



*mklingenberger
@wilbert.com*

**ICCFA Magazine
author spotlight**

►Klingenberger is vice president of sales & marketing for Wilbert Funeral Services Inc., and has over 26 years of experience in the funeral industry.

He has been in sales and marketing management for several leading funeral industry providers and has extensive experience in helping funeral professionals build market share through customer education.

►Wilbert Funeral Services Inc., Broadview, Illinois, manufactures burial vaults and related products, and also offers a wide selection of urns, jewelry and related memorialization items for cremation families.

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More about this subject

►To watch the video that explains the difference between a burial vault and a grave box and is discussed in this article, go to www.wilbert.com/research-study-video.

VAULTS

Despite the inexorable rise in cremation, millions of families choose burial. But how much do families really know about ground burial, and how does that impact their choices?



When families know they can personalize vaults, such as this one from Wilbert Funeral Services, many are interested in doing so. But many don't know, unless a funeral professional tells them about their options.

Do you know what your burial families really want?

There is a lot of research on cremation as an increasing number of families are choosing it and thereby impacting the entire funeral service profession.

However, as we look into the future and work toward adapting to market changes, we need to make sure we don't ignore burial families.

While projections certainly indicate a decrease in the number of burials, the projected increase in total deaths means that burial numbers will still be substantial (see chart, "Projected deaths and cremations"). As prudent funeral professionals adapt to

meet the needs of all families they serve, they should take note of new eye-opening consumer research on burial families' expectations and preferences.

Uncovering burial preferences

Wilbert commissioned a study in late 2013 to seek a better understanding of knowledge and perceptions about outer burial containers among those who expressed preference for burial. Conducted by independent research firm Product Acceptance & Research (PAR), the study revealed some surprises as well as

Projected deaths and cremations				
	Deaths	Cremations	Non-cremations	% of deaths cremated
2008	2,454,906	878,708	1,576,198	35.79 %
2015*	2,715,038	1,250,004	1,465,034	46.04 %
2025*	3,063,902	1,803,107	1,260,795	58.85 %

* Projected figures
Source: Cremation Association of North America

VAULTS

confirming some suspicions. Here are some of the key findings:

1. Families do not know the difference between a burial vault and a grave box.

When people were asked if there is a difference between a burial vault and a grave box, it was evident that they had little to no understanding of product differences. Seventy-eight percent responded that they did not know the difference (see pie chart 1).

This finding corroborates the casual observation that families often use the term “vault” interchangeably with other products. Further, while 22 percent stated that they knew there was a difference between a burial vault and a grave box, we should not assume that they fully understand all the differences.

2. After some basic education, most families did not choose a grave box.

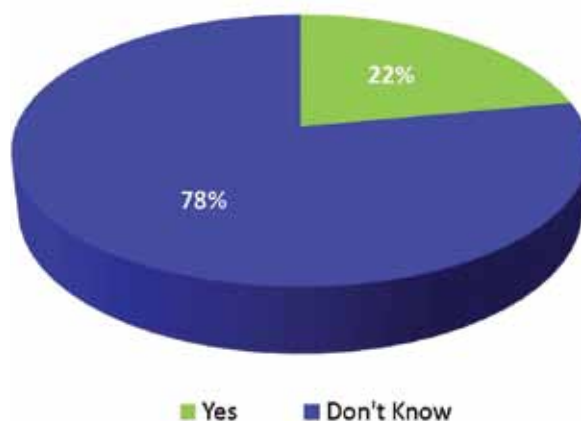
Survey participants were asked to watch a brief video that explained the purpose of an outer burial container (OBC) and the differences between unlined grave boxes and burial vaults. This was a straightforward video with no branding affiliation in order to objectively present product function and differences. (To watch the video used in the study, go to www.wilbert.com/research-study-video.)

For example, illustrations conveyed natural underground occurrences and the role of outer burial containers. Basic OBC construction was explained, as was the role of the burial vault at a committal service.

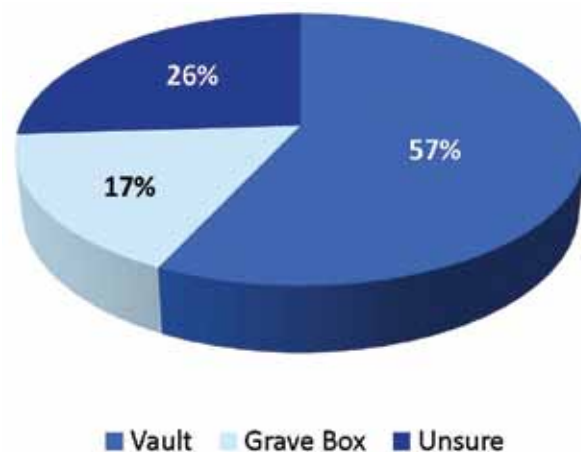
After watching the video, only 17 percent of respondents said they would choose a grave box. Fifty-seven percent stated a preference for a burial vault, while the remaining 26 percent said they were unsure.

