

Memorial Business Journal

The weekly resource for progressive funeral directors, cemeterians and cremationists



Action Item: Implementing Celebrant Services Redefine the Options Offered by Your Funeral Home To Reflect Changing Consumer Attitudes

YORK, PA. – In the past few years, several national opinion polls have revealed that Americans believe that religion is losing its influence on life within the United States. This statistic is hardly a revelation to those in funeral service who have seen fewer religious services being performed as part of the funeral rites.

Too often, this change in attitude results in a family opting for an immediate disposition of the remains and no service. Historically, many people have attached themselves to the con-

cept that funerals have to be religious and they have to be embedded into a church situation. So if someone is not interested in this type of service, what else can a funeral home offer?

We will get to that in a minute but first, consider this. In late 2008, a Gallup Poll revealed that two-thirds of Americans said that religious influence is waning, continuing a consistent downward trend. Surveys taken 40-50 years ago typically revealed that about 80 percent of the population in the United States actively participated in organized religious services on a regular basis. Today, would it surprise you to think that those numbers are nearly reversed, with only slightly more than 20 percent of the population actively participating in religious ceremonies on a regular basis?

It didn't surprise Ernie Heffner, president of Heffner Funeral Homes & Crematory, York, Pa. Heffner was already aware that families were looking for something other than a religious service. In fact a year before the Gallup Survey, he signed up for a celebrant certification program offered by Doug Manning and Glenda Stansbury of the In-Sight Institute, which is based in Oklahoma City, Okla. The program basically teaches funeral directors to be more involved with the families in creating personalized services.

"We've been doing this since 1999," Stansbury said. "We've trained over 1,400 celebrants in the United States and Canada.

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Above photo: A panoramic view of the Iraq and Afghanistan War Flag Memorial at Prospect Hill Cemetery in York, Pa. Currently, the display consists of 5,685 flags. Three different areas acknowledge Iraq, Afghanistan and Pennsylvania losses.

Our goal is to train people to understand the value of the funeral, understand how a good funeral helps people in their grief journey.” Stansbury had noticed the increasing number of direct dispositions and believes it corresponded to the feeling that more people are seeing less value in a typical funeral service.

Heffner was thinking the same thing. “We want to have services that are of meaning or value and it pains me to see people just get rid of the body,” he said. “And putting extra stripes on the casket doesn’t ring anybody’s bell.”

Heffner was planning on traveling to Pittsburgh for the three-day, 17-credit celebrant certification program with John Katora, a vice president at his firm. “We decided we were going to become certified celebrants, not because we thought we were definitely going to do it but if we didn’t go through the training program, we might not know exactly what it would be all about,” Heffner said. “The whole issue is, I don’t think we can afford to be doing boring cookie-cutter services because it is going to be our industry’s downfall,” he added. “We have a 41 percent cremation rate and we’re seeing an increasing rate in the number of people who are having no services, including those who are choosing burial.”

He was open to suggestions. “After all my years in funeral service, I am less confident about what I am doing now than I ever was,” he said. “It is like I don’t know what is coming tomorrow. Everything is changing around us.”

Katora was unable to attend the session, so Heffner invited his wife, Laura, to accompany him. “Coming home from Pittsburgh after the session I could not figure out in my head that if you are a funeral director, how could you be a celebrant,” Heffner said. “A celebrant who is very proficient at what they do will require at least 7 to 9 hours of additional time. While I am driving I am thinking there is no way that I can ask my associates to add 7 to 9 hours to what they are doing already working with families. I also thought that I couldn’t afford to hire somebody to be a staff celebrant.”

Further, Heffner did not have any idea how many people would be interested in this type of option in his service area. He recalled how many times he sat in an arrangement conference and listened to a family say, “well dad doesn’t belong to a church. But Uncle Harry goes to church,” which is followed by them looking at each other asking, “what’s his minister’s name?”

