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VISION



BY PAUL E. WHITE

New Day Dawning

It's time to rethink the traditional funeral to attract today's consumers, while still maintaining a sustainable business model for success.

There are only a few guarantees in life, including death itself, but traditional end-of-life rituals aren't one of them.

Many families have begun to challenge the time-honored ceremonies that have taken place following a loved one's death, and it involves more than just wanting a unique memorial service.

Perhaps most appropriately put, this trend puts the "celebration" in celebration of life. *The Washington Post* put it well in a recent article: Think "golf course cocktail send-offs; backyard potluck memorials; more Sinatra and Clapton, less *Ave Maria*; more Hawaiian shirts, fewer dark suits."

While it was much less common in our profession not so many years ago, this type of celebration is taking deathcare by storm. A survey conducted by ICM suggested that 54% of people now want their funeral to be more of a celebration of life instead of a traditional funeral service. Forty-eight percent of that group also stated that they wanted their service to incorporate their favorite hobbies, colors, sports teams or music, even if its tone was upbeat or positive.

In response to this change in need and expectations, forward-thinking funeral homes are rethinking and even remodel-

ing their facility, seeing it as more of an event space than a chapel. I recently attended an industry conference and heard a presenter who is an advocate of changing the look and feel of funeral homes say, "I'd like to put the pew companies out of business." He advocates removing this aspect of funeral homes entirely and replacing pews with round banquet tables, as well as removing the heavy drapes to create a lighter and airier feel. I agree!

While a bold statement, this is truly where the profession is heading. The trend is causing deathcare professionals to think outside the box and find new offerings to attract the modern-day customer and maintain a sustainable business model from a revenue standpoint.

Yes, this will require change, and for some, change will always be a threat or intimidating. But those who see it as opportunity will reap the benefits tremendously.

If you are among the group that sees this trend as an opportunity, here is some advice – don't overthink it or get overwhelmed. While it may seem like a massive overhaul

to your current operations, your approach does not have to be that aggressive. Your success simply depends on adjusting to the new expectations of consumers and adding those to your proven business model.

One of the more popular trends FSI has seen within the profession is a focus on adding items of service to preneed and at-need offerings, such as hospitality, catering and event planning. Furthermore, many funeral homes have consulted event planners to determine the most effective and strategic ways to implement these new practices into their operations.

If you prefer your facility to remain more intimate or don't have the budget to remodel your funeral home, you still have other options. Many deathcare professionals have partnered with local businesses, such as a restaurant or small event space, to offer an alternate, more casual location for families that seek a less traditional service.

For those who may begin questioning the changes this trend brings, remember that they are not necessarily replacing your more traditional practices but instead adding more value and attractiveness to families that are looking for different and unique ways to celebrate their loved ones. Funeral homes can still offer the time-honored services that motivated them to join the pro-

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Tanya Scotece, Ph.D., is a licensed funeral director and professor of funeral service education at Miami Dade College; she was also a certified

celebrant with Farley Funeral Homes and Crematory of Venice, Florida, for many years. From her experience in the profession, she offered some suggestions for sprucing up celebrant services:

- Family participation is a crucial element. Lighting of candles, a sand-layering ceremony or displaying rose petals can be very therapeutic.
- Playing the deceased's favorite songs is a popular

way of highlighting the person's life.

- Holidays can be meaningful for people. One person loved Christmas, so the family brought in a Christmas tree that Scotece made the focal point of the celebrant service. She creatively analogized the tree to the deceased's family – the roots represented his ancestry, the branches his children, the lights his grandchildren, the ornaments

his great-grandchildren and the star at the top of the tree his beloved wife of 70 years.

- Including favorite recipes in the memorial folder is a unique way of honoring the person. For example, at one service, the deceased's favorite ratatouille recipe, which she made often, was included on the back of the memorial folders distributed to family and friends at the celebrant service.

profession and have kept them in business over the years, while also adapting to the needs of the new consumer.

In my 30 years of serving the deathcare profession from a vendor's point of view, I have felt a great responsibility to stay informed and educate clients on the profession's latest trends that could move their funeral home or cemetery forward. When I became a certified funeral celebrant, I was introduced to these new celebrations of life and have seen firsthand the value it provides the profession. While I don't actively perform ceremonies, I am fortunate to use my experience in becoming a celebrant to share potential approaches and strategies around this trend with clients to help them grow their business.

So, while any trend deserves skepticism, just a glance at this

one's success will show it's here to stay. I strongly encourage deathcare professionals across the industry to take a fresh look at their facilities, brighten them up and begin implementing these new services, as their benefits will outweigh any short-term investments, help attract new clients and support the long-term sustainability of the funeral home they built. ☰

Paul White, a licensed funeral director, embalmer and certified celebrant, is vice president of client development and marketing for Funeral Services Inc. He has a 40-year career in at-need and preneed operations and an extensive background in funeral home client development, and sales and marketing services.



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