Respondents were given the option to write down their reasons or concerns, and many of those who responded “unsure” said they needed additional information before making a decision. Reasons ranged from wanting an idea of costs (no pricing was provided in the survey)

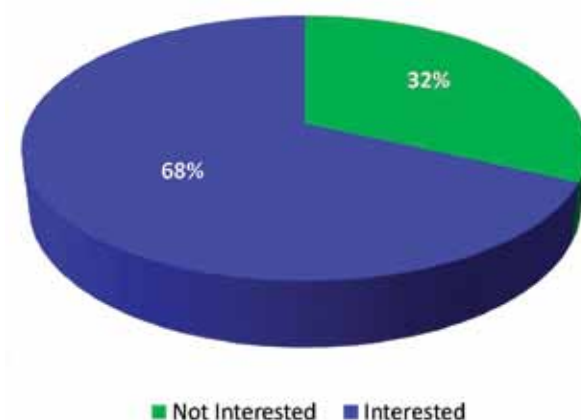
1. Is there a difference between a burial vault and a grave box?



2. Having viewed the educational video, if you were making burial arrangements in the future, would you choose a burial vault or a grave box?



3. Please indicate your level of interest in personalizing the burial vault with words and symbols of what your loved one had a passion for to display at the graveside service.



to desiring more detail on product choices and options.

It’s interesting to note that 100 percent of the survey respondents watched the entire video. This was an online survey able to measure abandonment (when people stop watching a video before it is over). Zero abandonment for an unpaid survey is perhaps another measure of the interest families have in learning about their options.

One additional note pertaining to choice that merits attention is faith affiliation and burial traditions. Respondents were given the option to indicate their faith and nearly 9 percent were affiliated with faiths less prone to choose burial vaults.

3. Families are interested in personalization of the burial vault.

Survey participants were asked if they would be interested in personalizing the burial vault with words and symbols representing their loved ones’ passions (similar to the vault pictured on page 36). Sixty-eight percent said they would be interested in personalization.

There are some striking disconnects between what was expressed by survey respondents versus what Wilbert is seeing in today’s burial vault market.

A majority of respondents, after some education, stated they would prefer burial vaults rather than grave boxes. Also, a majority of respondents said they are interested in personalization, which generally is available only with lined burial vaults.

Yet sales data indicate a lower percentage of families choosing lined burial vaults than the survey would lead us to expect, as well as a lower percentage of personalization.

Why is this? One theory is self-perpetuation: Many people have never seen a personalized burial vault at a service (and this is certainly due in part to the fact that families are often not made aware of this option).

Another possibility is that families perceive added cost for personalization. Remember, pricing

After learning the difference between a grave box and a burial vault, 83 percent *did not* choose a grave box: 57 percent chose a burial vault; 26 percent needed more information before making a decision and 17 percent chose a grave box.

was not introduced in this study. Indeed, comments from respondents included questions as to the cost of personalization. If we had told them that personalization is generally free, perhaps the percentage of people interested in it would have been even higher than 68 percent.

Survey lessons

What are some of the implications funeral professionals might infer from this study? The key takeaway is the need to educate families. Families want to be thoroughly educated and when they are, they will make better decisions, choosing lined burial vaults more often over unlined concrete grave boxes.

Consider also that prior surveys indicate that 92 percent of funeral professionals buy lined burial vaults for their own family

members, while only 50 percent of the general public selects burial vaults. Funeral professionals might conclude that they need to convey to families the value differences they themselves see between burial vaults and grave boxes.

A second implication is an extension of the first: Funeral professionals should not be afraid to educate because of the innate aversion many of them have to selling or being perceived by families as salespersons. Educating is not selling, and as this survey and the survey respondents' interest in the educational video show, families want to be told all their options so that they can make fully informed decisions.

This, then, leads to the third takeaway: Education can be helped by videos and other tools. The added benefit with using such tools is that the funeral professional can step

away from the “sales” aspect and let families engage in self-learning. Self-learning is often more “sticky” and trusted.

In summary, given the challenges of communication with families in the at-need situation, it is clear that:

- People do not understand the differences between a grave box and a burial vault.
- After a brief video the majority desire lined burial vaults and the peace of mind they can provide.
- Most families care about personalization when they see it is available.

The challenge to product providers and funeral professionals is to continue developing ways to break through to families and provide education that will lead to informed decisions. As documented by this study, families are not only open to education, they want it. □