“I was hearing that since I first started arranging services in the 1970s,” Heffner said. “We’re still doing the same thing we did in the 1970s, we’re getting the rent-a-pastor. Some of them are nice folks and everybody probably has one or more that they call when a family isn’t formally affiliated with a church. And you are sitting there with your fingers crossed hoping that clergy person doesn’t say ‘Bob’ when the deceased man’s name is ‘Bill.’ It happens. It ruins a service and is never forgotten by those in attendance.”

That was Heffner’s frustration driving home from that celebrant certification program in the spring of 2007. “I couldn’t figure out how to transition my funeral director staff into being involved in celebrant services,” he said.

“I used to think our industry failed to provide contemporary consumers with value and relevant services,” Heffner said. “I used to think the reason that people were choosing direct cremation with no service was because we, as an industry in general, didn’t do a good enough job of the show business and hospitality to make them feel like they received good value for the money they paid.”

Why were so many consumers deciding not to have a funeral and what role, if any, did the clergy play? The question nagged him.

The Original Plan

His original plan as of January 2009 was to transition Betty Frey, a sales associate with his firm since 1991, to a blended role of at-need celebrant and preneed sales associate. It was agreed that Frey would receive her celebrant certification at the International Cemetery, Cremation and Funeral Association’s University College of 21st Century Services that summer. By the middle of March, that plan was dramatically revised. What happened?

Laura Heffner found an Associated Press article in the local paper that she shared with her husband; and it changed everything. The article reported on the 2008 American Religious Identification Survey by researchers at Trinity College in Hartford, Conn., which surveyed 54,461 adults from February through November 2008. The survey focused on religion, beliefs and attitudes, and found that traditional organized religion played less of a role in many lives. A telling statistic was that 30 percent of married couples did not have a religious wedding ceremony — and it would not be a stretch to see that carry over into funeral service. The survey said the number of people who identify themselves as nonreligious or have no formal affiliation now totaled 15 percent of the population — a figure that has tripled over the last 20 years. Geographically, Northern New England had overtaken the Pacific Northwest as the least religious section of the country, with Vermont leading the country

with 34 percent of its adults claiming no religious affiliation.

The sampling of more than 54,000 people was very significant. What caught Heffner's attention was the fact that 27 percent of respondents said they did not want a religious funeral, just slightly less than the number of those who opted not to have a religious wedding ceremony. "When you think about how many deaths are in your area, 27 percent is significant," he said. "If all you do is offer a religious funeral and what the customer doesn't want is to be preached at, what is your alternative? Have no funeral? Have a direct cremation?"



Ernie Heffner



Betty Frey

Heffner noted that the survey had no funeral service affiliation so he said it was difficult to imagine any suspect motive to the findings relevant to funeral service. "I think we all kind of assume that churches have somewhat less influence today than they did 20 or 30 years ago," he said and the numbers backed up that assumption.

The change is being driven by people who define their beliefs differently. According to Heffner, if you ask people if they are religious, they will likely say no. However, if you ask if they are spiritual, they will more likely say yes. "The difference is do you believe in God? 'Yes.' Do you believe in going to church and being a member of the church? 'No,'" he said. "It does not mean that this 80 percent of the population doesn't believe in God and it doesn't mean they are no longer spiritual; they simply just don't define themselves as religious."

As this number increases so does the number of people who are less satisfied with a religious service at a funeral. This raises the question, If you knew that one out of every four deaths in the newspaper was someone who didn't go to church and would not want a religious service, wouldn't you like to offer them something special?

"The biggest percentage of people today in the United States in terms of religion are the nonreligious, there is no church bigger than that," Heffner said. "That's scary and we're not addressing it. Those people are taking direct cremation, no service, goodbye."

After digesting the statistics, Heffner set a plan in motion. For one, he decided to send three associates to celebrant training instead of one. "It's great for a funeral director to go through these things," he said. "It's an enlightening experience for a funeral director to go through and realize how there is this other block of thinking out there. The whole idea of the celebrant service is to give people options and different things to consider."

Heffner added, "This is not to replace the role of the funeral director, it is to enhance the value of the tribute service."

Of the people that have been trained at the In-Sight Institute, about 70 percent are either funeral directors or funeral home staff who plan to serve as celebrants. The other 30 percent are independent contractors, chaplains, hospice, teachers or others who are drawn to this work. Many of whom will look to work for one or more smaller funeral homes that may not have the size or the resources to employ a full-time celebrant.

