

Roundtable

By Patti Martin Bartsche

Vaults Roundtable



Doug Beck



Linda Darby



Mark Klingenberger

Cremation is impacting all segments of the funeral industry, including vault manufacturing and sales. We talk to Doug Beck, vice president of sales and marketing, Clark Grave Vault; Linda Darby, CEO of Trigard; and Mark Klingenberger, vice president of sales and marketing, Wilbert Funeral Services, about the state of the industry, how to market to the cremation consumer, the challenges that lie ahead and what the future holds for vault manufacturers.

Traditional ground burials are down. How is that impacting the vault industry?

Beck: With fewer burials, you of course have less opportunity to sell your product. So, we look for other revenue streams, both within the industry and outside, to remain in business. That includes cremation products, value-added services and memorial products. We also have to look inward and be as efficient as we can and always be looking for ways to improve.

Darby: It is impacting it in terms of

traditional burials – the more cremations, the less full-size burial vaults we make. We have to look to different ways, perhaps more urn vaults or products for niches or other means of memorializing with cremations.

Klingenberger: This is a challenge we are all facing. For those who are working on a smaller scale this will probably be more difficult to withstand than larger firms who can also diversify. What is interesting is that half of the market is unlined concrete boxes so the opportunity for improvements in the quality of

the average sale is good. Also, our surveys of families shows they will buy better products when they understand the differences between units.

What are the biggest challenges the vault industry will be facing in the next several years?

Beck: With the increasing cremation rate, we, the vault manufacturers, will continue to fight for a bigger slice of a shrinking market. We'll need to provide products and services that continue to set ourselves apart from the rest of the field as well as products and services that the consumer wants to buy.

Darby: Maintaining market share and figuring out how to keep the industry telling the story of why we do what we do are the biggest challenges. As new generations come forth, sometimes they need to understand the history to better serve our family clients.

Klingenberger: The market will tighten over the next few years before stabilizing. Without economies of scale coupled with a diversified revenue stream it will be a challenge. This same trend is affecting our customers as well; the funeral professional is facing a lower revenue stream with the increase in cremation. This has led to more

firms interested in maximizing the burial vault sale, and we are seeing an improvement in the sales mix where firms are focused more on family education.

How can vault companies become more consumer-centric, and why is it important that they do so?

Beck: We need to focus on what the buyer really wants from our products and services and then be able to meet these needs at price points they are willing to pay. We also need to be able to explain and present these to the consumer in a way in which they are comfortable with.

Darby: By listening to consumers – how they feel about what we do and trying to figure out how to give them what they want and need. Those two things can be very different. Educating and talking about it helps bring it back to the heart, which is where it should be.

Klingenger: It is critical we get more involved with the education of the families to support funeral professionals facing this challenge every day. Recently, Wilbert produced a video to begin the education before the family even meets with the funeral professional entitled “Value of the Committal Service.” It’s meant to help people begin to envision what might be possible and stimulate the dialogue in the arrangements conference to make the service more meaningful. Many people like to send it in advance of preneed appointments as well.

Wilbert also offers funeral professionals a display monitor with preloaded slide shows and videos that educate families on the reasons for burial vaults and some key product differences. Commonly mounted on a selection room wall, display animation breaks through the

static environment and immediately engages consumers.

How can funeral homes and cemeteries more effectively market both traditional vaults and cremation vaults?

Beck: We have always believed that educating the consumer is the best way to accomplish this, both on the importance of a funeral as well as the purpose and importance of a burial vault. Consumers first need to understand the benefits that it provides. And let’s face it, many people don’t know anything about a burial vault, or for the most part, the healing benefits that a funeral provides. For Clark, this goes back decades when we were the only vault company promoting the profession with ads in national magazines such as Good Housekeeping and National Geographic. We have always supported the funeral director with cutting edge materials such as the Labelle machine that was launched in the early ‘80s and was really a predecessor to today’s current use of information being presented to the consumer in a digital format. Currently, we are working another revision of our Consumer Vault Information video that funeral directors use to explain the purpose of a vault, making it even more consumer friendly and easy to use.

Darby: Funeral homes must have current and up-to-date displays available for families to see and understand. Don’t use miniature vault samples – families don’t understand what they are and how they are used. Pleasing-to-the-eye graphics work better. Cemeterians need to understand the importance of how they display these products; if they don’t show these products with an above ground set up, they devalue the product.

Klingenger: Education is the key – having families understand what the vault does and how it can be personalized for the graveside service. Also, in the case of cremation, the family needs to appreciate that while an urn going home is fine for now, they need to consider where the final/permanent resting place will be for it.

Five years from now, what will the discussion about vaults be like?

Beck: I think in many regards, much the same as today. Everyone knows that cremation will continue to increase and the big question is, will the ground burial market be flat or will it decrease? I have seen data that support both, but if the market size decreases, I think you’ll see fewer players in the industry as small, local vault companies either close their doors or are bought and merged with another company. In the end, I think we’ll see fewer choices that the funeral director, and thus the consumer, will have in what vault they can purchase.

Darby: Well, if we had a crystal ball that would certainly be helpful. I think that with cremation coming on so fast and furious we will most likely be talking about products relating to cremation and how to memorialize.

Klingenger: The presentation of the product and service options will be in a virtual showroom in more cases than not. We also believe that most burial vaults will have personalization rather than the exception that it is today.

Recently when talking to a family member about the funeral of a loved one, their sentiment on the importance of the vault was summed up by a comment, “I thought enough of her to bury her body – I surely want it protected.” •