

American Cemetery
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Aftercare; It's Not Just For Funeral Homes Anymore

By Daniel M. Isard

I find it amazing how the funeral and cemetery businesses tend to coexist when the two businesses are so very different. I also find it fascinating that certain matters have historically remained the realm of one business versus the other. So sells vaults more often in a region, who promotes the advance purchases in an area, who carries on the relationship with the family long term in any service locale. When thinking about the concept of "Aftercare" I tend to see the same dynamic.

Allow me to establish a common definition for Aftercare:

Aftercare is an altruistic service given to families served by funeral homes and cemeteries to help the survivors adapt their lives without the deceased being in their community.

Aftercare is not necessarily a
spiritual event, but it can be;
grief therapy event, but it can be;
a group psychology event, but it can be;
a task learning experience, but it can be.

Most importantly Aftercare is something to help the survivors adapt to life without the emotional and physical support of the deceased. It can take many shapes.

I have found that Aftercare is either done poorly, done exceptionally or not done at all in a market. When it is done, it is most often done by the funeral home, although it most certainly can be done by a cemetery. The Hindu god "Sarcasta" has given me her vision, so I see so many matters in a Sarcastic fashion. Funeral homes often don't do Aftercare so as to not wanting to do it wrong or offend a family. Cemeteries don't do it because it is an altruistic endeavor and most cemeteries only do profit oriented efforts. Please understand the following two points:

1. Regardless of whether you are a funeral home, cemetery or combination operation Aftercare can be and should be a part of your business plan.
2. Altruism can return big dollars if done right.

Allow me to explain.

Aftercare should be part of your business plan. Understand that you have so many dollars a year to spend on advertising. You can place newspaper ads that turn to bird cage liners within a day, or you can have events that can influence those that avail themselves of the event. A cemetery may have a cost of marketing that is about 6% to 8% of revenue, whereas a funeral home might be 4% to 6% of revenue. Having an Aftercare event has a cost associated with it, but that cost is a form of advertising and public relations. Therefore, I would spend some of those dollars on that.

The aftercare event is something that can have an impact on those that attend, but in today's world of marketing should also have a benefit to those that did not attend. For example, you can tape record the event and turn this into Pod Cast's. You can video tape the event and let it be downloaded from your web site. Either way, I would not just focus upon recording the event; I would also record the moments after the event. You should interview the attendees at the event and get their comments. With their permission, edit their comments and place them on your web site. This will demonstrate to those that did not attend this time, that the event is worthwhile. You don't need Siskel and Ebert to review your program, when you have people living in the community that are willing to give you 'two thumbs up'.

Years ago I studied funeral homes that employed Aftercare events. I found that they had increasing market share, call volume increasing, decline in receivables and decline in bad debt. In fact in general, I found that companies that invested about \$10,000 in a solid Aftercare program(s) were increasing their cash flow and value almost 500% their investment each year. Aftercare must be done as an altruistic outreach, but it generates so much more for you if you do it right.

Years ago one of my clients and I met with the head of a large acquisition company. My client was willing to sell their business, but wanted a job working at a high level to bring Aftercare to the acquirer. One president and founder told my client he would be willing to do that, "Buy you will report to the head of preneed, because we think Aftercare is only good if it generates preneed leads!" We were on the next plane out of there. That person didn't get it.

Aftercare will generate preneed leads for cemeteries as it does for funeral homes. But you cannot create it as a false program only to generate the leads. You must first be pure of heart and mind and the results will come.

Cemeteries have a much longer relationship with families, than do funeral homes. As long as there is a survivor in the community, that community will go to the cemetery even though they may have switched their allegiance to

other funeral homes. Cemeteries are a natural for outreach type of programming.

Offering a program is one thing, but getting maximum benefit from the program is another. There are four steps to proper public relations on any outreach program.

1. Promote that it is about to occur. Get maximum press coverage with press releases and calling and talking to assignment editors. Offer pictures from previous years. Get it out on your own web site.
2. Invite the press and media to the event. Have a special coordinator work with them when they are there. Let them know who that person is and how the coordinator will help them get the best coverage.
3. Publish that the event took place. Send out photo's and comments from attendees.
4. Place the attendee's quotes and photo's on your web site. Start promoting the next year's event now.

Aftercare events can be numerous. They can be classroom sessions to teach survivors how to do things for themselves including:

- Security issues
- Money management and Tax preparation
- Social skills adapting
- Estate planning for the survivor

They can be large community events including:

- Community worship services
- Evening placing of luminaries
- Memorial Day and other Flag bearing holidays
- Fundraising Walk-a-thons through your property

The best thing to know about outreach programs is to do something, then critique it, and do it better the next time. Look for ways to increase your attendance and the experience of those that attend.

Cemeteries are most often scene from the roadway, but when you have an event, you now bring people onto the site. When cemeteries use their multi-generational relationship with consumers and the size of their property to carry out a program, the program will differentiate the cemetery from its competitors. That will ultimate generate leads and sales and enhance your value and cash flow.

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