Key Questions

Following completion of the certification program by his three associates in July 2009, Heffner committed resources to educate families in his communities about the availability of "services by certified celebrants for funerals or cremation." The medium Heffner chose was a simple, two-sided newspaper insert. "People can read them or throw them out," he said. "That's how we are going about educating the community." Each side of insert asks a key question to get the reader's attention. On one side the question is, "Not a member of a church? Do you consider yourself spiritual but not religious? Would you prefer a non-religious service?" The other side says, "On a scale of 1 to 10, how religious would you like your services to be?"

The insert contains all the basic information about what a celebrate does, what a family can expect and why Heffner's is choosing to offer this type of service. But from the sales standpoint, the insert emphasizes the point that Heffner's has established a unique, differentiating factor for contemporary consumers. What is absent from the form is any kind of promotion, coupon or sales brochure. In fact, the would-be celebrants are instructed not to use the concept to follow up with a family. "If [a family you have served] calls you that's fine, but you do not follow up to sell preneed," he said.

Apparently the concept has been embraced within Heffner's service area to the degree that people have been compelled to pick up the phone and call Heffner's and request to preplan this type of service.

“We couldn’t have made it more difficult for people to have an idea about preplanning or to take positive action,” Heffner said. “There is no business reply, there is no mention of preneed and there is no suggestion to contact us. It just says this service is available.” Ironically, the insert has attracted more preneed business than some of the firm’s targeted preneed promotions. More than 20 percent of Heffner’s preneed clients are opting for a celebrant. “What we found is that people are coming to us to preplan to get this type of service,” he said.

During at-need arrangements, the celebrant option is mentioned to families who have indicated that they don’t want to have any clergy but would want to have a service. Stansbury said part of the appeal of a celebrant service is giving a family a chance to hear more about their loved one. “From a grief standpoint, we have to be very aware that a good funeral is the healthiest first step on the grief journey,” Stansbury said. “From the business standpoint, as a funeral director, I have to start understanding why don’t people want what I do, and if I can offer something that they feel worthwhile, they will remember it.”

The Certified Celebrant Training

After he went through the certification program for himself, Heffner knew that Betty Frey would be an ideal celebrant. Working with her for nearly 20 years he knew that her outgoing personality would serve her well in this dual role. “A celebrant is someone who can ask questions and not make statements and is willing to be engaging with people, someone who can ask a question and shut up,” Heffner said. “A celebrant can get the stories out of people that we as funeral directors don’t focus enough on in the arrangement process.”

When Heffner first mentioned celebrant certification to Frey, she responded, “What in the world is that? I have been in sales my whole life so I had to give it some thought whether I was able to change hats and do this,” she said. A few months went by and Heffner approached her again and said he really wanted her to go through the program. She had thought about it and when the program was held at the ICCFA University last year, she figured she would give it a go. “I received the training and came back and was a little nervous in the beginning,” she said. The program offers celebrants a wide range of material to help them put together a program that could include poems and some music. “I think the most rewarding thing is that we are filling a need for families that we have been hearing for the past 5 to 8 years, ‘what do we do if we don’t have a pastor,’” she said.

Stansbury said that some funeral directors who take the program often find it difficult how to frame the service to families as an option within the context of an arrangement conference. For them, she said, it is just a matter of saying “we have a professionally trained person who will do a wonderful, personal service for you.”

At Heffner’s, usually a day after the funeral arrangements are made with the funeral director, a meeting is scheduled with Frey and the family. “I say they are welcome to bring as many family members as they would like, if they want to include children they can,” she said. The family comes back to the funeral home for what is essentially a story time. “It is the time for the family to begin the grieving process,” Frey said. “It has been tremendously beneficial, because they can cry, they can laugh. It is a wonderful time to not only get stories about the loved one but also it does an awful lot to help them on their journey with their grieving.”

