

Ask The Expert

[Industry leader]

Your Marketing Plan Matters

Q&A with Alan Hillsberg, owner of Funeral Marketing Services

■ Summary

The ways people find information about funeral homes is changing, as the internet and online searches replace family loyalty and word-of-mouth references as the go-to methods of selecting who will handle a family's end-of-life needs. Alan Hillsberg, owner of Funeral Marketing Services and author of "The Ultimate Guide to Funeral Home Marketing" answers our questions about what it takes for funeral homes to connect with the families they want to serve.

Why does marketing need to be an integral part of a funeral home's business plan?

There are two types of families a funeral home wants to attract. Pre-need families provide revenue for the future or not-too-distant future and at-need families provide revenue now.

Without a solid marketing plan in place that is specific to the funeral home and its location, it can become a challenge to pay funeral home overhead, employees salaries and purchase equipment. It can be even more difficult to generate a healthy profit for the funeral home owner to support his family and to ensure the valued services the funeral home provides to future families.

You have said that not all marketing companies offer the right strategies for the funeral home sector. Can you explain that further?

Not all marketing concepts or ideas are right for the funeral home business. In addition, not all marketing companies offer the right strategies for the funeral home business. A company that also does search engine optimization for a bakery or a clothing boutique is not going to know the best strategies to use for your business. It's not a one-size-fits-all approach, and it's not going to work because they don't specialize in you and your funeral home business.



Alan Hillsberg

The goal is not about getting a great ranking on Google, that's only part of a strategy. The goal is to get your phone to ring and placing you or your team in a position to convert those calls into clients. That comes from putting together the right funeral marketing strategies and executing them well. The goal should focus on generating more quality services per month.

If you are working with a marketing company that is not niche specific, ask them this question; 'What is the difference between pre-need and at-need?' If your marketing company cannot answer you correctly, I would recommend that

you rethink who should be running your marketing strategy.

What constitutes bad funeral home marketing?

Not understanding the power of the Internet and the depth of searches at-need families do on a monthly basis. On the low end, we see a minimum of 160,000 searches per month and on the high end, up to 1 million searches per month for the keyword phrase "funeral homes." And these numbers are from Google only.

It's comforting to know the funeral home business is an incredibly well-searched industry. These monthly traffic counts represent a national total, however they are the direct sum from local searches. That tells us, internet marketing for funeral homes is a robust platform you can't ignore. It's big business.

A funeral home-related keyword search is not a leisure search. It's not doing a search to learn how to swing a 9 iron properly, or surfing the web to learn the latest holiday recipe. Funeral home-related keywords are a serious search. Something serious has happened. You want your funeral home fielding that initial call.

What are the components of a good funeral home marketing plan?

Here is where I want to shift the thinking of a lot of funeral home operators. For many, their marketing plan centers around neighborhood walk-ins and referrals. While there is nothing wrong with this type of business, it is unpredictable and unreliable.

For every referral you get, there are tens of dozens in your demographic that are not referred and search online in the areas you service. For every neighborhood walk-in you get, there are tens of dozens that don't want to walk into a funeral home and prefer to use the internet to find a funeral home in their community.

Think about it, how are people that don't know you going to find you? Outside of neighborhood walk-in traffic and referrals, the internet is where your next client is coming from, and if used properly, it's an absolute gold mine.

Many firms don't have an unlimited budget for marketing. Are there things they can do to improve their marketing if they are on a budget?

You don't need an unlimited budget to put together an intelligent marketing plan. We have ideas and strategies that are designed to provide real-time results at a fair price point all funeral homes can afford. For example, a reputation-management strategy does not have to cost a lot but is essential for all funeral homes to exercise and apply.

Healthy families never think about a funeral home ... unless they have an immediate need. Consider this scenario: It is not uncommon for someone to pass suddenly in a home. If the family is not referred, and most are not, in their state of grief and deep confusion they will not reach for the phone on the wall, (there isn't one) they will reach into their pocket for their cell phone and key in "funeral homes" as that is the

VIEWPOINT

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first keyword phrase that makes sense to them. Google will pick up that cell phone's IP address and provide the family with relevant funeral homes in their demographic.

Since the family does not know one funeral home from another, they will rely heavily on the reviews left by the families before them. Did the family before them experience a caring and compassionate service? Are the reviews recent and fresh? Good, fresh, consistent reviews will persuade an at-need family to call you over the competition that may have dated, poor or no reviews at all. Putting together a simple strategy to get reviews from every family you serve is cost effective and smart. This is one way to market your funeral business effectively, especially when marketing dollars are tight.

You talk about "solutions" not products. Can you explain why the difference – and why it's important funeral professionals understand that difference?

At first, the difference between selling a product and selling a solution may not be apparent – after all, aren't most products created to solve problems? This is true, but most products are designed as a one-size-fits-all solution.

