

Roundtable

By Thomas A. Parmalee

Vaults

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Linda Darby



Mark Klingenberger



Jim Wiens

When it comes to selling products and services, burial vaults often don't get the attention they deserve from funeral professionals. Just like a casket or urn, they provide families with meaningful value. To get a better sense of how funeral professionals can do a better job communicating that value to families – and also to learn how the vault business is changing – we reached out to three experts: Linda Darby, chief executive officer at Trigard; Mark Klingenberger, vice president of sales and marketing at Wilbert Funeral Services; and Jim Wiens, president of CVI Funeral Supply and vice president at Doric Products.

What are some common misconceptions consumers tend to have about vaults?

Darby: One of the biggest misconceptions I believe consumers have is that a grave liner (or concrete box) is the same thing as a burial vault. It is not. And, it is our responsibility as professionals to help educate consumers to the difference. I hear too many stories of people in our profession that show a grave liner and tell families, “This is the vault

that the cemetery requires.” That doesn't explain anything.

Klingenberger: There are a couple of big misconceptions: (1) that a grave box performs the same function as a burial vault, and (2) that an unlined unit such as the Wilbert Monarch grave liner is protective.

Wiens: The most common misconceptions we encounter center around three basic areas: what product is considered a vault, function or purpose of a vault and concerns associated with cost.

There is a misconception that either a basic concrete grave liner or a lawn crypt is considered a vault. In fact, a vault is defined as a lined, sealing outer burial container.

The second area of misconception deals with the actual purpose or function that a vault serves. A vault's purpose is actually three-fold:

- It is designed to safeguard the integrity of the casket.
- It provides an additional layer of protection for the remains.
- Lastly, it helps to prevent the ground covering the grave from sinking. Although not required by state or federal law, an outer burial container is required by most cemetery rules and regulations.

The third area includes misconceptions regarding cost. We frequently hear that a vault is a waste of money or too expensive. In actuality, when one considers the functions a vault serves, it is a logical progression that without the vault in place to support the earth and protect the casket, the cost of perpetual care increases exponentially. One of two things occurs: the cost of cemetery spaces increases significantly, or over time, the condition of the cemetery declines. With regards to the concerns about cost, burial vaults are available at a variety of price points, providing an option for virtually any budget.

“ When a family understands that a vault is more than something the cemetery requires, there are many benefits, notably peace of mind. ”

- Linda Darby, chief executive officer, Trigard

How can funeral professionals educate people about vaults?

Darby: It's not that hard. Keep it simple, explain the differences, and allow them to choose. Use verbiage and a presentation that fits the consumer. If you start the conversation talking about tensile strength and statistics, it will become a turnoff to most families. It is best to educate with information that can be easily broken down. If a family asks you, as a funeral professional, what vault you would use, tell them! I wouldn't use a concrete box for my mom or dad. I know too much. Don't the families we serve deserve that information as well?

Klingenberg: I think the best way is to use what captures most of us in a presentation: video. It engages the family with visual as well as auditory stimulation to support the funeral professional's presentation. It also ensures that the education is complete and consistent. In a recent study conducted for Wilbert, we had 100 percent of survey participants stay through the end of a video, which they were shown on burial vaults. As no one abandoned it, clearly this demonstrates interest in receiving the information.

Wiens: First and foremost, the funeral professional should ensure that they themselves possess adequate education regarding burial vaults. Periodically we offer continuing education courses to inform funeral professionals about the construction, function and personalization options available to the client family. This allows the funeral professional to

provide complete and accurate information to the family, allowing them to make informed decisions as they go through the selection process.

Secondary to that is imparting that information to future clients. This can be accomplished indirectly through placement of brochures in the funeral home lobby. An excellent resource available to the funeral professional is an actual vault plant tour for preneed counselors. Finally, the funeral professional can help the client family fully realize and take advantage of the array of personalization options available to ensure that the committal services are meaningful.

What should motivate funeral professionals to try selling vaults if they do not have a combination operation?

Darby: With cremation and anatomical donations on the rise, there is a large incentive for any funeral home to offer as many products as possible to make up for lost revenues. The burial vault is the low hanging fruit of the funeral industry right now.

Klingenberg: Families need choices, and the competition that can be created will keep everyone working to deliver the best value to families they serve. Also the revenue generated can help offset the declining cash flow cremation causes for firms.

Wiens: Although customs vary throughout the country, in many areas the funeral directors sell the vault as part of the arrangements at the funeral home for continuity of

service. This not only ensures that the vault ordered can accommodate the casket selection (as in the case of an enhanced width need) but allows for personalization options to be carried through to the committal portion of the services as well.

What kind of trends are you seeing – wider vaults, cremation vaults?

Darby: Yes, we have seen an increase in the size of vaults. We are also oftentimes seeing cemeteries not allow these vaults. And, it has me saying, “no wonder people move toward less traditional ways!” If they want it, give it to them. Be sure to educate the family about the extra time and costs involved.