After Frey takes in all of the stories, comments and emotions from the family meeting, which usually last between two and three hours, it takes her an additional 9 to 14 hours to put together her presentation, which ideally will last between 20 and 30 minutes. The heart of the program is based on the stories from the families. Frey also plans a graveside service if the family opts for one.

“Families share more things with her than she could include in a celebrant service,” Heffner said. “They are laughing and telling stories, it has really been an interesting experience.”

In the beginning, coordination with the funeral directors on staff was a little difficult. “But like anyone else, funeral directors have their own way of doing things and fortunately I have always had a good rapport with our funeral directors here,” Frey said.

Having the option of offering families a nonreligious ceremony gives a choice to those who would say, “we don’t want a pastor, we are not having a service, we’re not going to go there.” And on one occasion, a family used Frey’s services in addition to their own pastor. “He did the spiritual part, I did the personal family time,” she said. “I think [the pastor] was pleasantly surprised because it was new to them at well.”

Frey said that celebrant services fulfill a need that is out there with families. “Some people are religious but they haven’t been to church in a long time and they feel awkward going to something they don’t know,” Frey said. “We have had every

good thing happen. We have received thank you cards, and they have been so pleased when they saw how it came together and how it was a real tribute to the individual that passed away, they were thrilled.”

Stansbury said it takes a bold commitment on behalf of a funeral home to offer celebrant services. “We’ve got funeral directors who are afraid to make area clergy mad,” she said. “We have to get beyond that and say I’m going to do whatever it takes to serve the family.” She added that it would be a mistake to think that a celebrant is looking to replace clergy, but instead it is another option for those who would not have chosen clergy for a service, or even have chosen a service at all.

One recommendation that Heffner makes to funeral home owners, who might be interested in offering this type of service, is to check out the training first-hand. “If [an owner] thinks he or she can send somebody and that’s the fix [they are mistaken],” Heffner said. “It really needs to be the owner-operators going so they can understand the idea how it works and then decided if they even want to bother with it at all. Frankly, I hope my competitors don’t.”

The Basics of a Certified Celebrant Program

The job description for a celebrant is a person who seeks to meet the needs of families during their time of loss by providing a service that is personalized to reflect the personality and lifestyle of the deceased.

Ernie Heffner, president of Heffner Funeral Services & Crematory, York, Pa., says that a celebrant must be willing to meet the needs of the family, while at the same time checking his or her own belief system at the door. What brings up the whole celebrant conversation is this question: Are a member of a church? A follow-up question would be, “on a scale of 1 to 10, how religious would you like your service to be?” According to Heffner, there are not a lot of 8s, 9s and 10s.

The time to bring up the celebrant service is during the arrangement conference. When the family is talking about the service and whether they will use a pastor, right then and there is when you bring up the fact that the funeral home has a celebrant on staff. Alternatively, some arrangers bring it up when initially receiving the death

call by offering to contact the family’s clergy. If there is no “family clergy,” this is an optional time to let the customer know about the celebrant option.

A celebrant program must adhere to a strict code of ethics. Key here is confidentiality. The program only works if the family is comfortable enough with the celebrant to open up and share stories. Also, the celebrant should share no personal beliefs and, lastly, there is no follow up.

The keystone to the process is the “family meeting.” If a family indicates during the arrangement conference they would like a celebrant, an appointment is scheduled. Families are welcome to bring as many members as they would like, if they want to include children they can. The purpose of the celebrant at that meeting is to do nothing but ask some questions to get some stories going.

“It is not a funeral arrangement, it is to gather the notes to tell the life story,” Heffner said.

Service options include:

- Service with deceased

present and burial following

- Cremation service with deceased present and cremation following

- Cremation service with ashes present
- Memorial service
- Graveside service
- Evening prayer service.

Without overstating the production of the service — it is set up like a show. There is an opening introduction, which should be done by the funeral director, who serves as sort of the master of ceremonies opening the service before handing off to the celebrant, whose role is like a consultant between the family and the funeral director, to make sure all the family’s wishes are coordinated.

Personalization options, such as pictures, memorial folders, displays, video tributes and items in casket are also included and made an integral part of the service.

