



The Recession-Busting Power of Personalization

Personalization is more than just another industry buzzword. It is, if embraced fully, a frame of mind. It's the mental lens that savvy funeral professionals view each detail of every funeral service through, leaving an amazing experience for the consumer. It leads clients to tell and retell friends and acquaintances the tales of their experience, and it's what brings them back to the front door for the next family member, even if your competitor is lower priced.

Thoughtful personalization and memorable service separates leaders from the has-beens and never-will-bes. This became all too clear to me years ago, when in rough times I had a different sort of need...I was a new mother, learning the rules of life on one paycheck. I'd become the proverbial penny-pincher: keeping the balance between life's little pleasures and putting money aside for emergencies. This same decision faces every consumer in this new economy – walking the tightrope between staying financially stable and maintaining some quality of life.

I needed a hotel, having only a few immovable criteria: affordable, safe for my daughter and a good location. Once I found what I was looking for, I avoided feeling guilty about the expense by reminding myself that it was necessary. What helped to alleviate my concerns was the delight I savored having found exactly what I needed. The staff was friendly, genuine and responsive. Their amenities included a free shuttle to downtown and complimentary loaner umbrellas for the famously wet Seattle weather. They even recommended a nearby Thai restaurant that was cheaper and had better food than the one I inquired about.

Not only did I enjoy my stay, but I enjoyed that rare and wonderful feeling of getting more value for the money that I spent. I've spread the word to family and friends, given them glowing reviews and have stayed there numerous times since.

What's the lesson here friends? Don't cut service. Anyone can sell them a casket and anyone can undercut you on price. Your true competitive advantage has always been being able to beat them on the most valuable coin of the realm – memorable service... Eye-opening, mind-altering, jaw-dropping service.

Focus on the individual and their unique characteristics. Personalize the experience in unexpected ways. A premium professionally-produced video tribute can be an outstanding tool for you to utilize. It shows them that you care enough to go the extra mile. It acknowledges their loved one as special. Some funeral homes lose sight of this and offer their families a "streamlined" (aka de-personalized) memorial video for their

own convenience. This can be a huge mistake. These glorified slide-shows, that anyone with a computer can do, make families say: "Why should I come to you for something I can do myself?" It takes time, thought and talent to create the meaningful, quality production today's consumer demands. If they don't perceive tangible, valuable benefits from using your firm, everyone loses.

Long after the flowers have wilted and the casket has been forgotten, memories of a special, personal funeral service remain. A memorable experience can be the one thing that gives them subtle reminders of your firm's quality, as well as the free positive impressions that form when the family shares their memories with their friends and other family members. It proves that you are more than just an "order taker."

Your master plan should bring you back to the basics. Stay positive and take action to thrive. Keep your employees abreast of what you are doing, and why. It will alleviate the uncertainty they feel and help boost morale (theirs AND yours). Solicit their input on economizing the business and improving service quality. Your optimism can be infectious; translating into better experiences for your client families.

Compassionate, personal funeral care can be the driving factor that brings someone back to your front door or compels them to refer their friends or colleagues to you. A more assertive step would be to treat every service as if it was your grandmother's. Imagine how you would pull out all of the stops for her service and then do it for your clients. The word of mouth you generate would be the most powerful advertising you could ever get.

When you meet with your next client family, take some extra time to learn about the deceased so you can discover what personalization options to offer. Make sure that you are offering only the highest quality personalized merchandise; Professionally produced video tributes, that "perfect song", the right celebrant or even incorporating special vehicles like fire trucks or a Harley hearse.

Whatever you choose to offer, ensure it is the best. The funeral industry has survived rough economies before, and the versatile, approachable and responsive professional will be the one who succeeds through this recession. It could be you. **FBA**

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