



Michael Kubasak

## Kubasak's Corner

### The customer's experience: Is buying a computer anything like buying a funeral?

Like many people of my generation in funeral service, I sometimes struggle dealing with the onslaught of high technology, especially when it comes to using a computer. When my wife and I finally decided to purchase our first computer years ago, the buying experience was a roller coaster ride for us. From friends we heard how wonderful a home computer could be and the joy of "surfing the web." Yet, because it was new for us, we understood that computers could be frustrating. Apprehensive and filled with self doubt, we wondered if we could learn to use a computer. The language associated with computers baffled us.

Mustering courage and putting our feelings of dread aside, we visited a local electronics mega-store, checkbook in hand. Upon entering, I noticed my palms were getting sweaty. The computer section was intimidating, consisting of several aisles, all filled with computers. Signs advertised a special sale in progress. We strolled up and down the aisles, not knowing what we were looking at, oblivious as to what we needed to buy or should buy. Both of us felt out of our element, overwhelmed and vulnerable, but were determined to purchase a computer.

A salesperson approached us and asked, "What can I help you with?" We explained that we wanted to buy our first computer. "Come with me," the salesperson said, "let me show you the best computer we have and it's on sale today," he boasted. A computer on sale offered no comfort or relief and at this point, the word "best" had no relative meaning to us.

Trying to be helpful, the salesperson explained the computer and its features to us. We felt bombarded with information and details; we became more intimidated and more uncomfortable. He talked about things we knew nothing about: processors, mega hertz, CD Rom, RAM, hard drives, integrated audio and more "must have" features. Neither my wife nor I liked being so vulnerable.

After several minutes of being "helped," we made the excuse that we wanted to look at some of the other computers in the store. He said he would watch for us to call him back. We again walked up and down the aisles "looking" at computers. Totally confused, not knowing what questions to ask and disappointed in our own ignorance, we left the mega-store computer-less and went home.

For two weeks, my wife and I only looked at newspapers ads about computers, reluctant to discuss them and postponing a decision to buy one. Driving home early one day from my funeral home, I decided to stop at a small, independent computer store I frequently passed. I was hoping that delaying another attempt to buy one would make for a different experience. Entering the store, a man greeted me by saying, "I hope you are enjoying this fine day, can I offer you a cold soda or water?" Wow! This was already different. Politely, I refused his offer. He said, "Make yourself at home."

The unexpected but welcomed greeting was appreciated but I was still apprehensive and doubtful about ever being able to make an informed buying decision. I told the man that my wife and I wanted to buy our first computer but did not know where to start. He invited me to sit alongside his desk, away from the display-sales area of the store. We chatted about things in general. I began to feel comfortable and some of my apprehension was disappearing.

He asked, "We appear to be about the same age, do you live nearby?" As it turned out, we lived only two miles apart and he was aware of my funeral home.

Again he asked me, "What do you plan on doing with the computer and why do you want one?" I explained that all of our friends had email, I wanted to store written articles and documents, I needed word processing and instead of using encyclopedias, we could access the Internet.

Sitting alongside his desk, we both learned about each other and he continued with his questions. "Tell me about your family and who will be using the computer?" I explained that in addition to my wife and me, our two daughters would also use the computer. Hopefully, it would aid them in their studies and even help us decide on places for family vacations. He also had daughters at home.

"What type of vacations does your family enjoy?" I answered that we love the beach, love to snow ski and camp in national parks and want to visit historical sites.

"In what room will the computer be located?" he asked. It would be located in the upstairs study, away from distractions and a room with plenty of natural light.

"Tell me, how familiar are you and your wife with computers?" I felt a connection forming between us. For my own good, I decided to be frank and honest. I told him that neither one of us knew anything about computers; we were afraid of using one and were completely confused by them and had no idea where to begin or what to ask.

Admitting this helped relieve some of my fears and made me stronger emotionally. His questions put me at ease and helped me better understand how a computer would help my family. He assured me that I was not the only person who was afraid of using a computer; other people had also felt this way. I was feeling confident that this person could help us. I liked the fact that he made no attempt to 'sell' me anything.

He printed out a list of computer terminology words and went over several of them with me so that I would have a basic understanding of computer language. On another list he highlighted some common features available and explained the benefits of them to me. In just a few minutes, I learned many new things and began feeling more confident. Sitting at this person's desk, I felt very lucky to have found him.

The next day, my wife and I returned to the independent computer store and purchased our first computer. We also purchased some computer furniture and an ergonomic computer chair. The man set a time to come to our home to advise us about placement of the computer. For a reasonable fee, he offered to assist us in assembling the furniture, connecting the computer and installing the programs. Not believing my good fortune in finding this person, I was blown away by his next remark: "This is part of my personal service and in being your computer expert and resource person." Similarly, to stress my commitment to my client families at the funeral home, I also told them that, "I want to be your family funeral director." Now I was being told this by a computer expert. I felt really good about our purchase and thankful for the personal service and guidance we received.

The next day while watching my children use the computer, I reflected on our buying experience. I put myself in the shoes of my client families thinking that many of them have similar feelings about funerals, burials, cremations and anything to do with a funeral home or cemetery that my wife and I had about purchasing our computer. We were afraid, bewildered, overwhelmed, untrusting of salespersons and did not know where to go to buy one. We did not know what we did not know. We postponed making any decision. Our misplaced fear prevented us from learning.