Rather than working to fit the funeral director's needs, based upon

demographic, services offered, targeted market and income levels of their targeted market, products are usually made to be "good enough" for the widest audience. It's a general one-size-fits-all product that doesn't always work and a great way to lose time and overspend on marketing.

Solutions, however, combine products and services that are custom-designed around the specific challenges each funeral home faces, providing real answers and help that each funeral director will appreciate.

What are the most common marketing problems funeral homes are facing?

Visibility only in the area where their funeral home is located, but a major drop off in visibility in nearby towns and communities they serve. Quality on-page optimization strategies are designed to optimize your website for all the important keywords relevant to your business and further optimize for all the areas you want to do business in. You don't only serve the residents in the immediate area surrounding your funeral home, you also serve the residents in nearby towns, districts and communities as well.

You've talked about the need for funeral professionals to "cast a

wider net.” What does this mean – and how can marketing help?

Funeral homes need to stop “narrow casting” which provides visibility for your products and services only in the area where your funeral home is located. When a funeral home starts to “cast a wider net,” they are simply expanding their visibility into the many nearby towns and communities they also serve.

Can you give an example how marketing can vary demographically?

There are areas of the country where some funeral homes benefit from a location that is in a densely populated area, like New York City or South Florida. In less-densely populated areas, I would use different strategies to attract families to my client base.

For example, in less-densely populated areas, what gets immediate-need families into a funeral home are the people that run it. Your policy is to cater to every family with compassion, dignity and respect. But how do families know that?

Most families think that if they approach a funeral director, something bad is going to happen. People are full of superstitions. We want to correct that by making you more approachable to the families you serve.

We have an amazing strategy that puts a human face on you and personalizes who you are. We set up an interview-style video with you to personalize you to the demographic you serve. You want families to feel comfortable enough to approach you and ask important questions about funeral preplanning or what to do when a death occurs, or about veteran funeral benefits or anything else. This is a perfect strategy to use along with building your reputation online.

In more densely populated areas, we have developed relationships with hospice organizations. We have been setting appointments with hospice and palliative-care organizations on the amazing benefits of funeral preplanning. Our funeral director clients are building connections with these

organizations where, naturally, the social workers will come to our funeral directors to report a death.

Hospice and palliative care social workers are trained to provide skilled help to those facing an end-of-life situation. While working with their patients, they become close to the families they serve. In many cases they are asked questions beyond the scope of their skill set. Families ask; “How should we prepare now that death is imminent?” “What are the differences between a traditional burial and cremation?” “Are there any local government programs that can assist in the cost of a funeral?” “What are the veteran benefits upon death?”

These questions, and many more, arise. The answers to these questions and the knowledge, expertise and help that comes from a funeral director is extremely important at this difficult time. A funeral director can directly help educate social workers and palliative technicians in an event setting on the amazing benefits of funeral preplanning. This face-to-face discussion develops a close relationship between the skilled social worker on the front lines and the funeral director comfortable with end-of-life questions. The more informed social workers and palliative-care technicians are, the more meaningful their services become to the families they serve.

Some funeral homes still do not have a website. Why do you think that is?

They may not realize the value of an online presence or they want word of mouth to be the center of their marketing plan. Some funeral homes want to remain small while others have not had the opportunity to be shown the value of an intelligent marketing plan that is affordable.

How important is SEO?

The definition of search engine optimization is to make the website search-engine friendly. We realized early on one of the most important components of search engine optimization is keyword research. You

need to know what keywords people use to find your funeral home, then optimize your site for those keywords so you can put yourself in a position to drive new business to you.

Whether you have a basic website, or a more-sophisticated website, we will need to build out your site and make sure it is search-engine friendly.

However, SEO is half the battle. SEO alone won’t rank you in a way families can find your site.

It’s link building that determines search-engine placement. More than 70 percent of the battle is getting links. He who has the most quality links wins.

A back link is simply a link of your website on another site, that when clicked, points back to your website.

Search engines often use the number of back links that a website has as one of the most important factors for determining that website’s search engine ranking and popularity. The cornerstone of effective internet marketing is creative back-linking. Optimizing your site for Google is meaningless without quality highly relevant back links pointing back to you.

Many firms don’t focus on – or even know about – the reviews families are leaving online about their firms. Should checking these reviews be a top priority for firms?

Yes, and an ongoing reputation management strategy is vital.

Many funeral homes I visit show me all the thank you cards posted on their office door. Getting thank you cards in the mail from satisfied families is heartwarming but do you no good as future families need to read those sincere thank yous. A consistent online reputation-management strategy will add multiple services to your funeral home per year as families rely heavily on the reviews left from families before them. It’s been documented that families will spend more with a funeral home that shows consistent, fresh five-star reviews over a funeral home with dated reviews or no reviews at all. •