

Roundtable

By Patti Martin Bartsche

Vaults Roundtable



Rich Darby



Mark Klingenberger



James Wiens

Cremation is impacting all segments of the funeral industry, including vault manufacturing and sales. Rich Darby, chief operating officer for Trigard and Trigard Memorials; Mark Klingenberger, vice president of sales and marketing for Wilbert Funeral Services; and James Wiens, vice president of finance and treasurer for Doric Products, chat about the state of the industry, how to market products and services to cremation consumers and what the future holds for vault manufacturers.

We are continuing to see the cremation rate rise; how is this affecting the vault industry?

Darby: Of course, if the cremation rate is rising, then traditional burial vaults are seeing a decline. And, in order to stay ahead of this change, vault dealers have to find a way to adapt and survive.

Over the past five years, we have been shifting the focus from the ‘boxes’ we sell to a bigger conver-

sation about value. Our dealers offer more than products. They provide educational opportunities, proven growth strategies and outstanding service to their funeral home customers. That all adds up to a lot of value that extends beyond the method of final disposition.

The popularity of ceremonies that coincide with a vault is growing tremendously throughout

the vault industry. We are seeing more and more vault companies going this route. At Trigard, we have the Healing Tree ceremony and Serenity Remembrance Bear ceremony. Both have a poem that is read at the graveside and rings that are given to family and friends. The rings are a keepsake that can be worn on a necklace, keychain or kept in your pocket. By emphasizing the ceremony and

creating new cremation-based graveside services, we not only adapt to the changing industry, but we also provide value to families.

Klingenberger: Of course this is having a negative impact on burial vaults. The challenge now will be the consolidation that is inevitable as smaller players without economies of scale and strong distribution are bought out or simply close down.

Diversification will also be a critical element to help many stay viable. Those who develop additional revenue streams will continue on for the long term.

Wiens: The traditional side of the business is down in unit volume across the country. The burial vault industry is providing solutions to the cremation side of the industry through comprehensive solutions for the burial of the cremated remains. We have urns, urn vaults and graveside services to assist the funeral professional.

How is the industry responding?

Darby: I cannot speak for the entire industry, but I can speak for our company. We are big believers in education. We work hard at educating our dealers and the funeral homes they serve. Our goal is for everyone to understand the importance of remembering and celebrating a life. It's no longer just a conversation about the type of 'box' they are using.

It is our job as funeral professionals to do a better job of telling the story, not only on why a burial vault is important, but also on why the graveside ceremony is important. We have to provide families an incredible graveside experience that they can remember forever.

Klingenberger: While we cannot speak for the industry, Wilbert has invested in developing the Wilbert Educated Selection Process (Wilbert ESP). This cloud-based tool provides the support the funeral professional needs to improve the communication about the product and what it does, how it can be personalized for the family and what the committal service can be for them.

By taking the funeral professional from a salesperson to an educator, we remove any sense of pressure and provide a better purchasing experience. Improving the experience raises satisfaction for the family, which results in a higher probability of repeating the purchase again in the future.

Wiens: We have better training for vault manufacturers so they can educate the funeral professional. Many manufacturers have tablet apps and posters that make it much easier to present our product.

What are the biggest issues the vault industry will be facing in the next five years? The next 10 years?

Darby: I am excited to see what the next five to 10 years will bring. With the baby boomers getting older, a large upswing in the death rate is predicted. If this takes place, then I cannot see anyone believing our industry to be in a glass-half-empty situation.

An increase in cremation is inevitable. The burial vault industry is full of intelligent, hardworking individuals who have the expertise, equipment and knowledge to create new revenue streams for our businesses while giving the families we serve what they need to heal.

I believe we will begin to see more consolidation take place. Smaller burial vault dealers may not be able to adapt quickly enough to survive the many changes that are predicted. But dealers who consistently go above and beyond for their funeral home customers and the families they serve have every reason to be optimistic.

Klingenberger: Cremation will reduce the number of units being delivered and the lost sales will adversely impact the economics – especially at smaller firms. As stated previously, consolidation is inevitable. There will be fewer locations producing vaults and few brands to provide component parts and standards for quality production.

The rotation out of the traditional selection room will also be a big driver of change in the arrangement

conference and how the product is merchandised and presented. Unfortunately, too many of the systems used in the electronic showroom today only show a few bullet points about the product and the price. While these systems may be great at streamlining obituary writing, completing forms or accounting, there is not enough emphasis on education, particularly regarding the outer burial container.

Wiens: Consolidation due to shrinking traditional services, not only on our side but the funeral professional side. The economy is better now, and it is harder to compete for labor. Long-term government regulation will be challenging for our industry. Cremation will also steadily increase over the next few years.

