture of your ideal family. With this as your target you are now prepared to begin looking at how to package your business in such as way that they see you as the obvious choice ... Regardless of price!

Chapter 2 – Package Your Business

The second element of the Strategic Marketing Process is called Package Your Business.



Every business has two sides; the inside reality and the outside perception.

Your inside reality is everything that goes on inside your funeral home or is associated with the funeral experience that you are arranging and conducting. It covers every interaction you have with a family, from the time they first call you or walk in your door, to the last time you interact with them. Every step in your process and every word spoken by you, or your staff, shape the inside reality of your business.

The outside perception is what the outside world thinks of you. This is primarily controlled by your marketing and advertising.

If you have a great inside reality, but you market yourself the exact same way that your competitors do, then you are telling families that you are all the same. And if I have two funeral homes that have the same marketing message the primary tie breaker becomes ... Price!

One of the golden rules of marketing is the following.

When all things are equal the deciding criteria is always price. So NEVER let all things be equal. Instead make yourself unique and reap the rewards.

When you are packaging your business you are making the conscious effort to build a great inside reality and market that inside reality to your prospective family in such a way that they see you as the logical choice ... Regardless of price!

You might be thinking ... "But price is always the most important thing". Based on your experiences you're right, but that's because you have been selling a commodity service. The baby boomer woman doesn't care about that type of service, so she lets price be the deciding factor. She may not even bother coming in to make the arrangements and will send someone else to do it, while she is busy calling restaurants to plan a memorial dinner.

However, a key part of the Farewell Experience Strategy is to market and deliver a complete experience for the entire family. The baby boomer woman DOES care about this type of event and although price is important, it is rarely the deciding factor.

Begin With the End In Mind

When packaging your business it's always important to begin with the end in mind. In the previous step you developed a clear picture of your ideal family and the baby boomer woman who is driving the decision-making process. Now, you need to consider how you want to impact her and her family on an emotional level, as she's interacting with your funeral home.

For example, when she's initially checking you out, the first place she will probably visit is your website. When she's at your site you will want her to feel ...

Welcomed	Which means the design, colors, fonts etc should all be very female friendly (95% of funeral home websites stink at this)
Informed	There needs to be the right kind of information on the website to support her decisions. Now is the time to change it from a 'commodity' decision, based on price, to an 'experience' decision based on the value you offer to the family.

When she comes into your funeral home with her family to make arrangements you will want her to feel ...

Welcomed	Which means the room shouldn't look like a boardroom with stiff chairs and a large table separating the family from the arranger.
Emotionally supported	She needs to begin experiencing the support that you can provide to her family.
Empowered	She needs to feel that she can make a good decision that is good for her whole family.
That the decision was easy!	You've got to make the decision easy at this time. Always remember that a confused mind will never buy anything (and looking at a GPL is confusing!)

Similarly, when are delivering the memorial service, what kind of emotions do you want them to experience ... Connected? Supported?

When you begin with the end in mind you can design your inside reality and outside perception to meet the emotional goals. Otherwise you're just guessing ...

Build Your Content Foundation

The next step in Packaging Your Business is to build your content foundation. I refer to this as your 'foundation' because this supports all marketing activities from here on out.

Your foundation consists of at least 3 important components.

The first component of your foundation is educational material that helps someone learn about the practical issues related to the loss. You begin with the practical issues because that's what people focus on first. Then you progress to more emotional and family focused issues.

The next component is your Consistent Family Message. This is the 2 or 3 sentences that clearly communicate to a family exactly what you do. This takes your great inside reality, and projects it to the outside world, in a crisp, concise manner.

In a previous edition of this book I had an entire chapter dedicated to the Consistent Family Message. I've included that material again as a bonus chapter in this edition.

The third component in your foundation is what I call the "tell me more" section. This is the content that you use after someone has heard your Consistent Family Message and they are interested enough to ask you for more information. The initial message is two or three sentences long, but the "tell me more" section is typically one or two pages long and consists of 5 to 7 supporting points that describe how you are prepared to help the family.

The last piece in your content foundation is referred to as "The Path". This section is created with one goal in mind; to give the family a reason for doing something. Very few people understand that there are a set of 'universal' or 'common' steps that we all go through at a time of a loss and that a funeral

service (of some form) actually helps people move through these steps. When you can describe to someone the path they are on and the steps that are upcoming, they will see you as their coach and trust you to take them the rest of the way.

Create Your Marketing Tools

The last step in Packaging Your Business is to create your marketing tools. The good news is that if you've built a good solid foundation this is a relatively quick and painless process.

The most important tool in your arsenal is your website. I've already mentioned that 95% of funeral home websites stink at making the baby boomer woman feel welcome. The design, colors and fonts all scream that the site was built by men for men!

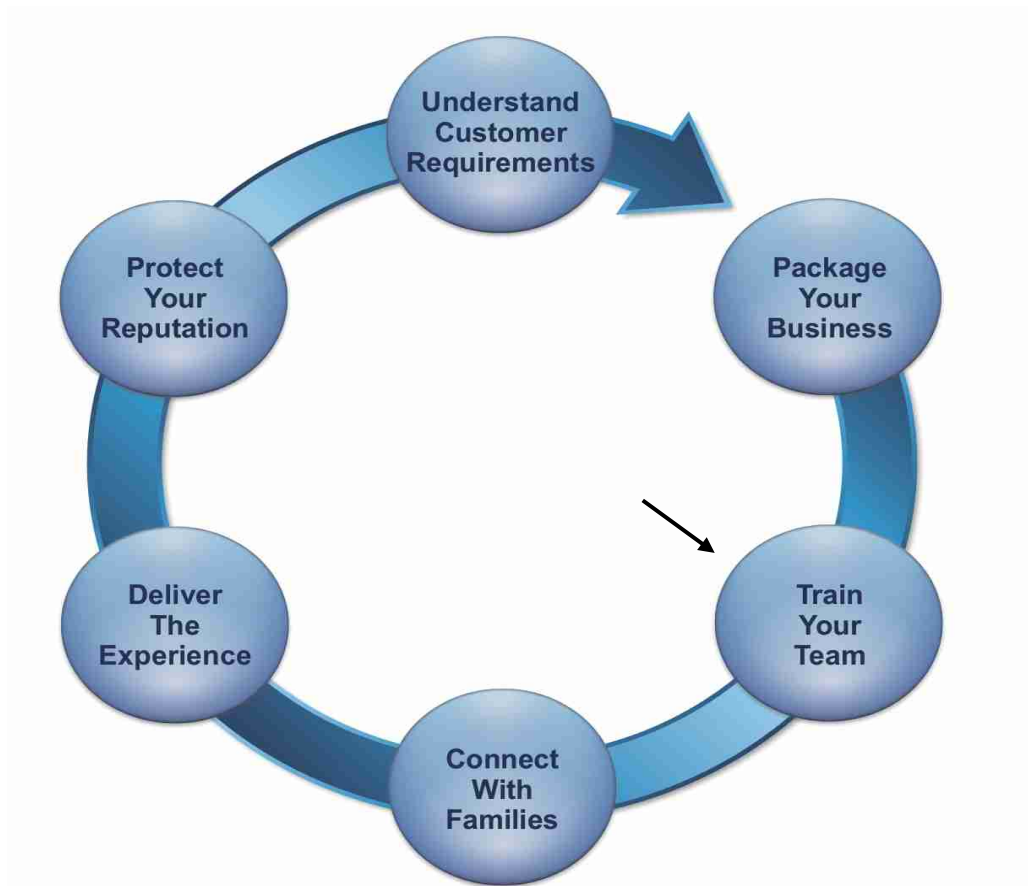
But even if you fix that problem the site still has a big whole ... The content. The good news is that now you can use the material from your content foundation to create a world class website. Lead with your educational material; connect that to your Consistent Family Message and offer the "tell me more" content if they're ready.

Another marketing tool that funeral homes often overlook is an 'on hold' message, the pre-recorded message that people hear when you put them on hold. They could just be listening to some canned music, but why not take this opportunity to start introducing your Consistent Family Message? Weave in a few testimonials from families and you've got a great 'on hold' message.

The last marketing tool that I'll mention is a Family Resource Guide. This is a very powerful document that can really simplify the arrangement meeting, as it takes a family step-by-step through the process.

