

Tips From The Top

[advice from experts]

10 TIPS

For Handling Cremation Customers

In today's marketplace, cremation rates can reach 50 percent or more, depending on your area of the country, and funeral professionals need to embrace the fact that cremation is here to stay and will continue to grow. Too many in the industry still dread the cremation customer, assuming they are only looking for the quickest, least expensive way to deal with the disposition of their loved one. Michael Devaney, cremation merchandising manager at Wilbert Funeral Services, provides tips for giving cremation families meaningful, value-added service.

1. CREMATION MERCHANDISING DOES NOT START WHEN THE FAMILY CALLS ON YOU.

Make sure you speak to the cremation customer in everything you do. Your facility name, staff communication, website and marketing messages should all embrace the cremation family as a valued customer. Never make them feel less important.

2. PROVIDE A TOUR OF YOUR FACILITY BEFORE MAKING ARRANGEMENTS.

Introduce the family to staff and show them your facility (especially if you have a crematory). This will help them see what they will be paying for as well as imagining possibilities for service options. Better yet, consider holding "cremation open houses" for the public, providing an opportunity for education before the need arises.

3. TAKE THE OPPORTUNITY TO SERVE.

If a family states, "We just want a cremation," create an atmosphere of communication. Ask open-ended questions. If they say they want a

"direct cremation," ask them to explain what they mean; they may think this is the only option. Never assume they know all service options available to them.

4. COLLECT THE STORY.

Don't just be vital statistics collectors. Avoid asking only yes or no questions. Learn as much as you can about their loved one. Even if you meet with a family that has expressed a strong desire for a cremation without viewing or services, it's important to collect their story. Take time to listen to what they feel is important about the life of their loved one.

5. REFLECT BACK TO THE FAMILY WHAT THEY SAY ABOUT THEIR LOVED ONE.

Often it is this time with a family that helps them to understand and see the need for a specific type of a personalized cremation product, ceremony or some sort of remembrance service of a life well lived.

6. PROVIDE ANSWERS.

Families look to you as the expert.

Use this time not only to listen, but to make suggestions based on their insights about their loved one. Providing answers does not mean telling families "what they want," but rather helping them understand the many options that are available and suggesting ways in which they may fulfill their needs.

7. USE AUDIO VISUAL TOOLS.

It is always helpful to use short, informational videos during the arrangement conference to help families understand available service options, as well as decisions regarding final placement of cremated remains. Having these videos on your website can also be extremely helpful for families to view before the time of need. They will have more confidence in knowing what to expect from your cemetery.

8. PACKAGE YOUR CREMATION SERVICES.

Once the family knows the type of service they want, it is helpful to hand them a list of cremation service packages in a customized printed booklet that has simple, easy-to-understand bullet points. Make sure there are visual images to correspond with each service package.

9. DISPLAY PRODUCTS IN AN ATTRACTIVE SETTING.

If you don't have the right display, don't expect to sell the products.

10. DO EVERYTHING YOU CAN TO MEET THEIR NEEDS.

Always look for ways to do more for your cremation families. You are not promoting cremation but rather promoting service and value. Cremation will be at your doorstep no matter what you do. Why not be proactive and add value in everything you do? Family preferences may have changed, but your business model of service should not. •