From there the celebrant offers tributes gleaned from the family stories and is punctuated with appropriate music or poetry.

Never underestimate the power of ceremonies. “There is nothing in this

thing about merchandise, it is all about ceremony and value,” Heffner said.

Celebrant training does not teach you how to have a one-hour funeral service. It does teach you how to create a 20-30 minute service and have three or four speakers.

“If you think about this, it looks like a hassle. You know what, it is a bit of a hassle,” he added. “But the nice thing is that it is not the funeral director who has to put this together, it is the celebrant. How many clergy you work with are willing or able to do all this, including meeting with the family for an hour and a half?”

Heffner believes that offering families a celebrant option will be a growing part of funeral service. “I think we have a chance if we offer this to families, for them to take a different kind of thinking approach to having a service,” he said. “We have seen families, their eyes light up because they want to do something to honor dad, but they don’t know what or how.”

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Buoyed by the success so far of the program, Heffner will put more staff through the celebrant certification at this year's ICCFA University. "We realized that it is important for all the other funeral directors to go through it so they understand how it works and how it doesn't take away from or infringe on their work as a funeral director," he said.

"If we can deliver some sort of service that recognizes a person's life and how that life touched the lives of others and we don't get anyone feeling uncomfortable, maybe we can have fewer people who say, 'when I die, just cremate me and just have a party at the house,'" Heffner said. "We've all heard that stuff."

And it doesn't hurt that the program gives Heffner's a leg up on his competitors. "I can work into better relationship marketing with families by offering something now that they can't get at just any funeral home," he said. "I like the idea of celebrant services."

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Gold or Garbage? Creating the Strongest Message for Your Marketing

BY DAN KATZ

President and executive creative director of LA ads – A Marketing Agency

I love acronyms – a seemingly meaningless salad of initials that really do stand for something meaningful. If you use text messaging, OMG, you might LOL at something your BFF just IM'ed you.

As a private pilot, I fly around in a dense cloud of esoteric acronyms: VFR, IFR, ATC, PIREP, ASOS, ILS, VOR, TFR and the like.

Computer junkies have always had cute acronyms. My favorite computer acronym is GIGO. It stands for "Garbage in, garbage out." It means that if invalid data is entered in a computer program, the resulting output will also be invalid. Garbage in can only yield garbage out. It's a law about as certain as had Sir Isaac Newton written it himself.

GIGO applies to so many aspects of life, and in particular, to marketing. I'll stare at a blank page for hours, sometimes, trying to write the perfect headline and getting absolutely nowhere. Inevitably, it's because I started with garbage as my input.

For a marketer, "garbage in" means an inadequate or superficial understanding of the product or service, an incomplete picture of the audience and what's important for them to know, or a fast, off-the-shelf solution that really isn't a solution at all. Without good, meaningful, insightful input, the output can only be weak at best. It's what leads to cliché headlines that are ignored faster than one can type them, and marketing results that are doomed to fail before they get off the ground.

What is "garbage in" when it comes to funeral marketing? It's a funeral home that says its strength is its caring. Or a cemetery that trades on its lovely historic acres. While both may be true, the audience has heard it so often from so many others, it's just not that interesting or meaningful. Messages like these are no more compelling than a soft drink that says it quenches "today's thirst!" What the heck does that mean?

Digging for the Truth

A message that is fresh and motivating comes from hard detective work. Saying your staff cares is a lot different than proving it, and a jaded audience requires proof. I worked for a combo cemetery/mortuary client who wanted to tell their "caring" story, as many do. But it was only after sitting in a number of sales meetings that one of the staff mentioned how a groundsman was watching a child's funeral from a distance. At the funeral, the family released a handful of helium balloons. A few minutes later, one of the balloons floated back to earth and the groundsman walked over to retrieve it. He handed it to the bereaved mother and commented that this balloon made him remember that it's God's plan that not everyone is intended to follow all the others. Needless to say, the mother was touched by this laborer's genuine and spontaneous compassion. And it led me to create a campaign that showed how it's their whole staff, and not just the family counselors, who share in their mission. We used real people, from secretaries to drivers to maintenance crew. That's specific. That's powerful. That's compelling. And it's the opposite of GIGO, unless the "G" stands for Gold.

