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Kubasak's Corner

Engaging Experiences in Funeral Service

The Forum Shops at Caesar's Palace, The Discovery Store, The Outdoor Experience, The House of Blues, and the original and still the best, Disneyland, awaken one's senses, attract interest and peek curiosity as to what to expect to anyone visiting these and other places. In the book, *The Experience Economy*, the authors, B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore write, "Experience occurs in places and the best of these places are themed." For the customer, the experience starts at the beginning and flows from this point. At a fine restaurant, it may be the manner in which you are greeted and taken to your table. At REI, an outdoor equipment store, it can mean being met face to face by a five story tall artificial mountain and being invited to climb it.

What is the "theme" of funeral service? What is the theme at your funeral home? Are the senses of your visitors "awakened" when they enter your building or attend a funeral? Other than the obvious fact of (hopefully) having the body present, what other interest is generated when orchestrating ceremonies? What is the experience like for client families and visitors?

As funeral service continues to evolve and in some ways, reinvent itself, there are more and more discussions centering on the ability and willingness of funeral directors and arrangers to be creative, to think and act outside the box and offer "experiences" in funeral life celebration events. For instance, many newly erected crematories are no longer hidden in the back of the property or inside garage-like structures, but instead are within public view and are easily accessible. They are constructed and designed for more active participation by the client family during the cremation process. Many funeral directors are encouraging families to accompany the deceased to the crematory, to have a final viewing at the crematory, to have a family member push the start button, to serve refreshments and recite eulogies/prayer services that coincide with the actual cremation, and more.

Like the retail establishments and entertainment parks listed above, some in funeral service think and act outside the confines of traditional funerals and provide their customers with memorable events. Some do it extraordinarily well. These practitioners have come to learn that sameness is an enemy that contributes to having the new consumer, many who prefer a life celebration to a traditional funeral, to either do it themselves (without funeral director involvement), go elsewhere or only choose minimum service and do nothing.

Sameness is also an enemy to other businesses. In purchasing new appliances, my wife and I visited two major national retailers. In both stores, all the washers and dryers were stacked next to one another. The refrigerators boldly stood shoulder to shoulder against a wall. Other appliances were positioned in such a fashion that they created a maze-like pathway for people to walk around and through. Selection, yes. Imagination, no. Theme, no. Sameness, acutely so. Does this sound like many funeral homes?

Yet, when we visited Carpets Plus, an independent retailer, we were treated to an extraordinary buying experience. To our surprise, there were twelve kitchens set up for people to "visit" inside the store. Each kitchen was fully furnished and fully operational with its own "theme." Different flooring material, lighting, countertops and cabinetry were showcased in each kitchen along with different appliances. When I say operational, I mean it. In one kitchen a host was making fudge and cookies, demonstrating the oven, microwave and cook top. In another kitchen, a host was cooking a roast and juicing fresh lemons to make lemonade. Next door, chicken was being fried and potatoes were being boiled. In another kitchen, microwaves defrosted frozen foods, were baking potatoes, steaming vegetables and popping corn. Dishwashers in each kitchen could be turned on so customers could make noise comparisons between models. Refrigerators were fully stocked and customers were invited to shuffle different foods back and forth between them to get a feel for shelving. Customers were encouraged to "try out" various ovens, cook top ranges, and microwaves. For example, my wife wanted an ultra-quiet dishwasher, loaded several dishwashers with plates and with ease, was able to make comparisons among several working models.

At my former funeral home, I was fortunate to have an energetic staff that enjoyed working with client families and helping them create memorable (out of the box) farewell ceremonies. Some I will never forget: for the prizefighter who died, a portable boxing ring was erected in the funeral home's celebration room; for a fireman, a life recognition exhibit was set up to highlight his accomplishments with an over-riding theme of public safety service; for an adventurer-outdoorsman, his family set a theme on saving the whales and the environment; for the "quilt lady" whose family chose to display her creations throughout the funeral home and sell the quilts with proceeds going to the local boys and girls youth club, just to name a few.