The best Family Resource Guide I've seen was created by Anderson McQueen Funeral Home in St. Petersburg Florida. A few years ago we worked together on a Consistent Family Message project and they also licensed my 'The Path We All Walk' materials. They then worked with a talented graphics design person who transformed their current arrangers guide into a Family Resource Guide that sets a new standard in the industry.

Chapter 3 – Train Your Team



There are many challenges related to owning or managing any business. However, the number one challenge that I have heard over and over again, is getting your team to all pull in the same direction.

All of the time you've invested in understanding your customer and packaging your business is completely wasted if you cannot get your team to embrace the farewell experience model and help you implement it in your business.

I have had the pleasure of helping a number of funeral homes go through the type of transformation I am describing in this document. Sometimes I have played an active role in the training and sometimes I have simply provided input

and observed the process. From these projects I have pulled together the following four “lessons have been learned”:

Lesson #1 – Create a culture of continuous learning and improvement

It's easy to bring in an outside consultant, hold a two day training class, and declare your team “trained”. But in my experience, that rarely works. I call this the fire hose treatment. You turn on the hose and hope that they catch as much as possible.

Your employees will fall into one of two camps: Either they will see this as a couple of easy days away from the office and barely pay attention, or they will actively engage in trying to learn, but by the middle of the first day their heads will be bursting with new information and they won't be able to absorb any more.

The secret weapon of the most innovative, progressive, companies in any industry is that they created a culture of learning and improvement. Managers are measured on it, employees expect it, and customers benefit from it. Yes, they bring in outside experts, but they also learn from themselves by consistently measuring and evaluating their own performance.

Rather than flooding your team with information about the new marketing tools you've created and the new service packages, show them how those pieces fit into a big picture. Then show them a roadmap for developing their skills, implementing the tools, and growing together as a team.

Lesson #2 – Put the right person in the right job ... Then train!

Have you ever noticed that some people enjoy working by themselves on a detail oriented task? They can spend hours working on a spreadsheet, or writing obituaries, or even arranging flowers. Yet if you pull them into a conversation it's usually brief and to the point.

Have you also noticed that some people crave interacting with other people? They can't do anything without collaborating. They naturally connect with people and conversations can last for hours.

Both groups of people are a mystery to each other (and sometimes frustrate the heck out of each other). However, both groups are essential for running the type of funeral home I am describing in this document.

Researches have labeled these two groups; affective and effective. There is only one letter difference but the way they view the world is totally different.

Affective people tend to be more interested in the emotions related to any situation. They crave interactions, they love collaborating, and they measure success by the level of harmony in the room.

Effective people tend to be more interested in getting things done. They are ok working on their own, they aren't overly concerned with the feelings of others as long as they are producing their desired outcome (i.e., the almighty check mark on their "to do" list).

One of the keys to any successful team is to understand that everyone brings different skills to the table. Rather than forcing a team member to change their basic nature, a good leader recognizes the persons strengths and helps them to grow.

When following the Farewell Experience Strategy, it is important to understand that you need both 'affective' and 'effective' people. However, their roles are very different.

As a general rule, you should always have affective people in roles where they will be interacting with families. Place your effective people in roles where they can make sure that everything gets done properly and on time.

This may mean that you currently have people in roles that do not fit their basic nature. That's ok ... You're the coach and it's your job to put your players into the right roles so that you can succeed as a team.

Everyone needs training on the big picture, beyond that you should put your players into their right roles then train them on the details. If you try to teach everything to everyone, you'll just frustrate your team and waste a lot of time.

Lesson #3 – Build on your successes

Whenever someone is learning a new concept or a new technique they always wonder whether this will work for them. This is human nature so there's no use fighting it.

When implementing the Farewell Experience, some people are going to be naturally skeptical. Even when presented with case study after case study they will still worry about the one situation when it didn't work. If I had a dollar for every time I've heard "but our families are different"...

From my experience, the best way to deal with the skeptics is to create a success case from within your own funeral home. To do this, pick out a single team member who you feel has the best grasp of the material and the best attitude. Give them lots of extra attention and then wait for the inevitable success because it will come, it's only a matter of time. Once you've got some successes within your own funeral home the skeptics will get on board (or they'll leave which is my next point)

Lesson #4 – Some people would rather leave than change

One of the hardest things for me to personally understand about other people is their attitude towards change. That's because I'm a person that craves change (drives my wife nuts!).

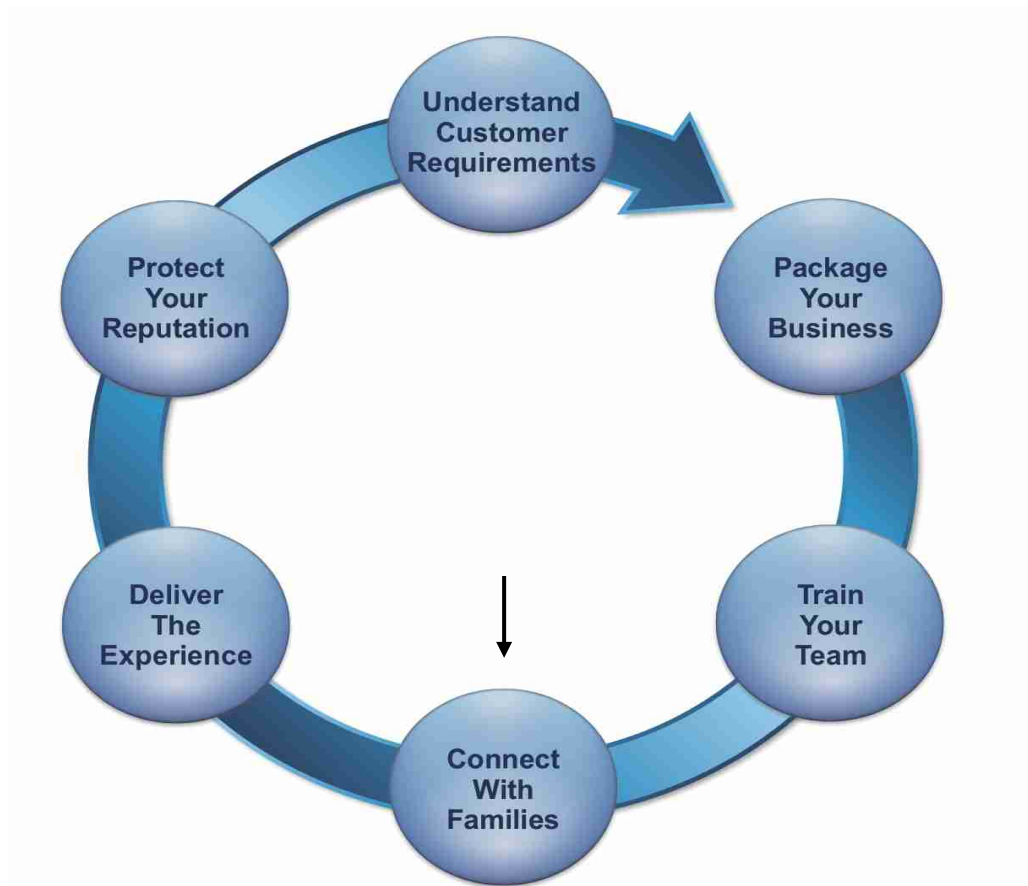
But the reality is that most people are uncomfortable with change. There's just too much uncertainty for them. They can't picture the future so they become stuck where they are and refuse to change.

Whenever a business goes through a major transformation it is inevitable that some people won't like the changes and will therefore leave the team. I have witnessed this over and over again as I've worked with clients. Sometimes those departures hurt in the short term but they rarely hurt in the long term.

By the way, there is absolutely no correlation between willingness to change and age. I have personally met people who have been in the funeral profession for 40+ years who have embraced the change and loved the idea of serving families in new ways. I have also seen people who were only 10 years into their careers leave to join a "traditional funeral home" because that's what they were comfortable with.

Training your team is a step that is often glossed over. But it is also the step that will make or break the future of your business.

Chapter 4 – Connect With Families



Somewhere in your community right now there is a baby boomer woman who is faced with the loss of a loved one but doesn't know what to do next. You have studied this person to understand her requirements. You have packaged up your business to show her that you are the best solution in the local market. You have trained your team and they are ready to deliver a beautiful and meaningful memorial experience to her family.

But first you have to connect with her and gain the opportunity to serve her family. In other words ... You need to win the call!

The key to understanding how to connect with any decision maker is to understand what is called the Educational Spectrum as illustrated below.



