



Michael Kubasak

## Kubasak's Corner

### 9 Key Steps That Will Improve (Your) Cremation Arrangements

The telephone was promptly answered on the second ring. "Kubasak Family Funeral Home. This is Frances speaking."

"Yes, Frances... I've had a death in the family and need some information about cremation. Can someone help me?"

"Oh I see...let me try to find someone who is available." Frances paged the owner in his office and told him, "You'll never believe it, there's another cremation shopper on the phone. Do you want to take it or just call them back after your Lions Club meeting?"

Telephone calls of this nature are received at funeral homes everywhere. Some are handled well but often when the "C" word is mentioned, the response can be poorly handled with indifference to the feelings and needs of the caller. This article will not address telephone answering skills, per se, but instead will identify some key steps every funeral-cremation arranger can use in the arrangement conference with cremation consumers. The most successful arrangers practice these steps with every family. They have learned that a satisfying arrangement conference coupled with revenue generation has little to do with merely offering more merchandise, but has more to do with updating one's people-communication skills and encouraging their active participation with the client family. Becoming skillful in these steps and implementing one or more of them in the arrangement conference (and on the telephone) will make a big difference.

1. **Listen.** Hearing words alone is not always indicative that you are listening. There are many aspects to listening. Among others it means listening to feelings, observing body language, understanding the person's demeanor, not formulating a response in your mind while they are speaking, not prejudging, and more. Active listening means focusing intently on the client family and with simple gestures or words, becoming a part of their discussion. Listening means not writing while they are speaking; making the conference as free of distractions as possible; not sorting papers or performing other tasks while the person is talking. Listening also means that you are not dominating the arrangement by doing the talking.
2. **Understand it is okay to break from tradition.** As requests for cremation continue to increase, be aware that for many client families, this may be the first time cremation is being done in this family. It can be a new experience for them. When my uncle died three years ago, it was his wish to be cremated -

the first family member to choose cremation. It created uneasiness among his surviving brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, grandchildren and some close friends. At a family only gathering at my uncle's home, I was asked to dispel many misconceptions and uncertainties about him being cremated. During a sometimes heated discussion, I answered questions about cremation and gave them brochures to read. Some parents asked for suggestions as to how they should explain cremation to young children. Some wanted to know how the "ashes" would be dealt with. For members of my Roman Catholic family whose tradition was earth burial or entombment of the body, the first cremation was unthinkable. During my career, it was a personal practice of mine to uncover the reasons why a family was "breaking tradition" and choosing cremation. In doing so, I looked for ways to be supportive to their choice while striving to be constructive in working with them (not demeaning them or being destructive to the planning process). I discovered early on that attempts to "change the minds" of cremation consumers or using demeaning words or treating cremation like the plague was destructive behavior in the arrangement conference and to some, viewed as unprofessional conduct. More often than not, trying to change someone's mind to my preference serves to alienate the arranger from the client and set the stage for needless confrontation. Being unsupportive complicates communication and makes any attempt to establish trust and collaboration most difficult. Cremation can also be a new experience for some staff members. Just as families can be filled with misconceptions about cremation and its role in contemporary funeral practices, employees can also be misinformed and prone to misjudge what the client family is saying. For arrangers and directors of funerals and ceremonies, non-traditional requests for services or services that require a change in protocol should not be viewed as burdensome or evidence that the client family is weird. Our business is extremely personal. Most of us entered funeral service so we could help people and serve them in their time of need. Meeting the changing needs of the "new consumer" requires us to recognize that "flexible" is one of the characteristics of the funeral. The funeral director-arranger must also remain flexible in providing services and in being helpful to clients who may seek to create new traditions.