Both computer "salespersons" were told that we wanted to buy a computer. We were not "just looking," and were not "just thinking about buying one." What were some factors that caused us to buy from the second person and not the first person? The second person:

- Showed an interest in my wife and I personally
- Was "consumer focused" not computer store focused
- Helped to understand and alleviate our fears and apprehension
- Helped to establish trust first, then worked on forming a relationship

- Helped educate us, not sell us. To us he was a consultant
- Asked high quality questions that helped us see the value of having a computer
- Created an environment conducive to learning and sharing information
- Offered to assist us (for a fee) in setting everything up

As I reflected, I thought that like many client families faced with making final arrangements or advance arrangements, my wife and I did not know what we did not know. Lacking knowledge, we felt exposed, uncertain and guarded. It was easy to become confrontational or argumentative. Like most consumers of my generation, we resist being "sold", preferring instead to deal with people who provide information in an educating, consulting way. We want to learn about the benefits of using and buying their products and services.

Many funeral-cremation arrangers imitate the first salesperson, failing to get acquainted with the client family, failing to put them at ease, failing to focus on them as individuals and failing to mention benefits. We are "funeral director" focused and move right into the business...selling the customer while disregarding their fears, misconceptions or points of view. For many arrangers, personal service is often nothing more than filling in the blanks on a death certificate. It often includes a reflexive set of shallow, interrogating questions answered by a simple "yes" or "no." Presenting the general price list in the arrangement conference is used as an excuse to explore feelings with a family, believing the client family is not interested in hearing or learning more and as a reason to avoid meaningful discussions. It is sad that many arrangers have not expanded their base of knowledge or skills of communication much beyond what they learned in mortuary science school or what they learned from their funeral director teacher years ago. Methods of communicating learned in the 60's, 70's or 80's no longer apply when arranging with the "new consumer." Customers want to be engaged and deal with a professional who collaborates with them. Like other personal service professionals who are skilled at asking high quality questions during an interview, funeral arrangers also must learn to incorporate high quality questions in the arrangement conference that permit client families to speak their hearts and minds. Failing to recognize this shortcoming, the inept arranger rushes to move onto the next "sales" opportunity, focusing on merchandise and completing the purchase agreement.

Questions are the basis of personal service and one way to show genuine interest in a client family. Questions help us become customer focused. Questions help a family see how you can assist them beyond the obvious. If my "family computer expert and resource person" was a funeral arranger working at my funeral home, I would presume he would proceed through a

funeral arrangement conference in a similar way he proceeded to help us buy a computer. I would expect he would ask a bereaved family some of the following questions that provide more than just a simple “yes” or “no” answer:

- Who are the other people in your family and how are they related?
- Who are some of the friends that are affected by this death?
- How do you see the funeral-burial-cremation helping your family deal with the loss?
- How familiar are you with the burial-cremation-planning process?
- Tell me how open you are to suggestions?
- When you think of your mother-father-brother-uncle, what thoughts come to mind?
- What is the most memorable thing you remember about any funeral you have attended?
- Help me understand what are two or three things you expect from me as I serve you?
- Tell me about other experiences you have had in funeral planning?

Personal service is much more than advertising “24 hour availability,” or boasting about “Two generations of family service.” Personal service is not substituted by merely engraving the decedent’s name on an urn, a casket or a vault or by displaying personal memorabilia in your chapel or celebration room. Personal service is not saying to a client family, “Here are the most popular options/packages, which one would you like?”

Personal service means helping each family, one at a time, taking into account their, and only their, particular situation. It means helping them discover their needs, not telling them their needs. It means being skillful in knowing how to put people at ease in an otherwise strange environment. It means working at establishing trust and recognizing that trust is the foundation of all relationships.

The first computer salesperson showed no passion toward serving me or for his product; he failed to invest the time to understand our individual needs and concerns. His goal was to sell a computer and move on to the next sales opportunity. He touted “lowest price,” believing this was his biggest advantage and the determining factor that would ultimately cause us to buy a computer from him.

The computer we purchased was not on sale and was not a basic model. We paid about \$300.00 more than the one that was on sale at the mega-store. We also never factored in buying computer furniture but after learning about the benefits of this specialized type of furniture, it made sense to us.

There are many things that are different from buying a computer and arranging for a funeral. Two important ones are:

1. People are not likely to walk out of a funeral home in the middle of funeral arrangements. Except for pre-planning, most people are under pressure from time and having to do “something” now. They may reluctantly go along with what is presented to them and deep inside, resent it all. For some, it can be a negative buying experience.
2. There is a great intangible as to what it means to experience a loss due to death. It varies for each individual. Death can be highly disruptive to every aspect of the survivor’s life and affect many different people. It is more than just the sadness and the grief. It is the arrangements, the “having to do this, choose this and go here,” feeling overwhelmed, tired and angry, dealing with other family members, work situations and feelings of helplessness.

Our relationship with the “family computer expert and resource person” continues to this day, 15 years since hearing the words, “How about a cold soda or water?” More than 10 friends have been referred to him, each one buying computers from him. He still operates out of mini-store. He has added a small espresso-coffee-juice bar and a computer working area open to the public in his store. I am still afraid of computers, but I am learning.

To learn the steps that will improve your arrangements with the “new consumer, register to attend the next *Advanced Cremation Arrangements* seminar through FCS Worldwide. Check the website at [www.fcs.worldwide.com](http://www.fcs.worldwide.com).

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