Your prospective family moves down this spectrum from **A** to **Z**. At **A**, they have no interest in hearing from a funeral home, but something happens in their life and they begin to move from left to right. At **Z**, the death has happened and they have selected your funeral home. If you wait until **X** or **Y** to market to them it's too late. At that point the only thing they will care about is price.

But if you can reach them earlier, perhaps at **M** or at least **T**, they will care about something very different. They will care about information. They are actively looking for information to help them make the decision. If you provide them with the information the chances of you winning the call go up dramatically.

If you question this, consider what happens when you are shopping for anything significant, let's use a new big screen TV as an example. Do you walk into Best Buy and buy the first thing you see? No! You study the market, you read reviews, you compare features, and you actively seek out information to help you make the decision. If a supplier can give you the information you need to make a decision and then show you that they are the best total value (not necessarily the cheapest price) you'll buy it from them almost every time.

The exact same thing is going on in the mind of the baby boomer decision maker. She is seeking information to help her make a decision.

If you recall from the chapter on Packaging Your Business, one of the tasks is to create your foundation of content. This is where that content comes into play!

Most funeral homes have some amount of budget set aside to advertise in their market. This advertising almost always follows the “Brand Awareness” model. The goal of this style of advertising is to create top of mind awareness so that the decision maker will think of you when their need arises. The problem is that this method of advertising only works if you have a huge budget.

The other form of advertising is called “Direct Response”. The goal of this form of advertising is to get you to take action now. Don't just remember me ... Do something!

The method I advocate is to use a Direct Response style of ad to get someone to read/watch your educational material. This material may be on a pre-recorded 800# or on a website, either way the same concept applies.

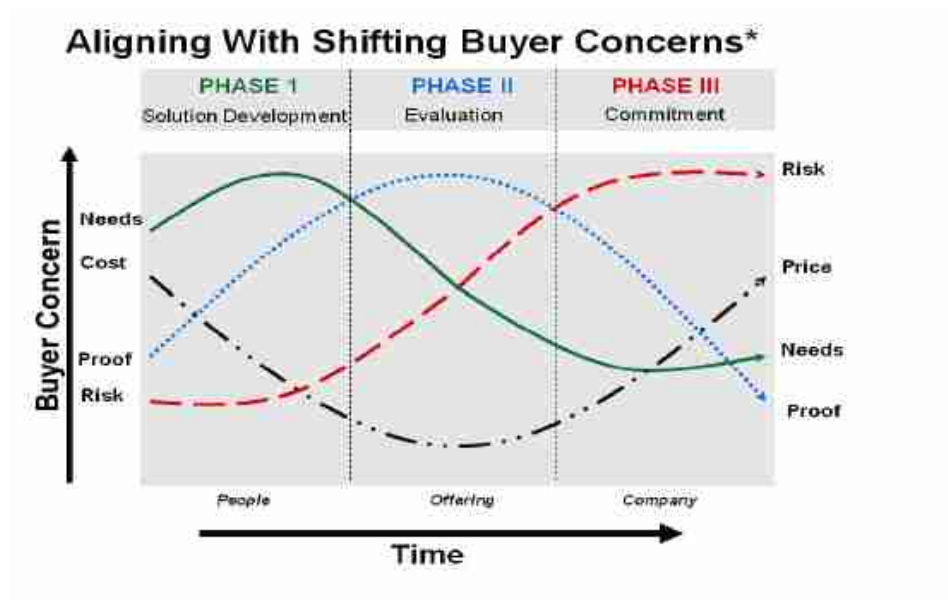
If you would like more information on this style of advertising study every book written by Dan Kennedy. He's the master of Direct Response and one of my personal mentors.

Once they have reviewed your educational content they will be interested in learning about your funeral home. At that point you introduce your Consistent Family Message supported by your “tell me more” material.

To review a web based version of this process check out www.AskHillcrest.com. This is a site I recently launched for a client. We will be using a mixture of methods to drive people to the site.

Your goal is to connect with the family, lead them through an education-based marketing and arranging process, and help them design a unique memorial experience that their family and friends will cherish. The important thing to understand about connecting with families is that you must begin by connecting on a point that they already care about. (hint ... the fact that you have been in business since 1910 is not something today's consumer cares about).

It's important to align your communications with the issues your family is concerned about as they walk through this experience. The following diagram is from a book called Strategic Selling. It was originally used to explain how technology managers bought their products, but it actually applicable to almost all purchasing decisions.



In phase 1 the buyer is primarily concerned with their needs. They will want to discuss their needs in detail before hearing about what you have to offer. That's why it is so important to begin every interaction with a family by focusing on their needs instead of on the history of your firm or your GPL.

In phase 2 the buyer becomes interested in evaluating your solution. They do not need to see the details, but they do need to see proof that you know what you're talking about. When arranging a Farewell Experience it is in your best interest to have pictures and/or testimonials from past events, which can prove to the family that other people have also valued the experience.

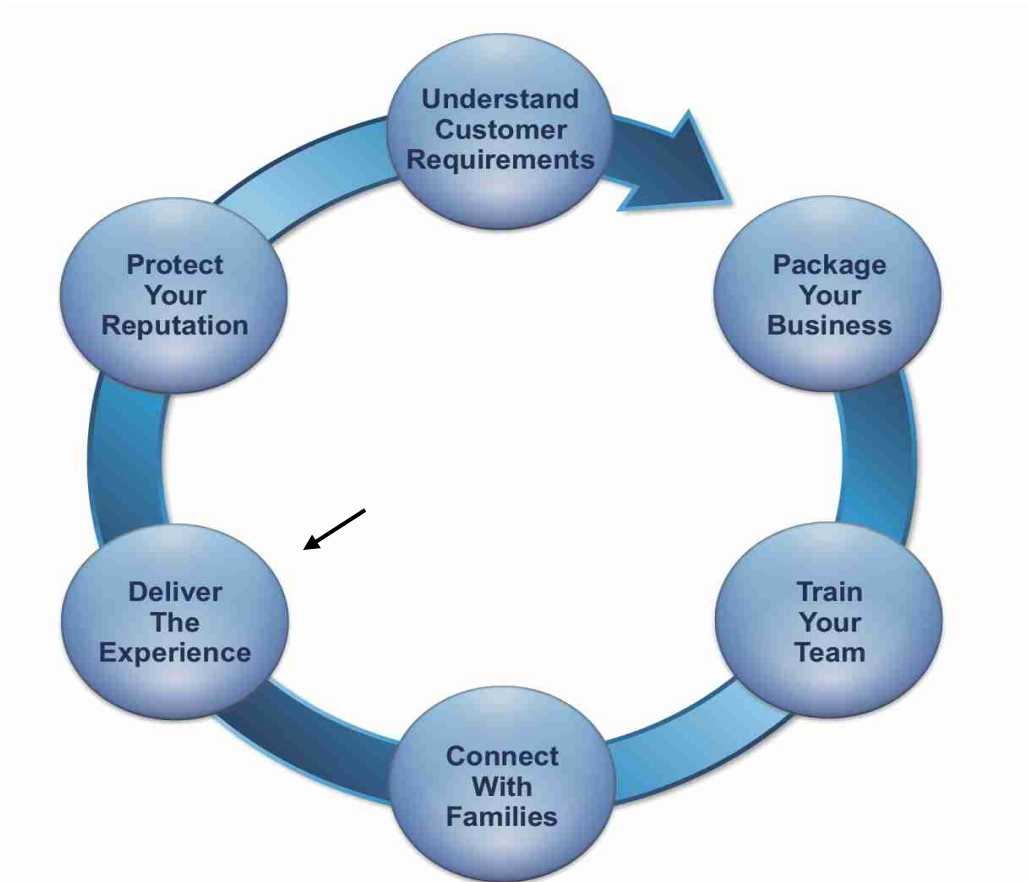
In phase 3, they are willing to make a commitment to work with your funeral home and they are primarily concerned about risks. Now is the time to do things such as introducing them to your team, so that they become comfortable with how the experience will progress. You may also want to be prepared to talk about

some of the practical issues, such as what will happen if it's raining, or what you will do if a lot of people show up.

Addressing simple issues like these will help to reduce their concerns and make them comfortable with their decision.

If you follow the risk sequence and address the families concerns in the right order, you will connect with the family. When you can do this properly, they will give you the opportunity to help them create a memorable farewell experience.