In another campaign, over the course of conversations, we found out that one of the owners volunteered as a Shriner's clown.

That's different! So we explored a little further and found out how many of the staff gave of their time at church, in the community, at their kids' schools, and that became the basis of an unusual campaign featuring their after-work lives. It not only elevated their local visibility, it got international attention.

You just can't afford to be superficial in arriving at marketing solutions, and particularly in developing your key marketing message. There's too much riding on it. Admittedly the barriers to mining for the gold are very powerful: No one has the time, the answers are "obvious," the deadlines are next week, we're paying *you* to come up with the message, and so forth. It takes strength of will and a commitment to the end result to journey past the obvious answer and dig for gold. Trust me, it's there! It's always there.

Take the time to talk to previous customers, look back at past cases and see what distinguished your service, read thank you letters and find a common – or uncommon – theme. Talk to your staff, including the receptionists and maintenance people, and find out what they think about your business and the value it brings to your families. And look at your competition to see what they're saying, so you can say something else. The key is to find specific examples that prove your point. Generalities are a formula for failure.

Identifying the strongest message

For a message to have enough weight and validity to actually motivate an audience, it has to do more than make you and your team feel good. It has to stand up to some very critical measures, and if it doesn't survive all of them, it's time to go back to the keyboard. Here they are:

Is the message clear? It surprises me how many times I've seen a commercial, read an ad, or even visited a web site, and still can't quite figure out what they're selling and why I should care. Often, it's the result of trying to be too clever for one's own good. First and foremost, the message has to be completely understandable. Keep "clever" to a minimum at this point. And when the final ad is presented, ask again, is the message clear?

Is it unique? Simply put, is the message something that has already been said in the marketplace? Has your audience heard it already – perhaps for a very long time? People respond to new ideas and stroll right past ideas that are old and familiar. In its market, the message about my client's maintenance crew was completely unique and unexpected. But messages that tout the most caring funeral directors or community service since 1914 are as worn out as a Windows 95 user's guide.

Is it believable? We've been over-hyped and over-sold on everything from instant coffee that's supposed to taste as good as fresh-brewed to cologne that makes sex gods of the most homely male specimens. Everybody has a built-in crap detector, and day by day, it gets more finely honed. So your message has to feel believable. Don't over-promise, or get so goofy with your message that the little red light in the built-in crap detector blows a fuse.

Is it honest? That's different from being believable. Your message may be one that people buy into. But if you can't really deliver on it, the word will spread and destroy your reputation. There's an old saw in the ad business that nothing kills a bad product like good advertising. So make sure that whatever your message promises can be fulfilled.

Is it compelling? After all your hard work crafting a message that is clear, unique, believable and honest, it still has to get the phone to ring. (This, by the way, is where 95 percent of advertising fails.) So be honest with yourself: Will the message compel a disinterested audience to get off their duffs and take some sort of positive action? Why? Again, a message that talks about how many years you've been around isn't motivating. But one that connects with your audience emotionally can be. Giveaways and discounts can be compelling, but so can messages that touch emotional hot buttons such as ego, guilt, pride, hope, belonging, love and loneliness. In the end, marketing's job is to move the audience. But only after all the other measures have tested true.

Clear. Unique. Believable. Honest. And Compelling. These simple measuring tools are so easy and powerful, you can test them on just about any ad or commercial, including your own. It will make you a sharper judge of marketing. (Cool, also, to try them out on your competitors' ads!)

Unquestionably, message making is a challenging alchemy. It's one that requires you to differentiate gold from garbage, work hard to dig out the nuggets, and test to make sure that it's still gold on the other end. It's not easy. But the payout is always worth it.