As a whole, what is the vault industry doing well?

Darby: The vault industry is quickly realizing that we are not just product-based companies. We are understanding that we are a service-based industry and are beginning to 'sell the experience' to families more than ever before. We understand the importance of our relationship with both funeral directors and with members of our community who we serve each and every day.

Klingenberger: Many are continuously improving the service provided to families. Adding things like public address systems for the graveside service, branch of service flags for veterans, water, heat and blankets where appropriate, and upgrading tents in size.

Additionally, we are making considerable options for personalization available. When we observe friends and family members use their phones to take pictures of a customized carapace, we see the impact we are having.

Wiens: Product consistency is definitely better. Doric uses the National Concrete Burial Vault Certification Program for all dealers. The service at the cemetery is better as well. Vault manufacturers are more proactive about

educating our customers. Personalization/customization of products continues to become more popular and needs to be stressed.

Are there areas for improvement?

Darby: Of course there are always areas for improvement. As funeral professionals, we are always searching for ways to connect with the families we serve. Our mission has changed so much over the last decade, and I feel that we are more open than ever to listen to suggestions for improvement.

Klingenberger: When we surveyed funeral professionals last year, only 1 percent said they would choose an unlined outer burial container for their own family when a death occurs. Yet as I mentioned above, approximately 50 percent of outer burial containers sold today are unlined. That is quite a disconnect. If families just moved to 25 percent unlined, the revenue increase would be substantial while delivering a quality product that knowledgeable professionals consistently buy themselves.

The service side is critical as well. A poor showing at a graveside service hurts all of us. Everyone in our profession has to treat each service as though it was set for his or her own family that day.

The inclusion of personalization is very important. Far too often we see units go out that could be personalized with pictures, words and symbols but have nothing on them. If there is a picture in the obit, why not help them get it on the vault?

Wiens: Yes, of course. Higher service levels, product quality and consistency are all important.

With selection rooms in many firms shrinking or disappearing altogether, how can funeral professionals display vault options?

Darby: Things have been changing for several years. Selection rooms with a dozen full-size caskets and at

least that many miniature burial vault samples are quickly becoming extinct. We are starting to hear less, ‘We have always done it that way’ and more ‘What can I do differently?’

The funeral profession can be slow to change, but we have seen funeral homes across the country embrace more consumer-focused display systems. Wall graphics, tablets and videos are the primary tools in our new toolkit.

We're also helping funeral homes understand that today's consumer wants more consolidated choices. Many funeral professionals are cutting down on the number of burial vaults presented, and they are offering a more concise mix of different tiers of protection. We consistently see the average vault sale rise for these locations, as families feel less overwhelmed by the decision. More choice isn't always better.

Klingenberger: Actually we are seeing greatly improved sales through the use of our Educated Selection Process that combines everything from the educational graphics, the vault display, and an educational video into a single cloud-based system. This allows the funeral professional to make a concise and logical presentation of the burial vaults.

For those that wish to continue to use more traditional display methods, Wilbert has encouraged people for years to limit the number of merchandise offerings being displayed. This is sound merchandising strategy that is successfully applied in any retail environment. Given that most people don't understand what the burial vault does, it makes matters worse to show them options they can't comprehend.

Wiens: This is not a problem for most vault manufacturers that have tablet apps. We also use posters very effectively as well as traditional miniature vaults.

When it comes to vaults, why is it important for funeral professionals and cemeterians to work together?

Darby: Just for fun, let's drop the word vaults from this question. For as long as I can remember, too many funeral homes and cemeteries have been butting heads. It is time to put the past behind us and work together as a team.

Cemeterians need funeral professionals to start the conversation with families and emphasize the importance of a permanent place for memorialization. Funeral professionals need memorialization professionals to explain why it's critical to have a special place to visit and honor a loved one's legacy. Without either half of this partnership, we're going to see more direct cremation without any ceremony or permanent memorialization.

The best way for us to serve families is to work together. Together, we are creating a stronger industry.

Klingenberger: We are all viewed together as a profession in the eyes of those purchasing or attending a service. Disputes or disagreements over any aspect of the service do absolutely nothing good for anyone in the long term. In the end, it all comes back to the family experience – when it is over, will they want to do the same thing again when a death occurs?

We have to continuously improve the experience for families. It does not matter which product they choose. As long as we can help them make fully informed decisions, we have a chance that they will come back for burial again.

Wiens: I think most families don't really understand the differences between the various parts of the funeral and memorialization business. All players in our profession should present what we do in a favorable manner. •