Chapter 5 – Deliver The Experience



The following is a 100% true story from my past.

Many years ago I took my wife and our four kids on our first trip to Disney World. I was somewhat skeptical as we walked into the park. I had never been to Disney and doubted that it was as “magical” as they liked to claim. The practical side of me was adding up the cost of the trip and hoping that this would be worth it.

We had been in the park less than 5 minutes when a young Snow White princess walked up to our little group. She didn't say a word to my wife or me, instead she bent down to my 8 year old daughter, looked into her in the eyes, gave her a big smile and said “thank you for coming to see us”.

The glow on my daughters face was absolutely priceless. In fact, at that moment I decided that I didn't really care what the trip cost. After seeing the look of complete joy in her eyes the trip was definitely worth it.

A week later, I was having lunch with one of my clients. I described our Disney “moment” to him and he smiled and said “oh you had one of those”.

It turned out that he had worked at Disney while in college and knew how the system worked. He explained to me how the Disney staff use remote cameras to monitor the crowds as they enter the park, looking for a certain profile.

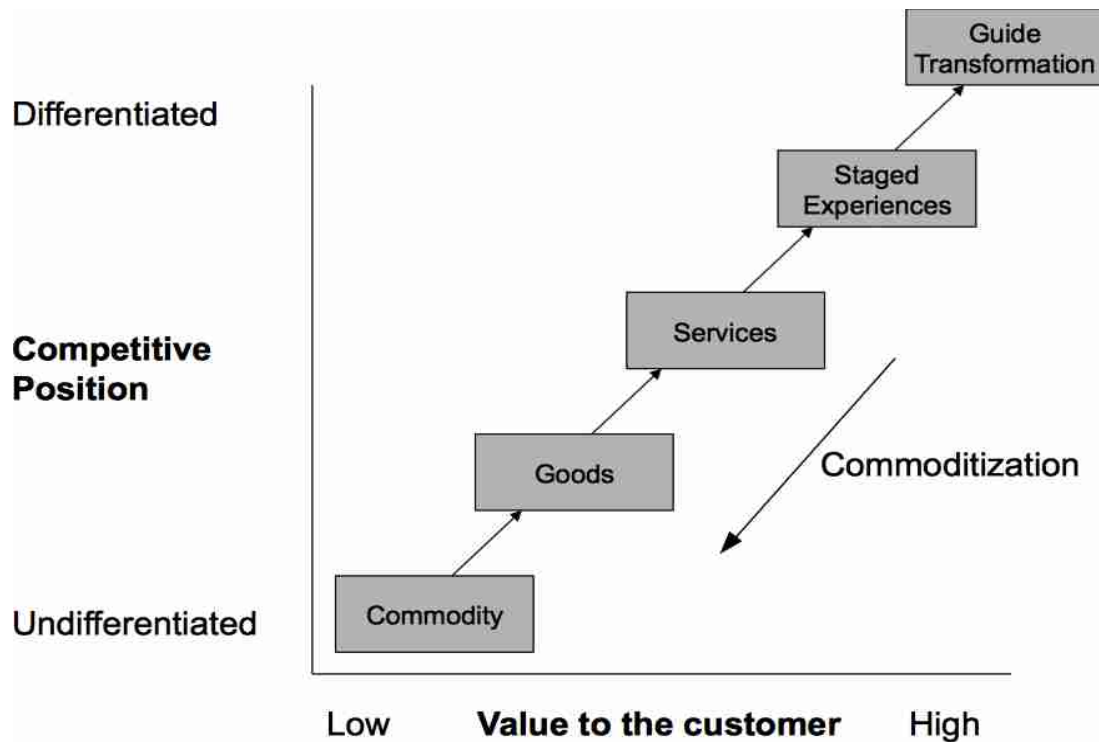
When they find someone that fits, they dispatch a princess with the clear assignment to give that family a “moment”. The entire thing had been planned, rehearsed, scripted and delivered with precision.

I was shocked! How could they plan such a beautiful moment for my family? And, how could they do that over and over again throughout the day. The answer is ... Disney is in the business of delivering transformational experiences. Other amusement parks give you entertainment and thrill rides. Disney gives you a ‘moment’ that changes your view of yourself and the world around you.

A little known secret is that the leading firms in the funeral home industry are not in the service business. They are in the business of delivering transformational memorial experiences. They have studied the books, they have attended the seminars, and they have designed their business accordingly.

To fully understand this topic you really need to study “The Experience Economy” by Pine & Gilmore, but I will attempt to give you the highlights that relate to your funeral home.

The following diagram is from page 166 in their book.



The diagram illustrates the various ways that a business can deliver value to a customer.

You can deliver a Commodity and you are of low value to a customer.

You can deliver a Good and you are of slightly higher value to a customer.

You can deliver a Service and you are of more value and your competitive position is getting better.

You can deliver a Staged Experience and you are of high value to a customer and your competitive position is strong.

Or you can deliver a Guided Transformation and you are of ultimate value to the customer and your competitive position is unmatched.

A discount service provider is strictly a Commodity. Most funeral homes operate at the service level of the economy. Price competition pushes many funeral homes down the scale towards the Goods and Commodity level. The leading funeral homes have learned how to stage experiences for families.

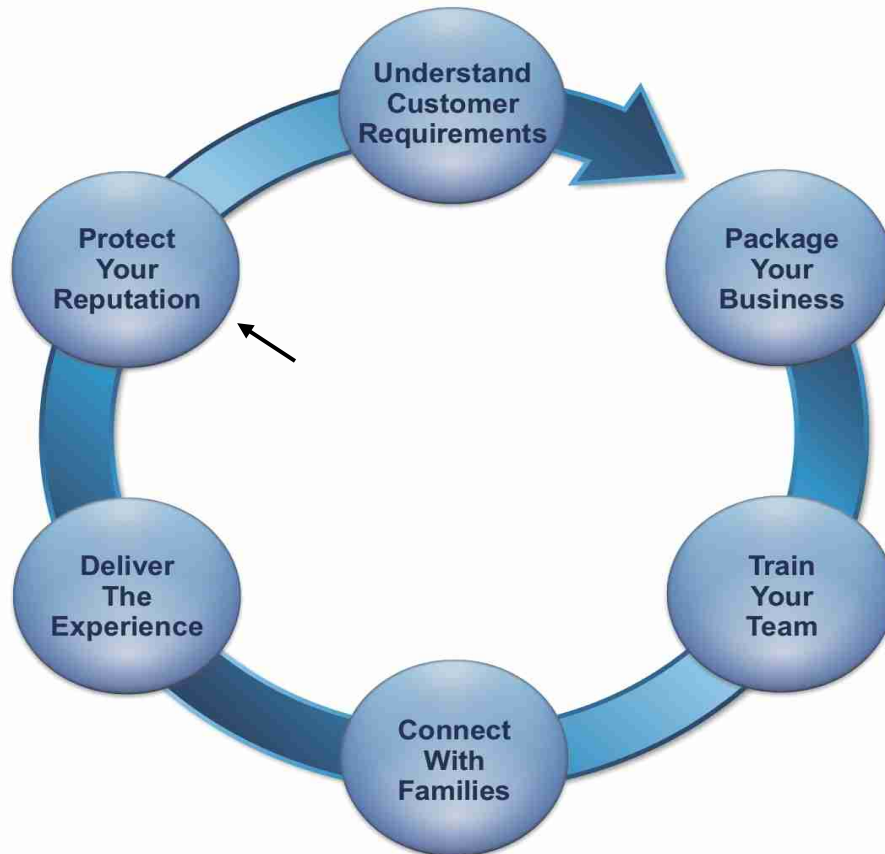
Here are a few quotes from the book and how they relate to your funeral home.

Experiences are as distinct from services as services are from goods	Is a funeral service all about the casket? No. And a funeral experience isn't just about how well you serve the family.
Experiences are events that engage individuals in a personal way	If your memorial event is essentially the same every day except for different pictures and a different video tributes ... It's not an experience.
Staging experiences is not about entertaining customers; it's about engaging them	When family members are passively observing the memorial they are not engaged (or entertained). When they are active participants in the telling of the story they are engaged in the process and will benefit from the experience
People purchase memorabilia as tangible artifacts of experiences	If you can create a valuable experience your memorabilia sales will go up.
The price point is a function of the value of remembering the experience	If you can deliver a memorable experience price is no longer an issue.