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The Notebook

The **National Funeral Directors Association** is accepting registrations for its 2010 Leadership Conference, July 11-14. Hosted at the Hyatt Regency Chesapeake Bay Resort in Cambridge, Md., this annual conference offers current and aspiring members of state and national association leadership teams the opportunity to gather with colleagues from around the country and engage in productive conversations centered on effective leadership and association success. This year's NFDA Leadership Conference will focus on the relationship between NFDA and its state associations, and the issues that are critical to the futures of both groups. Consultant to NFDA, James S. DeLizia of DeLizia Consulting Services, and NFDA President William C. Wappner, will facilitate a series of presentations and discussions that will examine critical governance issues including: The Future of Funeral Service and NFDA; Your Role in Shaping the Future of NFDA; and Mapping Out a Plan for Change, Together. For detailed descriptions of all the conference's educational workshops and leisure outings, visit www.nfda.org/leadership.

A **mistrial was declared** this week in the trial of Mark Singer, an alleged accomplice of Clayton Smart who was charged with misappropriating millions of dollars from preneed funeral paid by consumers to the Forest Hill Funeral Home in Memphis, Tenn. Singer, a former Smith Barney investment banker from Pennsylvania, was charged with one count of conspiracy to commit theft of property over \$60,000, one count of theft of property over \$60,000 and five counts of money laundering. He was accused of taking nearly \$3 million from the funeral home's trust accounts into his own bank account. Singer's lawyers say he was tricked into cooperating with Smart. Prosecutors are looking to try the case before another jury. Lawyers for both sides will appear in Memphis court on June 30. Meantime, lawyers for Smart are working out the details of a complicated plea deal for the man accused of stealing millions of dollars from preneed trust funds in Tennessee and Michigan (*Memorial Business Journal* April 8, 2010). Smart's attorneys are working on a deal with prosecutors to have Smart plead guilty to a litany of charges including money laundering, conspiracy and theft charges. The details are taking time to work out since the charges cross three jurisdictions.

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...So Easily Preventable

More often than not, when a funeral service story crosses over into the consumer media the story is likely to make me cringe. As a rule in life, I try to be optimistic but history has demonstrated that stories that appear in mainstream media that put funeral service in a positive light are few and far between. This week, stories appeared in major newspapers on subjects that for me fall under the topic of, enough already.

Seeing the words “prepaid funerals” in the headline of a story in the Wall Street Journal probably isn’t going to be good for anybody. However, the article that appeared on May 22 was objective but it did include the laundry list of pitfalls associated with preneed, from the National Prearranged Services implosion of 2008 to other fraud cases to Rep. Bobby Rush’s bill to require contracts to disclose the financial consequences to consumers of canceling or transferring the arrangements. All serious stuff, worth reporting but nothing that will help improve the industry’s standing in the eyes of the public.

But it was another headline that caused me to have a momentary debate on whether I should continue shaking my head side to side like a contrarian bobble head or just bang my head on the desk. The headline of that story was “Funeral home cremates the wrong child.” The first thing that popped into my mind was the voice of Mike Kubasak circa 1996 (and at repeated intervals since then) when during a presentation at an industry trade show he’d say, “cremation is not reversible.”

While the funeral home involved was not at fault, the situation could have been prevented. According to the report, the employee in the Franklin County (Ohio) coroner’s office responsible for the mix-up had a history of disciplinary problems including failing to follow office rules. She was blamed for erroneously sending the body of a 14-month-old boy to a funeral home that was expecting the remains of a 22-day-old boy. The coroner said that the forensic technician (who has since been terminated) ignored safeguards when she released the body. The coroner’s office had paperwork for the release of the boy’s body and handed over the paperwork and the wrong body to a transport driver. The body was taken to a contracted funeral home crematory. The body bag containing the body was not opened before cremation “out of privacy and respect for the deceased.”

Said Kubasak, “This is not an isolated instance. Coroner offices seem to make mistakes like this all too often. It underscores the critical importance for a funeral home to have best practices in place ... to check *all* tags that might be on a body, to open body bags and check the decedent.”

Kubasak added that it’s another classic example of a funeral home not having best practices in place when making a body transfer-removal, whether it be from a hospital or coroner. “Sadly, in most instances, the coroner is rarely held liable...it’s next to impossible to sue a coroner.”

Yes, it really hurts to read stories like this...they are so easily preventable.

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