Working with bereaved families this way and developing theme farewells is challenging, time consuming and often requires different resources than those for a traditional funeral. In addition, creating a theme is almost impossible to do without the client family participating in some way themselves. The costs associated in arranging some events are not normally contained in a standard general price list. At my funeral home, to cover these services, a "per hour" charge for staff services was added to the general price list. Depending upon what the family wanted us to do, sometimes it was not easy to establish price or accommodate them. More than once we had to say "no" when we were asked to build actual props.

For the funeral director and funeral planner, there are some things to keep in mind in setting a foundation for creating theme-experience based funerals and farewells:

- In the arrangement conference, you will not have much success in approaching the concept of themed or unique farewells by merely saying to the client family, "We provide personal services, let me help you create a unique farewell." No one will entrust himself/herself to an arranger unless a one-to-one relationship based on trust is

formed. You must take time to get acquainted with the client family and learn about the deceased.

- Funeral/cremation services are very personal but life-centered farewells are even more personal. If you are seen primarily as being a salesperson and merchandise is foremost to you, it is more difficult engaging the client family in order to learn how your service can become memorable for them. Interacting with the client family helps you figure out exactly what they want. Most cremation consumers do not equate merchandise with cremation and may view even ordinary services as unnecessary. They can be explicit as to what they do not want and have no idea what they might want or may need. Personalizing merchandise must not be a substitute for personal service and is not a replacement for engaging the client family. Until the cremation client sees a role for merchandise, they may completely disregard it.
- The client family is the product. In our ever-changing world, ordinary goods and services no longer are the determining factor in satisfying consumers. As an example, funeral goods, once exclusive to funeral homes, are now sold in stores, shopping malls and over the Internet. Consumer studies inform us that more and more purchases of personal services (including funeral/cremation services) are driven by the consumer wanting to feel better, to change, improve or mend. Consumers can be very "I" focused. For the funeral arranger primarily focused on the dead body and sale of merchandise and not the feelings of the bereaved, it can lead to minimum service and minimum revenue.
- Family participation. The more successful the arranger is in having the client family participate in the planning and execution of the celebration, the more the experience (of the planning and ceremony) is enhanced. After becoming acquainted, it starts with the client family being involved in making decisions, not the arranger. It can also include such things as having the family helping to set up the celebration room in the funeral home, the family composing the obituary, the arranger going to the family's home to help them write a eulogy, the family gathering personal memorabilia for display or the arranger and family selecting food and refreshments together.
- Effectively engaging the client family means the arranger can be more effective in assisting the family design a farewell that is specific to their needs and one that centers on the individuality of the decedent and survivors.
- Offering customization with products can be an important part of the client family's experience. Allowing the customer to personalize-customize goods with various options can help a family uncover wants and needs of which they were unaware.
- Whenever possible, have multiple places (or stages) in the celebration room for the farewell. For the prizefighter funeral, the portable ring was the focal point, but not the only one. At one end of the room there were photographs of the fighter; at another end were his personal memorabilia such as boxing robe, shoes, gloves and championship belt. Multiple sites can make for a powerful emotional experience.
- Think outside the box when it comes to memorial hand-outs and goods. For the funeral of an avid bingo player, the memorial folder was a bingo card. On the back of it was printed her memorial information. The family of the "quilt lady" helped a local youth club by selling her quilts to people attending the farewell ceremony. These, and others, represent keepsakes (other than keepsake urns) of memorable events and help in socializing a somber event. Creative memorabilia and customized products also help entice new customers to your company.
- Many consumers are visual and may not understand what is meant when you say, "Personal farewells." Just as you display caskets, containers, urns and vaults in your casket/products selection room, it is helpful to have various life celebration displays for people to see. For many, "seeing is believing" and understanding as to what can be created. Large photographs showing various themes are an aid in "getting this picture across" to the customer.

The more you experiment with innovation the more you will evolve into meeting the needs of the 'new' consumer. Shifting your focus beyond ordinary goods and services will accrue greater profits for you. Someday, the revenue from the sale of a casket, vault and an urn may become secondary to revenues generated by the marketing, sale and execution of "experience services." I believe that recognizing experiences as a new source of revenue in addition to the sale and personalization of familiar goods represents a major source of economic growth for the future of funeral/cremation service.

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