Baby boomers love experiences and hate services so it's time to move out of the funeral service business and into the farewell experience business. You have a choice ... Either you move up the scale or consumer pressures will push you down into being just 'another' commodity.

Chapter 6 – Protect Your Reputation

The final element of the strategic marketing process is called Protect Your Reputation.



Your funeral home business has always, and will always, live or die based on your reputation in the local community. Gain a reputation as a cold, manipulative, shyster ... and you might as well close your doors and sell your building! But gain a reputation as someone who delivers what today's families value and your business will flourish (in any economy!).

As I said in the introduction, one of the unavoidable realities of today's internet-driven world is that anyone with a computer and an axe to grind can slander your funeral home and ruin your hard-earned reputation.

Today's families do not ask each other for recommendations ... They look online!

Today's families do not tell their neighbors when they are happy or unhappy with your service ... They post it on their Facebook page or create a video and post it on YouTube, or write a review and post it on one of a dozen review sites.

Here is an actual review posted about a family-owned funeral home in New York City.

A Disgrace to Funeral Parlors (one star) - I wouldn't recommend this funeral home to my WORST enemy! Aside from their rude staff and drivers, this funeral home is operated more like a cut-throat business than a compassionate company dealing with grieving relatives.

That particular funeral home has 11 reviews and they average 1.5 out of 5 stars. Do you think this business will survive very long?

But it's not just the immediate family who is jumping on this bandwagon. Every single person who attends one of your visitations or memorial services feels qualified to announce their opinion of you to the world. Here's another example...

Absolutely Horrible! (one star) - The poorest excuse for a professional funeral home I have had contact with. Having served as pastor for over 45 years and performing hundreds of funerals, this home was the worst.

That's just the first paragraph of a four paragraph review. He goes on to lambast the funeral home things like; not being proactive enough when a large crowd showed up for the visitation and there were not enough chairs. At the end of his rant he casually mentioned that this was the first time he had been in that funeral home and he was there with a friend who wanted some company. He wasn't acquainted with the deceased or the family but he still felt that he needed to express his opinion to the world.

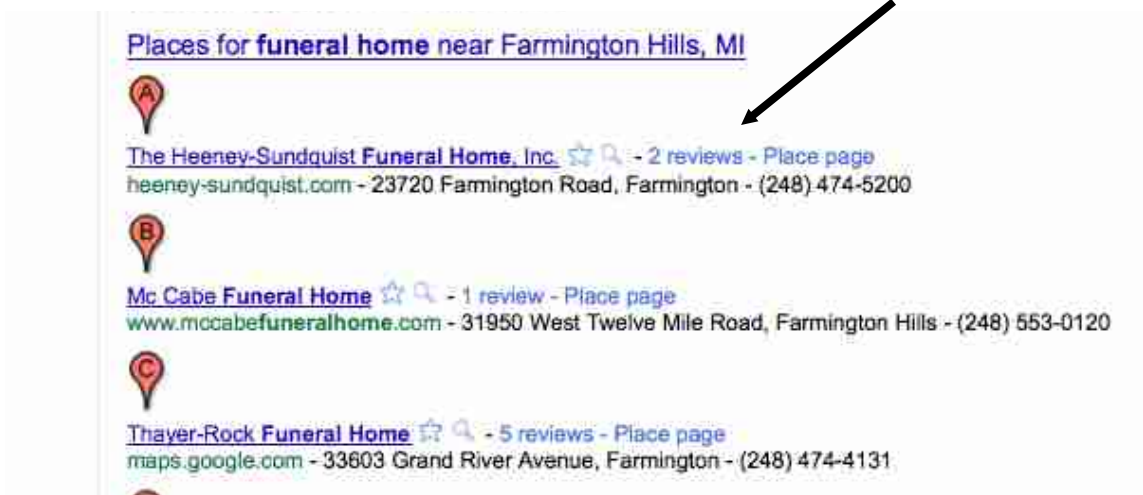
In bonus chapter #2 of this book I outlined a strategy for improving/establishing your online presence. If you need help in that area please be sure to read that chapter.

You can design your business to deliver an amazing farewell experience that your families will cherish. Yet there will still be some well-meaning person who thinks that the world needs to know that they didn't like the color of your carpet, so they are going to give you one star out of five!

Protecting your reputation online comes down to a very simple concept ... Making sure that any negative postings are buried under a pile of positive postings.

Your online reputation is impacted by three key things; postings on review sites, postings on social media sites, and news articles. Managing each of these requires a slightly different strategy.

Google has made it really easy for families to check up on your reviews by adding the “# reviews” link right beside your name on the Google Places listing.



If you have one bad review and 20 good reviews, most prospective families will overlook the bad review. But if you have one bad review and only 3 or 4 good reviews, they are going to wonder if you are the right funeral home for them.

It is now important for you to actively encourage your families to post reviews online. But, posting a review can be a bit of hassle, especially if you haven't done it before.

It's tempting to offer to post a review on behalf of a family. That is actually a really bad idea! Whenever you post any content online the address of your computer is recorded. If your reviews are all being posted by the same computer, Google will figure this out very quickly and your reviews will be banned.

There is a strategy to posting reviews that would take many pages to explain. Suffice it to say that it's not as simple as you might think. That's why there are service firms out there that will do this for you and I would recommend you explore outside assistance for this task.

The other important thing to know about online reviews is that most review sites will give the business owner the opportunity to respond. If someone posts a negative review it is important to respond with the correct information in a non-defensive tone, so that future readers will see that you were trying to be reasonable and the original poster may have over reacted.

A negative posting to a social media site requires a slightly different strategy.

Social media sites, such as Facebook, exist to facilitate interactions between people. Someone won't be giving you an official score like they do on review site (that's the good news) but they may be writing a very nasty rant that they share with their Facebook friends.

The important thing with protecting your reputation in the social media world is that you must be active in that world. Hundreds of funeral homes have created Facebook fan pages and have only one posting and no fans. Not only is that a waste of time, it's actually counter productive.

If you are active in the social media world, and a negative posting comes your way, you will be in a good position to respond. Other posters will see that you already have a good reputation and the negative person's comments won't carry much weight.

The key ... Be active before you need to protect yourself.

Protecting yourself from a negative news article also requires a very proactive approach.

Every funeral businesses owner runs the risk of having a negative news report published that references their name. All it takes is a team member to get involved in a bad situation and your business name is suddenly dragged into the mud.

When it comes to the press you typically do not get the opportunity to respond to the article. It's out there on the Internet and is now part of your permanent record.

But the search engines don't just care about news, they care about current news. This means that the way to respond to a negative news article is to publish a whole series of positive articles.

It won't happen overnight, but gradually the negative article will disappear from the first page of Google and future searchers will rarely, if ever, see the offending article.

Protecting your reputation online is not easy but it's also not optional. You absolutely must proactively protect yourself by building a solid reputation online before someone posts something that ruins your business and your legacy.

Chapter 7 – 12 Month Action Plan

In this section, I'm going to lay out a 12-month action plan for those of you who are interested in growing your funeral home business by delivering farewell experiences.

I know that it's possible to do this regardless of how tough your market is right now. The very first client that I worked with in this industry was in an extremely tough market and yet we were able to increase their revenue per call by 65%, and their call volume by 45%, making a significant improvement in their bottom line ... It is possible!

Keep in mind that this is a circular process. You do not have to accomplish everything in one pass. In fact, the best way to make this transformation is to put something in place at each step in the process and then re-visit it next year. That way you're making enhancements based upon what has worked in your unique market.

Here are the steps, broken down by quarters, within a 12-month period.

In Q1, the first three months of the year; work on your Understanding Your Customer and begin Packaging Your Business. If you have any time left over you should jump ahead to Protecting Your Reputation because it's never too early to start that task.

In the second quarter of the year, you should complete the work on your Packaging Your Business. There's a lot of work involved in creating your content foundation and individual marketing tools so it will probably take you an entire quarter to complete everything.

In the third quarter of the year, months 7, 8 and 9, work on the Training Your Team, begin Connecting With Families in new ways and begin Delivering the Experience in new ways.

During the last quarter of the year (Q4) work on perfecting you ability to Connect With Families and Deliver The Experience. Since you will now be receiving lots of positive feedback it is also appropriate to complete the Protect Your Reputation activities.

