

VISION TO REALITY

Both the families you serve and your bottom line will benefit as you meet the changing needs of consumers by leveraging new technology in 2023.

BY BILL WILLIAMS



As we look ahead to 2023 and examine strategic plans for the coming year, it's important to keep in mind the vast changes in consumer preferences that have been observed over the past few years. For example, the process by which families plan and hold end-of-life celebrations has changed forever; there is no looking back. To stay ahead of the game (and the competition), funeral directors should focus on helping families turn their vision of how they want to memorialize loved ones into reality, and one of the keys to that is embracing new technology.

The digital transformation that has been reshaping nearly every business you can imagine is now impacting the deathcare industry. Consumer behavior has changed dramatically, especially in the way they search for value in funeral services, interact with funeral directors and expect to manage and pay for those services.

The foundation of our industry, the traditional funeral, will remain an integral part of the services we provide to our communities, but it will diminish in the years ahead. And with the cremation rate rising, a significant portion of funeral home revenue and profits is at risk.

For many businesses, making the most of technology is among the top priorities for the new year. Research by global accounting and consulting firm E&Y found that 53% of senior business leaders identified data analytics as the number-one investment priority in the next two years – an increase of 50% since 2020. And the only way they can accomplish that goal is by, you guessed it, having top-notch software platforms fully integrated into their business.

As the number of funeral services with typical attendance returns to prepandemic levels, we believe now is the time for funeral homes to meet the changing needs of consumers – and enhance revenue-generating opportunities – by leveraging new technology:

- Enhancing the firm's website to provide families with more choices for end-of-life celebrations
- Integrating digital tools and applications to make it easy for consumers to plan, arrange and pay for those services.

NOT YOUR MOTHER'S OR FATHER'S FUNERAL SERVICE

One of the biggest changes in consumer attitudes toward funerals centers on end-of-life celebrations. Many deathcare professionals have either read or are aware of some of the findings in the Foresight Companies' 2022 Funeral and Cemetery Consumer Behavior Study on this topic, but they must be repeated because of their significance:

- 59% of survey respondents said they are “looking at alternative venues where they can celebrate, searching primarily for a more relaxed atmosphere.” 51% of those respondents want a “more casual/relaxed” funeral.
- Of those surveyed, only 20% said a funeral home “was not conducive for happy celebrations,” while 10% cited “cost.”

As you can see, that leaves just more than 40% of respondents who still want a service at a funeral home, which implies that they see value in what our industry provides. That, my friends, is because of the dedication, care and empathy of our professionals in helping families gain closure by honoring and celebrating the life of a loved one.

The data, however, underscore the fact that fewer families will hold services like the ones our parents and grandparents attended. Yet this is exactly where vision setting comes into play and how funeral directors can provide an invaluable service in helping families plan these new celebration services.

USER-FRIENDLY TECHNOLOGY WILL HELP DRIVE SALES

Think about this for a minute: How many times in the past year have you had a technology-free day? Chances are they are few and far between. Research from DataReportal shows that Americans spend seven hours and four minutes every day looking at a screen (and that includes three hours and 45 minutes viewing smartphones).

It's not surprising, then, that technology has become embedded in nearly all aspects of everyday life. VPN provider Tech.co listed seven ways technology is impacting our lives: improved communication, decreased privacy, accessible shopping, better information access, virtual social lives, flexible working and smarter health tracking.

This list is especially relevant because it relates directly to another key finding in the Foresight study: “Consumers expect the profession to behave like other industries, offering technologies that make shopping, paying and participating possible without leaving the comfort of their home.”

Those consumers who want to hold unique, non-traditional end-of-life celebrations are the same ones who will spend hours on the internet painstakingly researching options for a family vacation. They will gravitate toward the resorts and hotels that provide

information about amenities, entertainment, dining and activities in the area.

To meet the demands of those consumers, funeral homes will need to make available the digital tools that help them view funeral service options and pricing, plan online and make it easy to pay for services all from the comfort of their home. Funeral homes that do not provide these tools risk losing business to more nimble competitors that have embraced new technology.

The travel and hospitality industry recognized that threat and now excels at providing easy-to-use platforms that help families plan, book and pay for family vacations. The travel and hospitality industry learned early on that offering comprehensive vacation packages leads to increased revenue. Travel behemoth Expedia Group estimates that the average daily hotel room rate was 30% higher for packaged vacations.

One final point here: It is not a problem if a family chooses a \$1,000 cremation when also included is a \$9,000 celebration of life service.

TECHNOLOGY CAN HELP FAMILIES IN NEED

For an industry historically hesitant to embrace new technology, we learned over the past two years the value that today's digital tools can provide for families we serve and help our business grow. We cast aside outdated thinking and realized that technology can actually help, not hinder, our interactions with families and make it easier for them to spend more time healing.

When integrated on a funeral home website, online sales platforms can allow families to:

- Review and select celebration of life services and products
- Easily create, make changes to and execute a contract (to which you have access 24/7)
- Make electronic payments (that you can more accurately track and record for accounting and compliance purposes).

The new year is an ideal time to roll out new initiatives and test new operational strategies. By using today's digital tools, you can offer families in your community a wider variety of purchasing options, meet their need for end-of-life celebrations and better position your business for future success. ☰

Bill Williams is president and CEO of Funeral Services Inc. and serves as vice chairman on the FSI Board of Directors. He joined the company in 2001 as vice president and was named president in 2003. Under his leadership, FSI has expanded to offer services in more than two dozen states across the country.