

Personalization Is the Buzzword ... but It's Really About CHOICE

by Mark Klingenberger and Wayne Stellmach, Wilbert Funeral Services, Inc.

Funeral professionals have always endeavored to help families commemorate their loved ones in the most meaningful way possible. However, whereas in years past, families would largely follow time-honored funeral rituals, today we see more families breaking from tradition with funeral services that are much more customized around the person. Families want to weave into the service the unique fabric of their loved one's life, to remember his or her passions, personality and relationships.

"Personalization" is a word often used to define this contemporary approach to funeral services. But perhaps that word is too trite. Patrick Lynch, Lynch & Sons Funeral Directors, Detroit, Michigan, and past president of NFDA, says, "*Personalization* is a term that is somewhat vendor-driven; personal is a term that is driven by families. Sometimes those can be the same things. But personal is unique to the individual family. We just need to show them things that are possible."

It's really about providing *choice*. You're not just giving families personalized items but, rather, are empowering them through choices to create a service that is uniquely theirs. This difference is much more than semantics. If you can better understand how people make choices, you can better communicate with them, make their decisions easier and make their experience more positive. Your families will gain in experiencing a more meaningful commemoration for their loved one and potentially a better journey toward reconciling their own grief. It can be argued that this is essentially the crux of your business.

There is some interesting research on the psychology of choice that can help you engage with and guide families. Sheena Iyengar is a Columbia Business School professor who studies the psychology of choice. She submits that although we live in a culture of virtually limitless consumer choice, less may actually be better. When there are too many choices to compare and contrast, the process of choosing can be confusing and frustrating, particularly for people who are unprepared for it.¹ Making funeral arrangements, especially at-need, is an arduous task that many are unprepared for, and too many choices can be quite overwhelming. Iyengar suggests an assessment of the choices you present and how you construct those choices. She describes four C's — simple, proven techniques that you can apply across the spectrum of choices you offer families.

1. **Cut** — Less is more. While you certainly want to offer choices, watch for redundant or extraneous options that may end up overloading families. Improve the choosing experience, and the family will likely make better choices.

2. **Concretize** — In order for people to understand the differences between choices, they need to understand in a concrete way the con-

sequences associated with each choice. Iyengar uses an example that presents a downhill biking trip on perhaps the most dangerous mountain road in the world, first using a written description that talks of the dramatic setting as well as the danger (on average, two vehicles per month fall from the road). That same trip is presented using actual photographs depicting the one-lane, twisting road with sheer drop-offs and no guard rails. Despite more information being provided in the written presentation, the pictures made it real.

3. **Categorize** — We can handle more categories than we can choices. Categories tell people how to tell them apart.

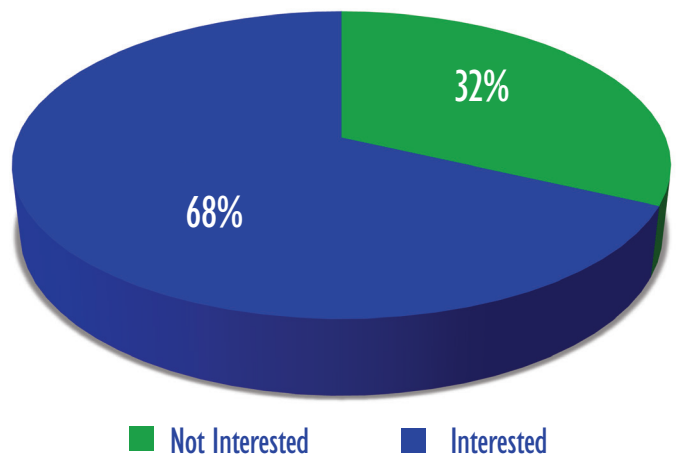
4. **Condition** — If you start people off with easier choices and gradually move into the more complex choices, they become conditioned for complexity, effectively learning how to choose. It is a less overwhelming process that results in better and longer engagement.

How might these techniques apply to funeral service? How can they help families create funerals that are personal and special? Here are some examples, drawn from what the authors have seen successfully applied in funeral homes pertaining to burial vaults.

Cut — If you utilize a slatwall to display burial vault miniatures, is it overcrowded with choices? Take a moment to stand in front of your display, and pretend you know absolutely nothing about burial vaults. Is there some logical presentation or is it a mish-mash of products? Do you have too many displayed? Similarly with digital presentations and monitors, are the burial vault choices well-organized, or is it a visual assault of photos?

What about personalization options that, to reference Pat Lynch, may be one of those instances when personalization and personal are the same thing? Is it apparent when looking at your display that personal photos can be applied to the vault cover that would add to the unique commemoration of a loved one? Or is this option buried within an overwhelming number of competing images?