If you had absolutely nothing else to do, you could probably accomplish all of this in just three or four months. The problem is I've never met a funeral home owner with absolutely nothing to do!

That's okay. That's why I lay this out as a 12-month action plan. You can take 12 months and work on your business, or you can do like everybody else is doing right now and sit around and worry about the economy and the next election. Myself, I prefer to work on my business – worrying about it has never been shown to yield any kind of rewards.

And so, 12 months from now, where will you be? If you take no action at all... you'll probably continue to lose market share to the discount service provider, and your revenues will continue to shrink.

Or you can take action. You can use this next 12 months to reposition your business, to establish a unique selling proposition, and to move your business to the next level. The choice is yours.

We are here to help you succeed. For a complete and update list of our training materials and turnkey marketing solutions visit <http://www.funeralsuccess.com/>

Bonus Chapter #1 – Your Consistent Family Message

One of the keys to effective marketing is to anticipate the questions running through your prospect's minds and answering them before they are raised. Subconsciously this sends the message to the prospect that you understand them so well that you can anticipate their needs and are prepared to help.

There are two common questions running through the mind of every person who is considering your funeral home. They will rarely ask these questions out loud, but they will always be thinking them:

The first question is ... "Why should I have a service of some kind?"

And the second question is ... "Why should I choose your funeral home?"

If you cannot answer the first question, you will lose these leads and hand them over to discount service providers, or if you win over the call from that lead, the family will probably choose to have no memorial service.

If you cannot answer the second question, you will lose a full service call to another full service funeral.

So which of those two scenarios is a bigger problem for your funeral home?

Most of the clients that I have worked with one to one, initially think that the second scenario (them -vs- a competitor) is the more common problem. However, after we look closely at their numbers and discussed the issue, they realized that their 'inability' to explain why a family should have a funeral is hurting them far worse than their traditional competitors.

"Why should I have a funeral?" and "Why should I choose your funeral home?"

Your Consistent Family Message must answer both of these questions!

In past editions of this book, I had a section entitled "Become Unique"... This section described the steps involved in creating a Unique Selling Proposition (USP). The content in that section is still very relevant and therefore I have included it as a **bonus** chapter in this edition.

Creating a USP is a good first step, however in my view, it does not go sufficiently far enough. A good USP answers the question "Why should I choose your funeral home?" but does not answer the question ""Why should I have a service of some kind?".

The "Consistent Family Message" expands on the USP. The most obvious change is that I have replaced the term "Unique" with the term "Consistent". The primary reason for this change is to highlight the fact that it is no longer enough to be 'unique' ... You must also communicate your uniqueness in a very consistent manner.

This means that every piece of marketing material you put out must always communicate the same, well crafted, message to your audience.

It also helps to emphasize to your staff that this only works if everyone is consistent. The power of a Consistent Family Message is totally destroyed if one single staff member doesn't follow through on the promises made in the message.

Over the years I have found that the vast majority of funeral home owners have a real problem with the term "selling". Initially I was puzzled by this because I had never experienced an industry in which "selling" is practically blasphemy.

However, as I've come to know more owners on a more personal level I can see that to you this isn't a business as much as it is a calling or a ministry, and therefore we have replaced "Selling Proposition" with "Family Message"...

I would like to challenge you to go 'beyond your USP' and create a Consistent Family Message as a foundation for all of your marketing efforts.

You are probably thinking...."ok John, nice idea but you haven't told me how to do it yet!"

To help with this task, I suggested a book called Inside Advantage by Robert Bloom. The premise of the book is that all businesses contain within them the seeds of a strong competitive advantage. By identifying those seeds, cultivating them and communicating these to your target market you cannot help but grow. I like the process that Bloom outlines and have used it successfully with many clients.

The basic foundation of this book is the following formula:

Who + What + How + Own IT! = Inside Advantage

Here's how Bloom defines these terms on page 19 of his book:

- ✓ **Who** is the *core customer* most likely to buy your product or service in the quantity required for optimal profit?
- ✓ **What** is the *uncommon offering* that your business will own and leverage?
- ✓ **How** is the *persuasive strategy* that will convince your *core customer* to buy your *uncommon offering* versus all competitive offerings?

- ✓ **Own IT!** Is the series of *imaginative acts* that will celebrate your *uncommon offering* and make it well known to your *core customers*.

When you go through this exercise for your funeral home you will collect pages of notes on each of these elements. From those notes it's possible to craft your Consistent Family Message.

Example #1 – John's Cremations Inc. - A discount cremation service provider

Consider the four steps in Bloom's process: How could John's Cremations answer these questions?

Who – your core customer	Families who have experienced the loss of a loved one but do not want any memorial service and want to save money
What – your uncommon offering	Guaranteed lowest price when compared to the traditional funeral homes in the area
How – your persuasive strategy	A website that shows our prices versus the prices of traditional funeral homes
Own IT! - your imaginative acts	A series of ads that show a cumulative total of the amount of money saved by families who choose our service instead of a traditional funeral home.

Now consider the two questions I posed at the beginning of this section "Why should I have a service of some kind?" and "Why should I choose your funeral home?"

How would John's Cremations answer these questions?

"Why should I have a service of some kind?"....you shouldn't

"Why should I choose your funeral home?"...guaranteed lowest price

So their Consistent Family Message could be something along the lines of...

“John's Cremations helps families who really don't want the fuss and expense of a traditional funeral. Our Low Price guarantee means that you will always save money with us. Check out our website to see how much we have saved other families so far this year” !!!

Example #2 – John's Funeral Home – A traditional funeral home that delivers innovative memorial experiences

Consider the four steps in Bloom's process. How could John's Funeral Home answer these questions?

Who – your core customer	Families who have experienced the loss of a loved one but are not sure how to honor their wishes while taking care of the needs of the family and friends
What – your uncommon offering	A flexible style of memorial experience that can be tailored to each family's wishes regardless of their budget
How – your persuasive strategy	A website that shows pictures and videos of how other families have experienced our style of service
Own IT! - your imaginative acts	A series of community events that teach families how to design uplifting memorial experiences.

Now consider the two questions I posed at the beginning of this section “Why should I have a service of some kind?” and “Why should I choose your funeral home?”

How would John's Funeral Home answer these questions?

"Why should I have a service of some kind?"....to connect with your family and honor the life of your loved one.

"Why should I choose your funeral home?"...our unique memorial experiences can be tailored to fit all budgets.

So their Consistent Family Message could be something along the lines of...

"John's Funeral Homes helps families who wish to come together and honor the life of their loved one. We offer families a unique memorial experience that strengthens family bonds, celebrates the life of your loved one, and can be tailored to fit your family's budget."

You probably noticed that I mentioned the dreaded price issue. In today's economy you cannot avoid this issue, so you are better off dealing with it right up front. I'm not saying we're the lowest price, I'm just saying that the service can be tailored to fit your family's budget.

Bonus Chapter #2 – Improving Your Online Presence

Hopefully by now everyone can agree with me that the Internet has fundamentally, and irreversibly, changed our society. It has impacted every from aspect of our lives from how we entertain ourselves, to how we gather information, to how we collaborate, to how we hold elections.

Today's families do not look in the phone book....they look online.

Today's families do not ask each other for recommendations....they look online.

Today's families do not tell their neighbors when they are happy with your service...they post it their Facebook page or create a video and post it on YouTube.

A few facts you may not be aware of...

- ✓ 73% of all online activity is related to local content
- ✓ 82% of local searchers follow up with a phone call or show up on your doorstep
- ✓ 66% of Americans use local search to find local businesses
- ✓ 54% of Americans have replaced phone books (Yellow Pages & Business Directory) with internet and local search
- ✓ 43% of search engine users are seeking a local merchant with the intent of buying offline
- ✓ 41% of consumers say they use a location in their search – “Funeral Home in Chicago”

sources – Google, TMP and Comscore

The title of this section is Improve Your Online Presence. That's a huge scope of material and I could easily fill an entire book just on this subject. Instead I'll get right to the point and give you some specific action items.

4 Tips for Improving Your Online Presence

Tip #1 - Fix Your Website

By now the vast majority of funeral home's have a website. Many of you are on your second or third generation of website. But sadly, many funeral home owners that I speak with are embarrassed by their website.

Never forget that in today's Internet driven world family members will check out your website before deciding to do business with you. If you are trying to present yourself as being a very professional firm, yet your website looks like it was developed by a team of high school kids...your business will suffer.

