by Alan Wolfelt, Ph.D.

drwolfelt@centerforloss.com

ICCFA Magazine author spotlight

➤ Dr. Wolfelt is a respected author, educator and consultant to funeral service. He advocates for the value of meaningful funeral experiences in his death education workshops across North America each year.

➤ He conducts an annual training program on the "WHY" of the funeral for funeral directors in Fort Collins, Colorado.

MORE FROM THIS AUTHOR

➤ Dr. Wolfelt's annual training program on the "WHY" of the funeral will be June 12-14, 2017, in Fort Collins, Colorado. For more information or to receive a descriptive brochure, call the Center for Loss at 970.226.6050, email Dr. Wolfelt directly or go to the website for information about this program or others being held at different locations.

www.centerforloss.com

MANAGEMENT/SERVICE TO FAMILIES

The professional jargon and business terms that you might use when talking to others on the funeral home staff can make a bad impression on your families and members of the public. Consider rewording these sentences you might say without thinking.

Watch your words: The importance of semantics in funeral service

Editor's note: This article is excerpted from Dr. Wolfelt's book, "Funeral Home Customer Service A-Z."

Have you ever noticed the power of words? Well-chosen words give structure to an entire chain of experiences. To insiders, certain terms may seem completely neutral, but when it comes to your public's perception of funeral service, stay alert.

Let's look at a few examples:

In taking information from a family member, a funeral service staff member inquires: "Where is the *deceased* now?" or, worse yet, "Where are the *remains* now?"

The person has just experienced the death of a family member. He or she is often in shock and hasn't even started to absorb the reality of what the death means. Using terms like *the deceased* is not only impersonal and crude, but it also doesn't assure the family member that the funeral home will carefully take care of the precious body of someone they have loved.

Instead, funeral service team members should say *your mother* or whatever term best captures the family member's relationship to the person who died.

*****

In arranging the time of the service with the family, the director says, "We have *an opening* at 2 p.m." This terminology makes it sound like your funeral home has to squeeze the family being served in between other appointments.

When your schedule is busy, try something like, "Would it be convenient for the service to be held at 2 p.m.?" Of course, when you don't have other services scheduled, allow the family to suggest what would be best for them.

*****

A phone call comes to one of four funeral homes in a company. The caller asks if the funeral home is handling so and so's service. The staff member says, "That lady is not at this *branch*."

Remember, you have funeral homes or chapels, not branches or facilities. A branch is something a bank has. Don't make it sound like you represent a large, impersonal company.

*****

In talking during visitation hours with a family member, a staff person mentions, "We have three other *cases* in the funeral home right now."

The word *cases* is impersonal, cold and distant. Instead, refer to other *services* or *families we are serving*.

A similar example is when a funeral director announces during a clergy breakfast, "I'm sorry, but because of our busy *caseload*, some of our staff couldn't be here." Never use the word *caseload*. It makes it sound like you work in a factory, not a funeral home that serves families.

*****

When explaining the funeral home's schedule of services to a visiting clergyperson, a staff member says, "We have three *calls on the board* right now."

Calls on the board is impersonal and emphasizes the importance of numbers, not people.

*****

A visitor comes through the door of the funeral home and asks if you have Mr. Jones. The staff person says, "Oh, he's *down in number five*."

When talking to family members, try not to refer to your visitation rooms just by number. A more appropriate response would be to say, "Yes, let me show you the room," then walk the visitor to the room, making him feel welcome.

Better yet, on the way, introduce

yourself and find out who he or she is. This is not only an opportunity to make guests feel welcome, but to begin to build relationships with them.

*****

In responding to a client's question about how busy the funeral home is, a staff member says, "Well, we *do about 300 a year*."

It is easy to understand why a layperson would perceive this as an insensitive remark. A preferred response would be, "We are honored to serve around 300 families each year."

*****

Someone calls to learn if you are serving a particular family. The staff person answers, "No, our *competitor* has that one." The word *competitor* is not one you should use when speaking to the public. Many people don't even understand what you mean when you say it.

Instead, if you know who is serving the family, tell them and offer to give directions if necessary. If you don't know, offer to try to find out and call them back.

*****

In talking to a visitor to the funeral home, a staff member says, "We have been working aggressively to increase our *market share* in recent years. We project a 10 percent increase in *volume* annually over the next five-year-period."

These words, in this context, make you sound like a businessperson who is more concerned about numbers than serving families. Keep these kinds of comments behind closed doors.

*****

You can probably think of other words or phrases (like *bottom line*) that can give clients the wrong impression of your funeral home. Please e-mail your examples to me (drwolfelt@centerforloss.com) when you get a chance.

You may also want to have a staff meeting to review the above examples. I would also suggest that everyone in funeral service try to ease up on the use of industry jargon, even when talking behind the scenes with coworkers. That way you won't be as likely to use that language unconsciously when you are speaking with families you serve or the people in your community. ❑