3. **It is permissible to not use the "F" word.** Some people choosing cremation do so because they simply do not want a funeral. For these people, burial or entombment can be synonymous with having a (traditional) funeral while cremation can be synonymous with individualization, personal expression, customization, spontaneity, less restriction, non-tradition, and so forth. Using the word "funeral" with some cremation consumers can mean an instant "No, thank you." The most successful funeral directors across the country dealing with cremation refrain from using the word funeral. Instead, they use words such as ceremony, celebration, life celebration, farewell, gathering,

sendoff, recognition, and others. In one funeral home where cremation is performed 70% of the time, arrangers use words like honoring, “wingding” and bash when discussing ceremonies. Our license may denote us as being funeral directors and our facilities may be licensed and zoned for conducting funeral services, but in actuality, we do much more than any license or zoning description says. I recommend including the word “cremation” on business cards, signage and in all advertising copy. Using the word “cremation” will not cause burial clients to shun your establishment and choose another funeral home. It will not influence burial consumers to suddenly choose cremation. In my experience at my funeral home in southern California, using the word cremation meant that in addition to serving (traditional) burial families, other families who preferred cremation and otherwise would not have selected my firm, called me. If yours is truly a full service funeral home, advertising the fact that you provide cremation services makes good sense.

- 4. Offer choices and let the client family be the one to say “no” to them.** It is no secret: consumers today are demanding and for sure, they demand choice in all of their purchases, including choice in funeral-cremation-cemetery goods and services. A minimal selection of merchandise and optional services and ceremonies means you are shortchanging yourself. In my opinion, it is a disservice to the client family. What I learned many years ago in my practice has become one of my axioms: *What you do for the burial family you must also do for the cremation family.* Burial families are presented with an almost unlimited selection of caskets. Yet, at some funeral homes, cremation families are given a meager selection of two or three containers. Urn selection can be downright embarrassing, with as few as three urns hidden inside a closet. *Offering a wide selection of merchandise is an investment, not just an expense.* While most every burial family is provided with information to make an informed decision, many cremation families receive no explanation and are left to fend for themselves. Without crucial information, this usually results in the least expensive item or service selected. Do some arrangers or funeral directors see their time as being too important to spend with a cremation consumer? Do some owners berate arrangers who spend time with a family choosing cremation? Rarely, if ever, will an arranger make a casket decision for a burial family, but for many consumers who choose cremation their loved one is placed in a cardboard box often without their knowledge. When a cremation family is presented with a choice of containers (that are fairly priced, in logical order and well displayed in a room or presented in a book), *and the family is allowed to make their own decision,* it is surprising how often something other than a cardboard box is selected. Smart, respectful arrangers have learned to not make decisions for the client and to allow the client to say “no” to everything (except the minimum

requirement). This increases revenues and enhances customer satisfaction.

- 5. Focus on survivors.** As a young arranger, this was cumbersome for me to understand. Asking how they wanted the hair done, what shade of lipstick they wanted, what clothing to use and if they wanted a minister was not “focusing on the needs of the survivors.” For the most part, our training has focused on rendering care to the dead body and making as good a presentation as possible. With traditional families, those who desire visitation or are concerned with the looks of the decedent, it is easy to talk about these matters. Except for minimum verification of identity viewing, many cremation families do not equate viewing the body with cremation. Your skills as an embalmer or restorative arts technician can be superfluous to them. On the other hand, employing more of the “human touch” in your arrangements is a way to show the family that you are there to help them, not sell them. It is alright to assert your wisdom while educating people about the importance of saying goodbye and the need to recognize the death. Asking who is who in the family, who are key friends and who should be included in planning are important questions. Ask them to tell you about previous experiences they have had in attending funerals or farewells. What is one thing they recall from other celebrations that they would like implemented at this time? Remember, many of your client families have watched Six Feet Under, Family Plots, Pope John Paul II’s funeral, Gandhi’s body being carried to the funeral pyre, President Reagan’s funeral, and more. You might be surprised by what you hear. You may learn how to be of further service, above and beyond just disposing or cremating the body.
- 6. Share an agenda with the client family near the beginning of the arrangement conference.** This is a critical step often overlooked or ignored. Even if the family is adamant about wanting “only simple cremation” or is experienced in funeral planning, one fact remains: Everyone feels better when they know what will take place. People respond better when they know what to expect. All professionals, especially those in personal service businesses, share an agenda with the client. It is a mark of the professional; not sharing one is the sign of an amateur. Sharing an agenda helps the arranger maintain control; it demonstrates you are organized. Knowing what will take place helps put people at ease, especially people dealing with a death. Without acting over-bearing, an agenda lets the client family know what is expected of them, as well. The best agenda is short and succinct, not a rambling dissertation. My agenda is: *“In the next hour and a half, we will take care of the legal documents and information for the death certificate along with completing authorization and consent forms. I will review with you the services of our funeral home and ask you to make four decisions: what ceremonies you want and how you would like to say goodbye, what container you want for the deceased, a*