There are 3 common mistakes that I see with too many funeral home websites.

The first mistake deals with navigation (i.e. how do I find stuff). Today's Internet user has a very short attention span and you need to make it as easy as possible for them to navigate your site. If a visitor cannot find the information they need in one or two clicks they will give up.

That means you should absolutely get rid of an "enter site" page or any "survey pop up" that gets in the way of what the visitor wants to do.

You should also put your current obituaries right on the home page so it's easy for people to find them. This is the number one visited page on your website so you should make it really easy for families by putting your services right up front.

The second big mistake that I see on funeral home websites involves the choice of color scheme. Have you ever noticed that most funeral homes websites use very dark tones? Lots of browns, dark green, sometimes dark blue. These colors choices scream to the visitor that this site was designed by men for men.

FACT: the majority of people visiting a funeral home website are women. I verified this on a site called quantcast.com. Just enter your website name and if you have enough traffic they will be able to give you a profile of your visitors. I tested this with 20 of the leading funeral homes in the country....on average 61% of the visitors were women.

So if the majority of your website visitors are women why wouldn't you use a color scheme that is more appealing to women?

The third major problem I see at funeral home websites is the content (i.e., text). The vast majority of home pages that I have seen begin with a history of the firm. In today's Internet world that is a huge mistake!

Your home page should begin with your Consistent Family Message that I discussed in a previous chapter. It should then present information that will help the visitor make good decisions. The history of your firm may be important to you but it's rarely the #1 priority for your website visitor.

Tip #2 - Claim Your Social Media Sites

My second tip for improving your online presence is for you to claim your free social media sites. That doesn't mean you necessarily have to start using all of these site but you should claim them as soon as possible.

There are literally thousands of different website on the Internet that are designated as being part of the Social Media world. Of those, there are

approximately 50 that dominate. The two that you are probably the most familiar with are Facebook and YouTube.

Most social media sites, including Facebook and YouTube allow you to setup a dedicated page for your funeral home. In the case of Facebook, this is called your Facebook fan page. In the case of YouTube, this is called your YouTube Channel.



The interesting thing is that none of the social media sites put very many restrictions on what you decide to name your individual page (or fan page, or channel, etc.).



This may not sound like much of a problem...but consider this scenario.

Let's say you work for John's Funeral Home and your main competitor is Bob's Funeral Home.

You could easily go to YouTube and create a new channel with name of Bob's Funeral Home. The official link to this channel would be youtube.com/bobsfuneralhome

At that point Bob's Funeral Home is locked out of every being able to use their name for a YouTube channel.

Do you see the problem here? It's really easy for your competitors, or a disgruntled former employee, or a dissatisfied customer to legally use your funeral home name to claim social media sites all over the internet.

Once they've claimed the social media site they can publish anything they want and you will have no control at all.

Here's a few of the top sites that your should claim asap.

youtube.com	livejournal.com
facebook.com	myspace.com
wordpress.com	livevideo.com
blogger.com	dailymotion.com
hubpages.com	twitter.com
friendfeed.com	typepad.com
multiply.com	bloghi.com

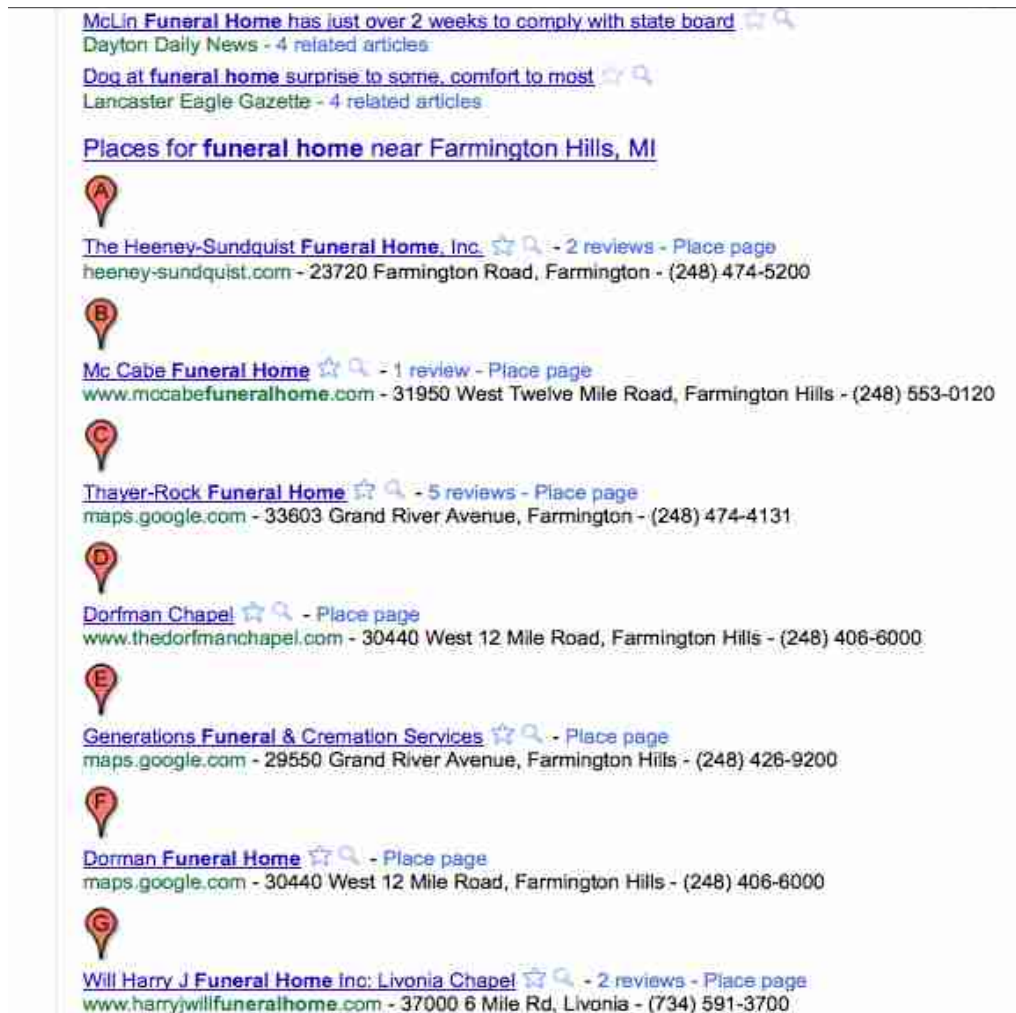
Tip #3 - Claim Your Google Local Places Page

Did you know that in 2010 Google created 43 million free web sites and one of them is yours?

The are called Google Local Places pages and they are integrated with Google Maps and with the Google search results.

In mid 2010 Google changed the format of their search page to include Google Local Places listings mixed in with the organic search results. The Google Local Places listings display business in your local area. If I search on "funeral home" where I live in Farmington Hills Michigan the following Google Local Places listings are displayed on page one.

You will notice the red letters (A, B, C and so forth) followed by the business name, the number of reviews, and a link that says “Places page”. That link goes to your free web page courtesy of Google!



I have heard that Google created this to inflict even more pain on the Yellow Pages since they were trying to charge customers hundreds of dollars for the same listings. If you click on the Places page link you will see a page that looks like the following.

The Heeney-Sundquist Funeral Home, Inc. ☆

23720 Farmington Road, Farmington, MI 48336-2317
 (248) 474-5200
 heeney-sundquist.com
 Directions Search nearby Save to... more▼

Categories: Funeral Home, Cremation Service
Transit: Grand River @ Grove (0.2 mi) 330, 385, ...

3 reviews **Your rating:** ★★★★★

A family-owned funeral home providing funeral and cremation services for the great Farmington area for over 160 years.
 - From the owner

Details

Email: heeney-sundquist@sbcglobal.net
 Business owner
 More details »

Photos & Videos Upload a photo

citysearch.com

Print Email Link

Free Genealogy Search
 1) Search for Your Family Members
 2) Build Your Complete Family Tree!
 Genealogy.Archives.com

Notice the check mark in the middle of the page where it says “Owner-verified listing”. That tells you that the owners of this funeral home have claimed their listing and now have full edit rights on the listings.

Here's a second listing.