As funeral professionals continue to research additional products in the cremation market, we are seeing an increase in cremation vaults (or urn vaults) as well. It is important that we educate families about the importance of memorializing their loved ones when they choose cremation. That is part of writing our generation's history. I firmly believe that every person needs to mark their life and leave their legacy through permanent memorialization, regardless of what method of final disposition they choose. Everyone needs to create a place for future generations to come pay tribute and share memories.

Klingenberg: We are definitely seeing the rise in cremation urn vaults as more firms communicate with the family about the need for a final and permanent resting place. Also the use of the “short” urn vault designed to go on an existing grave is increasing as well.

Wiens: Current trends in the industry include the need for larger outer burial containers in a greater number of cases. This has generated the necessity for a larger number of choices, both in metal and concrete vaults, in enhanced sizes.

Additionally, cremation continues to occupy an increasingly growing niche in the market. It is important

to note that urn vaults can be offered with the same personalization options as traditional burial.

Different cemeteries have different regulations about whether a vault must be used. Should more cemeteries require vaults?

Darby: It is very beneficial for a cemetery to require a vault. But remember, requiring a vault and requiring a grave liner (or concrete box) are not the same thing. A vault not only helps keep the weight of the earth from caving in on the casket, but it also helps keep the cemetery grounds level. That way the staff does not have to continue to backfill the graves and can spend more time doing other things to enhance the cemetery. From a groundwater perspective, a lined, sealed burial vault keeps any and all contaminants out of our ground water. To me, that is one of the most important aspects.

When a family understands that a vault is more than something the cemetery requires, there are many benefits, notably peace of mind. But that means that we as funeral professionals need to take the time to explain the importance of a lined, sealed burial vault.

I have talked to many individuals who thought they purchased a quality vault, when, in fact, they had only purchased a grave liner and didn't understand the difference. They felt cheated. That troubles me, because it can't be fixed. But we can be sure we do better next time.

Klingenger: Cemeteries see the benefit of lower maintenance costs as well as improved safety on the grounds. These same benefits apply to the families as well since none want to be buried where loved ones can't easily and safely come to pay their respects. Also, many likely included the beauty of the cemetery grounds as one of their considerations, and they would want to see that continue into the future.

Wiens: Most modern cemeteries require outer burial containers. For the cemetery, maintenance benefits are first and foremost. The vault

helps to ensure that the risk of a cave-in is minimal and limits the ongoing need for filling in as the ground covering the grave continues to settle. For the family, selection of a burial vault provides peace of mind. They can rest assured that inclement weather will come and go, but the burial vault the family has selected will provide ongoing protection for their loved one.

How can vault companies adapt to the changing face of funeral service – specifically, the rising cremation rate?

Darby: We adapt by continuing to listen to the needs of the families we serve, and finding products and solutions that will fill those needs. There is such a wide variety of products for families who choose cremation. Many families see new and intriguing products but often-times can't make the leap between an idea they see online and their own final wishes. That's where our entire profession, not just vault companies, can be so valuable.

Klingenger: Take a look first at the mix of the products they are selling. About 50 percent of the market is unlined grave boxes, but research shows that over 70 percent of burial families want the human remains protected. There is a great opportunity to improve the product sales to burial families through education.

Secondly, take the opportunity with cremation families to have them consider their options as "temporary" and "permanent." In-home placement is really not a final resting place for the loved one, and future generations will struggle with what to do with relatives whom they have never known. Burial provides the solution that many need for a problem they have never completely understood or even contemplated.

Wiens: Vault companies can best adapt to the changing face of funeral service by becoming better-rounded funeral supply providers. This can be accomplished by providing more

products to the same customer base; for example caskets, creative cremation products, open/close of the grave at the committal and monuments.

When it comes to vaults, how can funeral professionals and cemetery workers work together to improve the outcome for themselves and families?

Darby: We must stop fighting among ourselves. When battling occurs between funeral homes and cemeteries, families lose. It puts them in an uncomfortable spot, and causes them to doubt the value and integrity of our profession. Most consumers don't see cemeteries and funeral homes as separate entities, so we shouldn't get caught up in turf wars. It's also vital that we all pay attention to the details. How does the vault look at the cemetery? It's something that the family has invested in and is relying on to protect their loved one. If you prop the vault cover up on a mound of dirt at the graveside, it completely devalues the product and their investment.

Klingenger: Focus needs to be on families first: What do they want and need? This is the culmination of one of the most challenging things they will face in their lives.

First, do not rush them in and out of the property or hurry a service along because the weather might not be cooperating or the schedule is full. They need the experience to be a fulfilling event. Letting them take the time they need and having what they want will bring them back.

Second, take the time for a complete explanation of what the families' options are and let them make an informed decision. A few extra moments providing additional information on the differences between units and service options will help them feel good about the decisions they are making.

Wiens: Funeral professionals and cemetery workers should work together to have a meaningful committal service for their families. •