

# Moving Forward



## Post-pandemic ideas for thriving in funeral service.

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Now that COVID is moving into its endemic phase, we're all breathing a sigh of relief. Everyone is tired of pandemic life. Funeral home staff, especially, have been asked over and over again to go above and beyond. Understandably, you're tired, you're numb, and many of you are probably traumatized.

But as we look to the future, there are also opportunities presented by what we've collectively learned over the past two years. Here are some ideas for seizing this unique opportunity to forge stronger bonds with your community, improve your service offerings and thrive.

### **Remember, you're an educator, not an order-taker.**

During COVID, we learned that everyone needs and relies on funeral service. But many don't understand the value of rituals and the elements of the funeral ceremony. You can be an educator – even an evangelist. Take the goodwill you've built over the past two years and use it as platform to educate both the families you serve and your community at large about the history of and innovations in funeral service and ceremony.

### **Educate yourself about why we have had funerals since the beginning of time.**

To educate families, you must first teach yourself. Read up on the history of funerals. Hold staff in-services on the topic. Discuss how COVID funerals had to be diminished and the ways in which that hurt families' ability to integrate grief into their lives.

### **Teach the value of each element of ceremony.**

As you know, funerals that include as many of the elements of ceremony as possible are usually the most healing and transformative. But families that don't understand the value of, say, the visitation or the committal will often skip these pieces.

During the arrangement conference, you have an opportunity to educate families about what each element involves and why each is meaningful. You can also proactively give community talks, hold seminars and webinars, and evangelize on these topics whenever and wherever you can. Don't forget to record teaching videos and add them to your website.

### **Don't confuse making decisions with making choices.**

Funeral directors sometimes tell me that their role is to help families make decisions. The problem with this understanding is that decisions can be made with limited information. An example of a decision a family is often asked to make is, "Would you like to have a visitation?" The answer to this question is yes or no, black or white. But if you are helping families make choices, instead, you first take the time to educate them. The more information a family is given about each of the elements of ceremony, the more their decisions become true choices.

### **Learn the six needs of mourning and how meaningful funerals help families meet these needs.**

When we are grieving the death of someone, we have six needs that must be met for us to heal:

- 1. Acknowledge the reality of the death.**
- 2. Embrace the pain of the loss.**
- 3. Remember the person who died.**

4. **Develop a new self-identity.**
5. **Search for meaning.**
6. **Let others help, now and always.**

The meaningful funeral gives mourners a good start on all six of these needs and puts them on a healthy path to healing. During the pandemic, we saw that missed or abbreviated funerals complicated families' grief. Use what you experienced during COVID to teach the next families.

#### **Practice teaching families.**

If you're not already in the habit of doing it (most funeral directors aren't), learning to articulate why we have the individual elements of the funeral and how those help meet the six needs of mourning will take some practice. Schedule staff training and take turns role-playing. Have someone play the uninformed (or even defensive or unresponsive) family and walk through a mock arrangement conference step by step.

#### **Don't confuse efficiency with effectiveness.**

Are you an efficient funeral direct-

or or an effective one? If you are efficient, you get things done quickly and competently, perform surface-level duties with speed and reasonable attention to detail, try to be polite yet not waste time, and focus on reaching "the end."

On the other hand, if you are effective, you do what you do with a higher purpose in mind, care deeply about the lasting impact you have on others, interact with genuine compassion and empathy, and understand that time spent helping families create a meaningful experience is never wasted. COVID has given many people a new awareness or purpose or passion. Use this to reinvigorate your staff and funeral home's mission and vision.

#### **Learn to overcome objections constructively.**

Families that are uneducated about the value of funeral service often have objections to including some or many of the elements of ceremony. Again, the key to overcoming objections is to educate. We also know that with enhanced awareness of one's mortality comes a heightened awareness of the value of preplanning funerals.

#### **Provide aftercare as a source of ongoing education.**

Aftercare is your best opportunity to not only stay connected to families and help them during a time in which they need help but to continue to educate them about the role of funerals and other ceremonies for people who are grieving. You can create a truly exceptional funeral experience for the family, but unless you follow through, you haven't made the experience all it can or should be. Families affected by COVID deaths, especially, need and deserve your compassionate aftercare services. They, in turn, can then become valuable word-of-mouth ambassadors for your funeral home.

#### **Innovate.**

I'm sure the pandemic stretched your staff resources to the limit. But you also likely forged new ways of doing things because you were forced to. As the proverb says, necessity is the mother of invention.

Take the innovations you developed during the pandemic and build on them to offer today's families the funeral experiences they want and expect. Add to your services list and improve old processes. This means leveraging technology in myriad ways: to enhance communication with families, provide service upgrades and more. Maybe you weren't great at technology in the past, but you clearly must be now. It's time to become your community's funeral innovator. ☰

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