Generations Funeral & Cremation Services ☆

29550 Grand River Avenue, Farmington Hills, MI 48336-5620
 (248) 426-9200
 Directions Search nearby Save to... more▼

Category: Funeral Home
Transit: Grand River @ Tulane (75 ft) 330, 805

Your rating: ★★★★★

Photos & Videos Upload a photo

Be the first to upload a photo

Reviews by Google users

Been here? Rate and review

Related places

Generations Funeral & Cremation Services 23 mi SW 2360 E Stadium Blvd, Ann Arbor, MI Crematories, Funeral Homes & Directors, Funeral Home	Generations Funeral-Cremation 8.0 mi NE 3924 12 Mile Rd, Berkley, MI Funeral Home
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Print Email Link

Notice how this one says “Business owner?”. That tells you that Google is waiting for the funeral home owner to come and claim their free listing. Until they claim it they have not edit rights on the page.

Why should you claim your listing? Because they are getting a huge amount of traffic and until you claim it you have no ability to edit the content to highlight the best parts of your business (e.g., your Consistent Family Message)

Also, if you have not claimed your listing it is automatically lower in the rankings than those that have been claimed.

Tip #4 - Maximize Your Exposure on Page #1 of Google

My fourth tip for improving your online presence is you need to grab as many spots on page 1 as possible.

The first page of Google is the main battle ground on the Internet. 87% of all clicks happen on page 1, 10% on page 2 and 3% thereafter.

Some funeral home's only have one spot on the entire first page, some have zero. That is directly impacting the amount of traffic flowing to their website and the number of families they are having the opportunity to serve.

To maximize your listings on page one of Google there are four initiatives to consider.

- Set up a Google Adwords campaign (that's their paid listings on the right)
- Claim and optimize your Google Places listing
- Perform Search Engine Optimization (SEO) work on your primary site to move it up in the listings
- Publish good content to your social media sites to claim even more spots on page one.

The fourth point is probably one that you have never considered. It's actually very possible to have one of your social media sites appear on page one of Google (and push your competitor off of page one).

The easiest way to do this is to publish videos. Eighty Percent of all internet traffic is now video. Google knows this and places a very high priority on videos when it determines the order of search engine results.

My Story

It was the fall of 2002 that I took my first steps into a local funeral home in a small town Michigan. I had been a professional marketing consultant for many years and worked with hundreds of clients in 15 different industries. My passion was, and is, to help business owners take their companies to the next level. Yet, I had never had a client in the funeral home business and frankly I wasn't sure I wanted one.

As a business person, I looked at the funeral home market as being on the edge of a major chasm. The industry reports that I had read told me that less than 50% of funeral homes would make it over the chasm. The rest would crumble under the weight of declining market share and rising cremation rates. The reports also talked about the consolidation going on in the industry and how the days of the independent funeral home owner were numbered.

As a consumer, I walked into the building with the same sense of dread that I always had when walking into any funeral home. I had attended too many funerals over the years and had always left with an overwhelming feeling of “whew...I'm glad that's over with” or “I'd never want to put my family through that”. I had never personally met a funeral home owner and I wondered what kind of person could work in this environment and deal with such a painful issue (i.e., death) day in and day out. My perception of funeral home owners was about to change...

I was ushered into a conference room where I met with the owners. They immediately surprised me on many levels. More energized than I expected, more business savvy than I expected, and absolutely passionate about dominating each of their four markets. They also saw funeral service as a calling, almost a ministry. Their passion for helping people shined through.

Over the course of the next 3 hours we mutually interviewed each other. They had met with dozens of different marketing consultants from inside the funeral home industry and were looking for a fresh perspective. I was committed to only working with the best company in a given industry because my style of marketing is very truth-based and only works if the company can deliver on the promises we make.

In hindsight, I won them over when I told them “Never spend a dollar on any marketing or advertising unless you can measure the results. Otherwise you’re just throwing your money away.” They won me over when one of them said “The cremation crisis is a bunch of bull. Cremation only deals with the disposition of the remains and it has nothing to do with how you can deliver a service that addresses the emotional, relational, and spiritual needs of the family.” And with that....a business relationship was launched and a transformation process began.

Skipping ahead 3 years, you may wonder if the transformation worked. Working together we increased overall revenues at their funeral homes by 65%, our average revenues related to cremation services are up 110%, and our customer satisfaction rating is at 99.5%.

So how did we get here?

The answer is that we followed the exact same process I have laid out in this book, the Strategic Marketing Process. Some of the labels we used for the various steps have changed from the original version but the overall methodology has not changed.

We began by studying the local market and by doing competitive research. We then packaged up the business, built our content foundation, and trademarked key words so that our competitors could not copy us.

We then trained the team on how to deliver our new style of service and created education based marketing that connected with local families. We next focused on delivering a service that always exceeded expectations and protected our reputation by collecting positive reviews.

During that same 2002 to 2005 period, Michigan was already bogged down in the economic depression that did not hit the rest of the country until 2008. Yet we grew revenues by 65%....that's the power of the Strategic Marketing Process.

Word began to spread and the next thing I knew I was receiving calls from funeral homes all over the country. At the time I had clients in over a dozen different industries and knew I needed to focus on a specific niche in order to grow my business and leverage my time. After the success of my initial project focussing on the funeral home market made a lot of sense.

And with that decision I launched FuneralSuccess.com, loaded it with free content, wrote the first version of this book and began signing up new funeral home clients.

From 2005 to 2008 I travelled extensively and had the pleasure of working one-on-one with some of the leading firms in the industry. The work was invigorating but the travel was taking it's toll. With 4 young kids at home plus another whole company that I continued to operate (Customer Driven Marketing) I was being stretched too thin.

By 2009, in all honesty....I was starting to lose faith in funeral home owners. For every Anderson McQueen that I worked with there were 50 owners who wanted to pay my fees but weren't really willing to change. My own marketing efforts were generating lots of new clients for me but if a client isn't willing to change it turns into a lot of frustration for both of us.

Then in June of 2009 I experienced the passing of my mother. I thought I was prepared for this moment but you can never be prepared...

Three days before my mother passed I decided to visit the local funeral home where she had made arrangements years ago. I wanted to see what they had to offer our family. Did they have a plan? Could they give us the funeral experience that we wanted and our mother deserved?

They had a reputation as being a good firm. Not great...but good. When I met with the funeral home owner I asked if he had any unique services that we could take advantage of....he gave me a blank stare. I asked if there was anything we could do to upgrade the service for her....he suggested upgrading the casket. I was appalled.

I was very tempted to move the arrangements to another local firm but instead decided to take charge. I carefully dictated a long list of requirements to the funeral home owner covering everything from exactly how he was to do the removal, to how we wanted the visitation to run, to how we wanted a dove release at graveside. To his credit he did not argue and cooperated as best he could. Sadly, many of the tasks fell upon our shoulders because he had no way to do them.

It's important to note that none of my requests were unique. In fact, there were all small personal touches that I had learned from my funeral home clients. They were just things that this very traditional funeral home was unprepared to do for us. He was prepared to be courteous, take care of my mother's body and rent us a badly decorated room. We needed a lot more....

My mother's service turned out perfect. It was exactly what she would have wanted (complete with piano music and late night fireworks). Our family was delighted and all of our relatives commented on how it had been a great event.

I had a chance to talk to the funeral home owner after the service and I asked him if he would use some of these ideas with other families her served. He shook his head and said "it seemed like a lot of work"....I wanted to deck him!

This extremely painful event COMPLETELY confirmed my belief that a well executed funeral experience can be extremely healing for a family. But it also confirmed my belief that too many funeral homes are not prepared to meet the needs of today's families.

And with that, I recommitted myself to the funeral industry. To seek out those few brave owners who are willing to change but need a roadmap, some guidance and some tools. I'll continue to help those funeral homes that are willing to change, we'll transform their business, and get them ready to serve families for generations to come. In the meantime, their competitors can fight over every call and keep lowering their prices until they can't afford to stay open.

I am a catalyst for change. If you are ready to change contact me. If you are not ready to change please don't call. We'll both just end up frustrated.

On a final note...people often ask me...why do I work in the funeral home industry at all? I continue work in other industries and most of them are far more lucrative (and easier). Why do I also work in the funeral home industry? It comes down to something that I read years ago "whenever you're helping someone heal, you're doing God's work". I know that every funeral director that I've ever worked with is in this business to help families heal during the loss of a loved

one. If I can help you with your noble calling, that means I've indirectly helped families all over the country.

For information on my current marketing services and upcoming speaking events visit www.FuneralSuccess.com