Majority of Those Choosing a Burial Vault
Are Interested in Personalization



Some funeral homes have found it more effective to display or present fewer vaults, perhaps one or two in each category (see Categorize below). In addition to making it easier for families to choose, less product clutter also opens up space to present other important choices such as personalization.

Concretize — How do you convey the differences between unprotected graveboxes and protected burial vaults? Between different types of burial vaults? Between plain carapaces that are merely functional and those that can include words, symbols or photos that reflect the life of a loved one and help make the service personal? As per the example described earlier of the mountain-biking excursion, the written or spoken words alone may fall far short.

Families need to understand the consequences associated with each choice. An unprotected gravebox meets minimal cemetery requirements but does nothing to protect the contents from ground elements, insects, the weight of the earth and other stresses. Your burial vault supplier will have tasteful illustrations that show this. Better yet, use video. There is nothing better than video to engage and educate families.

Categorize — Your vault display or presentation doesn't have to show every vault choice, but it should have several selections available. Most families appreciate the simplicity of three to five price points and options for customizing the units. Basic, Standard and Premium units give the family someplace to start. Once they understand the essential differences

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between categories of burial vaults, you can always introduce additional choices if it seems appropriate for their wishes, but by categorizing, you will have simplified their choosing process.

Condition — The typical procedure that most funeral professionals seem to follow when walking a family through the decisions on an outer burial container likely already go from the more straightforward decisions to the more involved, yet there may still be some ways to improve upon it.

The most fundamental decision is the choice of a grave box or a protected burial vault, and, again, using video and other educational tools to outline for families the differences in a consistent manner may be the best way to complete this step. If the family members decide on a

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Let's look back at that demand for visualization and how we can assist families in that life transition. The last part of that old saying my father told me, "Believe only half of what you see," is a powerful statement to what we do in the preparation room. We want families to believe that their loved one has passed away and is at peace. Our effort is to remove the mental image perhaps the coroner or police officer painted when they were told the death was caused by tragic circumstances and that seeing that loved one again was not possible. Regardless of the circumstances of the death, whether it be a sudden death or an expected death due to illness, we have the power to improve the mental thought process in the families we serve by making everything appear "normal" when they view for the first time. In no way are we deceiving the families we serve; however, we are creating a softer mental image and a more favorable memory picture of their loved one than the coroner or police officer may have created. Only half of what the family may see may be real. Extensive injuries and the reconstruction techniques used may create a totally illusional effect. The truth is we can recreate what was lost or destroyed using our professional skills. This can give that family the acceptance and the hope to move forward in the grief process.

The preparation room is the most challenging work atmosphere in your funeral home. Its

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atmosphere deserves extreme detail and the highest skill. You have the ability to make the difference to that grieving family. Your ability to learn some of the most modern advanced embalming skills comes from stepping out of the box and creating a new higher platform on which to stand. That higher platform may cause you to stumble and fail in your efforts to climb higher, but once you reach that platform, you will see the difference you have made with families you serve. We can all accept failure as a part of life. We will have failures in the preparation room. What we cannot accept is not trying. Families rely on us as professionals. We hold an integral part of the grief process for these families in our

skills, our confidence and our ability to get the job done.

Families only have one chance to say goodbye to a loved one in death. Give them that chance. Learn the skills of today for the future of all of us tomorrow.

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burial vault, through categorization, they sort through the somewhat more complex decisions on the specific unit.

The final decision that may not sound complex but actually is involves personalization of the carapace (yes, in this case, personalization is the appropriate word). Not only are there numerous options including choosing complete photo collages if desired, but this decision is also both entwined with emotion and is part of the final committal service, reflecting most deeply the life of the loved one.

A Final Word on Personalization

As Pat Lynch observed, making the service personal may include personalization, and, as mentioned above, the personalization of the burial vault carapace can be a very

impactful component of the service. In fact, recent market research demonstrates that a majority of families want personalization on the vault cover.

In this survey conducted by an independent market research firm commissioned by Wilbert, participants prone to choose burial if they were making funeral arrangements for loved ones were asked if they would be interested in personalizing the burial vault with words and symbols of what their loved one had a passion for. *Sixty-eight percent said they would be interested in personalization.*²

Sadly, this is often not presented to families, despite the low-cost or even no-cost options available for families. We've seen many creative ways that families commemorate their loved

ones and express themselves at the committal service. Choosing a special color such as "John Deere green" or university colors, adding a photo or photo collage, even signing the carapace at the committal service are just some of the ways that can be done to make the final moments of the committal service memorable — and personal.

It's all about choice.

References

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2. *Wilbert Funeral Services, Inc., How Much Do Burial Families Know About Burial Vaults (Broadview, IL: WFSI, 2013).*