

Cooperative Funeral Fund Inc.

Where is Your Preneed Comfort Zone?

===== *as seen in:* =====



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Where is Your Preneed Comfort Zone?

By Ann Marie St. George

After working in funeral service for more than 30 years, you would think nothing could surprise you. Most funeral directors do what we do because we truly care. Sadly, the industry has seen many unpleasant surprises, such as unscrupulous preneed scandals. These are always a surprise for those of us who are in it for the right reasons and realize the value and promise we offer to our communities. The difficulty is that in the court of public opinion, all it takes is a couple of “bad eggs” doing something unprincipled and we are all lumped into the same category.

Fortunately, the families we have served know the true soul of the funeral director. These are the families that we helped when they thought they couldn't be helped, and the people we see almost every day in the communities we serve. They know we will be there when they need us. But what about those families we have not yet served? How do we take a proactive approach to showing them who we are and the important role we play when they experience a loss? It really only takes one thing to make that mark on your community, but the trick is, that one thing will be different for each funeral director and for each community.

So how do we reach our community with our message?

Being on the sales side of the death care industry, I am not in a funeral home on a daily basis, though if I am



doing my job well, I should be, just not the same exact funeral home every day. In addition to my sales job, I, with my husband, own a retail shop, convenience store/pizzeria and a restaurant. Because of our presence in the community, people know that I am a funeral director and they often seek me out in one of our businesses to sit with them and discuss prearranging their funerals.

They are unsure of what to do and they feel comfortable enough to discuss their thoughts. This is the essence of being a funeral director — families knowing we are the subject matter experts willing to share our knowledge.

What a unique gift we have been given — if only we could learn to share it with a larger audience. Note: I'm not suggesting that funeral directors open pizza shops to gain exposure, but in my case it has allowed me to play an important role in the community I serve.

“Preneed” is a hot topic in our industry, and rightfully so. It is the perfect opportunity to help families before they actually need us — by building a relationship that will ensure a successful and long-lasting business. In our search for the next best thing in preneed, we need to look toward our local, state and national death care industry

organizations where there is a wealth of knowledge to learn. Attending either the ICCFA or NFDA conferences will give you that added edge over other funeral homes in your community. Sharing what you learn after attending these conventions is what makes you that “one in a million” funeral director.

At the ICCFA convention in April, I attended sessions with some very intriguing and inspiring speakers: Rabbi Daniel Cohen, Ron Rosenberg and Cindy Gallop, to name a few. The theme of the convention was “Breaking Boundaries,” and the goal was to inspire us to think outside the norm. This is what we must do if we want to survive during these challenging times.

The theme for the 2015 NFDA International Convention & Expo? “It’s not your grandpa’s convention.” One of the most popular pre-convention sessions is the “Certified Pre-Planning Consultant (CPC) certification course. This is the only national certification program in the field of advance funeral planning, setting an industry standard of excellence. The CPC designation can enhance your reputation in your community as a specialist in preplanning. We all need that “one thing” that will make us stand out from the other funeral directors in your neighborhood. I received my certification about six years ago, and it has helped me develop my place in my community through the knowledge I gained.

When I worked as a preneed counselor, I was taught several techniques on how to grow our preneed files. Some were genius, while others made me feel like a door-to-door salesperson — *ugh!* My first project, which got me the quickest results, was separating the preneed files into funded and unfunded. A letter was created and sent to all the unfunded prearrangements, informing

them of an opportunity to fund their prearrangement. We were always mindful of the sensitivity of the topic, and we included a disclaimer at the end of the letter essentially letting families know that if the letter arrived during a difficult time, to forgive us.

My next project was developing an aftercare program that included discussing the future and the importance of prearranging one’s funeral. This is

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especially effective when the deceased has not prearranged their funeral and there is much confusion as to what the dearly departed would have wanted for funeral services — such an unnecessary burden for the family. We put together a scripted scenario and practiced how to discuss these difficult topics with the families. Some of us then took improvisation classes to help us think quicker on our feet. These discussions and improv techniques made us all better funeral directors.

The third project, which I really enjoyed doing, were outreach programs. We would either pair up with an elder care attorney or hold our own meet and greets at the funeral home. I was amazed at the number of people that would show up and ask questions — I could sense the significance of what we were sharing with our community. It is so important to get the proverbial preneed ball rolling. The discussions were never morbid — they were filled with uplifting stories and so much laughter.

The last project we crafted was the direct mailer sent out to a designated area surrounding the funeral home. This was a letter with a return postcard that used check-off boxes to ask the person at that address a couple questions regarding prearranging one’s funeral along with a request for more information. Very important to this project was, as before, including a disclaimer, apologizing if the mailer had come at a difficult time. Upon receiving any returned postcards, we would follow up with more information either by phone or in person. The goal was to meet with them in person to make a prearrangement.

Not all of these projects/programs are for everyone. If you are not comfortable performing any of these strategies, consider hiring someone who would really dig into these projects and make them work for you and your business. As I mentioned earlier, in this competitive age of the funeral industry we need that one thing that makes people stand up and notice. We need to make our mark on the families we serve and become trusted members of our communities so we aren’t associated with the bad press stories. My hope for all of you is that you truly find that one thing! *AM*

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