container for the cremated body and the final disposition of the cremated body.”

7. **Be knowledgeable about the cremation process.** It is surprising how many arrangers have not seen the inside of a crematory facility and have never witnessed a cremation. I believe in the adage: *Seeing is believing*. While some arrangers may not want to view the actual reduction of the body in the chamber, all arrangers meeting with cremation consumers must be familiar with what takes place during cremation. You need to know some basic facts, such as how long it takes, how much cremated remains weigh, what is processing, what happens with any metal from the container or that may be in the body, how cremated remains containers are labeled, and more. Just as you know what goes on at a cemetery when a burial is made, you must also know what goes on during the cremation process.
8. **Invest in yourself and funeral home and/or crematory staff.** For owners, human resources are your greatest asset. Ask yourself: Are employees working with you or for you? Funeral service is among the last refuge of nepotism and in some firms, if the employee is not a family member, it can mean they are merely workers paid to perform duties. Some are not given opportunity to chat with suppliers-vendors or represent the firm in the community. Often they are excluded from partaking in business-planning discussions with management. Unless continuing education is a requirement for licensure, they can be denied the opportunity to attend seminars, workshops, special educational programs or association events. The entire staff should be given an opportunity for self-advancement and learning, especially arrangers, who in actuality are front line representatives of the firm. If you are being denied, then you must read and study on your own. Evening classes, reading books about business, interpersonal skill development, understanding the consumer, are things you can read about beyond trade journals. The best funeral directors and arrangers never stop learning and reading. This is why practically every attorney, physician, CPA and financial planner has a professional library in house. We need to copy what they do.
9. **Ask high quality questions.** In studying the habits of successful professionals and businesspeople, among others, all of them have mastered the art of asking clients high quality questions. They know that in actuality, the right question posed the right way, yields high quality information. The answers help the professional uncover ways he/she can be of service. For us, the right questions help take the guesswork out of the planning process and aid the family in uncovering needs that go beyond disposing or cremating the body. Asking the right questions help prevent the “order taker” mentality and from making false assumptions about the client. For most of us, asking questions is a learned skill, requiring preparation and practice. In my training seminar,

*Advanced Cremation Arrangements* (for the 2006 schedule, see [www.fcsworldwide.com](http://www.fcsworldwide.com)) a module is devoted to developing questioning skills. When I learned to ask cremation families the right questions, opportunities that I had assumed were not there opened to me. Some rewarding questions are: Tell me about the family? When you think of your mother, what thoughts come to mind? Tell me more about when you said you only want cremation? Describe for me the single most memorable thing you recall about other life celebrations you have attended?

Here is some recommended reading for you: *When Customers Talk- Turn What They Tell You Into Sales*, by T. Scott Gross & BIG Research; *Interpersonal Skills Training for Funeral Home Staffs*, by Alan Wolfelt, PhD; and *Cremation And The Funeral Director – Successfully Meeting The Challenge* by Michael W. Kubasak (immediately available by calling 702-345-3212).

The arrangement conference is much more than a reflexive exercise to complete documents, authorizations and hand out a general price list. Hopefully, the arrangement conference is a satisfying experience for the client family and an aid to them in uncovering needs while being rewarding for the company. As I see it, if a client family is desirous of creating new traditions and seeks something other than a traditional funeral, a professional funeral planner is the best person to help them.

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