

Cooperative Funeral Fund Inc.

Creating the “Want”

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November 2016

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► **Cooperative Funeral Fund Inc. (CFF)** specializes in the management of preneed and perpetual care fund accounts. CFF has provided a program for the death care industry to facilitate the creation, investment, tax compliance and payout of funeral trusts since 1989.

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Editor's note

Preneed Sales Success, an ICCFA Magazine column by various authors, focuses on building success in sales, particularly the preneed sale of cemetery, cremation and funeral products and services. Submission inquiries are welcome. For details, contact ICCFA Magazine Managing Editor Susan Loving, sloving@iccfa.com.

PRENEED SALES SUCCESS

How do you get people to *want* to prearrange funeral and cemetery plans? How can you sell the idea of doing so without “selling”?

Creating the ‘want’

“I want you to take care of me when I die.” Do I consider this a compliment? Absolutely!

When I first started out as a 20-year-old funeral director and someone said this to me, it was usually a young man who thought I didn’t get their true meaning—wink, wink. I will never forget the day this sentiment was posed on a whole other level.

A female coworker and I were driving the hearse to a local crematory. While driving on the expressway, a car full of young men passed us at a high rate of speed, leaving us in their dust. Imagine our surprise when they slowed down enough for us to pass. We chuckled, thinking they probably had never seen a woman driving a hearse before and wanted to make sure they hadn’t imagined it.

It wasn’t very long before I noticed them in my side mirrors speeding up to catch us. As they approached the passenger side of the hearse, one of the men was holding a sign that read, “I want you to drive me when I die.”

Never ones to be outdone, we caught up with them, holding a sign of our own: “How about now?!” Even though they didn’t pass us again, I am sure they still tell that story. I do, though with a slightly different perspective.

This incident is one of many that seemed to follow me during my career in the funeral profession. What it taught me was that finding the funny is a unique way to help people open the dialogue about prearranging their funeral.

Even as a young funeral director, I knew intuitively that it was OK to smile and laugh at certain times when speaking of the deceased. You just had to be cognizant of when those right times were.

When my manager called me into the office to scold me for “joking” with the family, I did second-guess myself. But

then I thought, if the family jokes with me, am I expected to tell them, “That’s not appropriate!” I didn’t think so. Not following my intuition felt wrong.

Fortunately for me, the owner of the funeral home pulled me aside to simply say, Go with your gut, kid.” It was nice to know someone else felt the same way. Though it was, of course, to be our little secret.

As professionals in the death-care industry, even though we might doubt ourselves at times, we learn to trust our instincts. We naturally sell without actually “selling,” while meeting a need and helping people reach the point where they want to take care of their final arrangements.

Whether it’s a serious conversation or a playful discussion, just talking with someone about their final wishes opens their mind to all of the possibilities. This is where we excel. Our passion for what we do shines through. What we see and believe, we help to achieve.

I rarely hear a grieving family have anything bad to say about the funeral directors or cemeterians who handled their loved one. Yes, there are a few of knuckleheads out there, as in any industry, but fortunately, they are few and far between.

So, how do we naturally create the “want” in preneed sales? We talk about it every chance we get and every place we go.

We can talk about it in obvious places such as with high school kids in a death and dying class, adults at a seminar sponsored by an elder care attorney or with senior citizens in an assisted living facility.

Or maybe we think outside the box and talk about creating one’s final tribute while standing in line at the supermarket, while buying a car or while the x-ray technician is imaging the leg you possibly broke while trying to learn something new.

When discussing something we believe

in and are passionate about, there simply is no bad place or time.

Recently, while my husband and I drove his 16-year-old son and his girlfriend back to her family's home, I thought, "Why not ask these teenagers their thoughts on prearranging their funeral?" It was a long drive, so I was being creative.

My stepson is used to this type of talk. There are four funeral directors in the family, so the subject of death comes up more often than in most homes. However, I wasn't quite sure how his girlfriend would respond, so I approached our conversation a little differently.

When speaking about death with someone from any generation, it is best to see what kind of experiences they have had with death and go from there. The less familiar they are with dealing with any type of death, the more cautious you need to be starting out.

Let them share their experiences without leading them. This helps you get a sense of whether they are open to talking about the topic or whether you should just let the

subject drop. Fortunately for me, neither of them had endured a bad experience and both were interested in talking about it.

My question to them: "What would someone talk about while prearranging their funeral?" Their main focus was whether they would be cremated or buried.

When I asked them what their parents want, they looked at me and exclaimed, "How should I know?!" Sound familiar? I guess most people, regardless of age, feel the same uncertainty when it comes to arranging someone else's funeral.

Here is the scary part: This is the generation that will be taking care of many of us baby boomers, not to mention Gen Xers. If you want to create the prearrangement "want" in a baby boomer, share with her or him their children's mindset about making funeral arrangements for their parents.

Can't you picture the LED bulb going off in their head? "Uh oh, I'd better prearrange my funeral. My kids wouldn't have a clue, and if I'm not around to text them, they will never get it right!"

Reach out to members of the baby

boomer generation. They, more than anyone, understand—or can easily be led to understand—the importance of prearranging a funeral.

Creating their "want" can be done naturally when you understand what will motivate them. Many have already had to make arrangements for a parent who did not leave instructions. They are often painfully aware of how difficult that process can be.

They also know full well that their children often have their heads in the virtual world more than in the real one. I understand that feeling. I have already talked about my final wishes with my stepchildren, yet they admit to not remembering what I requested. Talk about having your personal LED light go off.

This is what we need to convey to as many people as possible: We all should sit down and prearrange our own funeral rather than relying on family members to remember what we did or did not tell them about our final wishes. How's that for creating a want? □

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