

## You're Darned Right It's Personal!

by Wayne Stellmach,  
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A funeral is about a person.

That statement is so patently obvious that it almost borders on the ridiculous. "Of course it's about a person!" you might shout back. And yet there are a number of areas where a funeral service can be made more personal which are often not applied. While personalization is certainly not new, it continues to be a topic of discussion in industry publications and at conferences because it is under-utilized even though it is proven to enhance the experience for the family. The more personal the funeral experience, the more satisfied the family. The more satisfied the family, the greater the chance that they will return to your funeral home for future services.

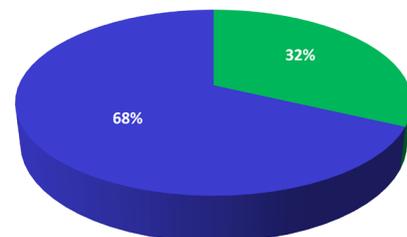
Given that personalization of funeral services and merchandise isn't really new, why is it so often not utilized? There may be myriad reasons from the unfortunate mechanical approach of some funeral directors, i.e., just going through the motions and checklist, to genuine unawareness of what can be done to transform something from functional to meaningful.

Perhaps there is no product to which this pertains more than the burial vault. Personalizing a burial vault is still a foreign concept to many funeral professionals, let alone families. "I didn't know this could be done" is a response I continue to hear from funeral professionals admiring a customized vault carapace on display in our booth at trade shows. That same phrase is uttered by people who attend a graveside service made even more powerful by a beautiful image on the burial vault

carapace with photos of the person and her family reflecting a full life that had meaning. While more families are being offered burial vault personalization by progressive funeral professionals who have witnessed the impact it can make, I don't believe it is a stretch to state that the majority of consumers remain unaware that it is available. And yet when they are made aware of it, a good percentage opt for it. After all, today's consumers desire unique experiences and disdain cookie-cutter products or services...why would that be any different when it comes to funeral selections made for a loved one

An independent study confirms that personalization of the burial vault would indeed be selected by a majority of families. **Sixty-eight percent expressed interest in burial vault personalization** yet today we are nowhere near that level. Where is this disconnect happening? Are families who are actually making arrangements

Majority of those choosing a burial vault  
are interested in personalization



■ Not Interested ■ Interested

*Wilbert.*  
Commemorating Life with Respect™

Q. Please indicate your level of interest in personalizing the burial vault with words and symbols of what your loved one had a passion for (such as in the photo above) for display at the graveside service.

being offered personalization and declining? Or are they not being told about personalization by their funeral professional? Given the reaction mentioned earlier when funeral professionals see examples of burial vault personalization at our trade show booth, I suspect in many cases it is the latter.

We need to do more to raise the awareness of burial and urn vault personalization and it begins with vault providers equipping funeral homes with tools that better explain and visually show what can be done. If you haven't had a discussion with your vault provider about updating your selection room or arrangement conference room with visuals and other tools to depict examples of personalized vaults, it is time to do that. Traditional visual aids such as wall graphics, table signs, brochures and printed presentation materials can show the array of beautiful images that are available along with some examples of loved ones' photos, names, dates and even collages that can be done to commemorate a singular life. Even better and more impactful are videos, slide shows and other digital tools that can engage today's consumers. Videos can not only be shown in a selection or arrangements room but also embedded on your funeral home website so that families can get a head-start on understanding their options before they even come in for the arrangements conference. Placing educational videos on your website is also a fantastic method of reaching prospective customers who may be researching who they want to work with when it comes time to making arrangements for themselves or a loved one.

In addition to simple unawareness, there may be other hurdles that funeral professionals face in offering personalization of burial vaults or urn vaults. One is not knowing whether their burial vault provider is even able to make a customized carapace or whether a short turnaround requirement can be met. Over the past couple of years, technological advancements have made large-format printers more accessible for vault providers to acquire, giving them the ability to produce carapace prints locally. Not only does this accommodate getting photos to them and makes it easier to communicate directly about other things that would truly make it personal, having local production also eliminates any concern of swift turnaround. It's worth asking your burial vault provider if they have this capability. Even if not, most are able get prints overnight from other sources who understand the quick

response needed in the funeral service industry.

Another significant hurdle that not only applies to offering families personalized vault options but transcends across other services and products is the worry about being perceived as a pushy salesperson, especially with sensitivity to the occasional jabs by media or on social platforms that funeral providers are taking advantage of people in a time of grief, confusion and vulnerability. STOP IT! A funeral director is precisely that: directing and guiding families through their choices. If you don't educate families on what is possible, how in the heck will they even know?

Allow me to make an analogy with choosing a cell phone and service plan. I don't know of too many people who relish the thought of spending hours at a cell phone store when it comes time to select a new phone or carrier. It can be an exhausting experience, given all the options and weighing what's right for each individual. Yet I suspect that most of us want to be educated on all those options. Most of us appreciate a well-informed sales associate who walks us through the plans and features and lets us make our own informed decisions. A professional cell phone sales rep doesn't assume what each customer wants but rather takes time to patiently explain all the options to every single one. A few customers may still choose a basic model with no frills, but it's pretty safe to say that they are happy having made an informed decision.

Similarly, one cannot assume what a family wants when it comes to an outer burial container. From the level of protection to the availability of personalization on the cover, if a family understands their options and makes decisions based on their perceived value of what they are getting, they will be satisfied. Educate, don't sell. You may be surprised by the decisions they make.

Another reason personalization options may not be discussed with families is simply "out of sight, out of mind". If you don't have visuals to show personalization examples and selections to your families, it's easy to forget to even talk about it. Again, ask your vault provider what they have.

How big of an impact can something as simple as a personalized burial have? Huge. I have heard numerous stories from funeral professionals about families who are so touched by the visual tribute to

their loved one on a carapace that they gather around, recount even more stories and happy times, take pictures and commemorate a life well lived. One story in particular that stuck with me was told by a funeral director remembering the family whose loved one was a motorcycle fanatic. The vault cover included a wonderful photo of him and an image of a winding, open road as seen from the perspective of a motorcycle driver, complete with the handlebars and dashboard visible. Their only “complaint”, she recalled with a smile, was that the speed shown on the speedometer wasn’t fast enough. Do you think that family will return to her when it comes time to make another funeral arrangement? I think it’s a pretty safe bet.

As you look at the many examples of burial or urn vault images shown below, think about how they would be enhanced further with photos, poems or passages, even words of love literally written with a marker by family and friends at the committal service. Think about other things that can be done for the family including framed prints of the carapace or bookmarks that can be provided as mementos. Think about how you would feel if this type of personalized tribute were made for one of your own loved ones. Think about the families you serve would feel.

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The following are examples of images that can be applied to a Wilbert burial vault:



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### The Making of a Personalized Burial Vault

<p>The family chooses a background image and photo(s) to be printed.</p>			
<p>The entire image is placed on the vault.</p>			
<p>The personalized burial vault is a central element of the graveside service.</p>			