



Nurturing Leads Through the

\$ALES CYCLE

by Welton Hong

EVERYONE AGREES THAT PRE-NEED SALES are essential to the ongoing financial health of funeral homes, but many firms continue to have a tough time figuring out exactly what their approach should be—especially in the rapidly changing deathcare landscape.

This has been an issue for several years, but it appears to be more noticeable than ever in 2020.

- Some firms have in-house salespeople.
- Some contract out to pre-need marketing companies.
- Some ... well, some don't do anything. They just sit back and hope for the best.

I hope you are having luck with options one or two, because as you have undoubtedly noticed, option three doesn't get the job done.

Now, I realize that not everyone reading this article owns and/or works for a funeral home. Some of you are cemeteryans. Some of you specialize in cremation services.

Regardless, the points I make in this article are for any services that typically have a long sales cycle—or at least one that is commonly not short or immediate.

The Making of a Successful Plan

A great salesperson sometimes can rapidly close a sale on a funeral pre-arrangement contract or a cemetery plot. However, the reality is that closing often only comes after a thoughtful process of first, intriguing the lead, and second, steadily nurturing until the close is essentially a foregone conclusion.

Nurturing leads is one of the bedrock concepts in sales, especially when you are selling something that has a significantly long sales cycle—which is exactly the case for pre-needs.

For simplicity, I am using pre-arrangements as the example in this article and focusing on the funeral home perspective. But the lesson is that nurturing should be a core component of any sales process that has a sales cycle of more than a week or two.

With pre-need sales being so important to a funeral home’s future—especially in these uncertain times, with direct cremation disrupting the landscape for at-need cases—you need to create a dedicated plan for growing pre-need sales.

The plan needs to comprise the following:

1. identifying potential pre-need clientele

2. nurturing those leads until they are ready to act
3. closing the sale

Granted, a funeral home owner who puts any effort into growing pre-needs is undoubtedly familiar with the first and third steps—or at least the basics of them. And most target family members and friends/associates of a recent decedent as potential leads. And a hardworking salesperson knows just how to get that signature on the contract.

But step two? That’s where the ball gets dropped *all the time*.

It’s as simple as this: The vast majority of leads are not ready to commit to pre-arrangement right from the start. In sales vernacular, they are *cold*. Many of them are *ice cold*.

They might be vaguely aware of the overall benefits of pre-planning, but like most people, they are vaguely aware of the benefits of *lots* of things, including the benefits of drinking water throughout the day, getting eight hours of sleep, and saving at least 15 percent on car insurance.

But that doesn’t mean they’ll commit to any of those things.

And most people certainly won’t commit to something as substantial as an advance funeral plan until they are convinced it is worth their hard-earned money. It is *your* job—or your sales representative’s job—to do the convincing.

This is where we acknowledge the obvious “elephant” in the room: funeral directors are not necessarily dedicated salespeople. Their role is to serve families and the community well.





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Sure, some are great at sales. They understand that it's an important aspect of the job. But it's just that: an aspect.

However, when it comes to pre-needs, sales cannot be just a secondary consideration. It's the whole kit and kaboodle.

Adopting a Sales Mentality

When it comes to pre-arranging, you need to fully adopt a sales mentality. Nurturing leads is one of the bedrock concepts in sales, especially when you are selling something that has a significantly long sales cycle—which is exactly the case for pre-needs.

In Homesteaders Life Company's guide to pre-need sales, the agency notes that "many consumers need a *couple of years* after first considering prearrangement before they are ready to complete an advance funeral plan."

A couple of years! Talk about a (potentially) long sales cycle.

Specifically, of those who had committed to such a plan, 27 percent said at least two years had passed between (1) their first thoughts on pre-arranging and (2) actually completing the paperwork.

The timeframe was one to two years for another 8 percent, and five months to a year for another 18 percent.

That means a full 53 percent of those surveyed took between five months and two years to finally sign on the dotted line.

Granted, some people make up their minds much faster. A full 19 percent of respondents signed a contract in the first two weeks after considering funeral pre-arrangement.

On average, 1 out of every 5 people decides he or she shouldn't wait at all. In sales, those are *blazing hot* leads. They don't require nurturing. You just have to get the papers in front of them and graciously accept the check.

Those sorts of sales come easily, of course. But for some funeral homes, those are the only contracts they get. They nail down the blazing hot leads because doing so requires virtually no effort. It's like being the only open pub in town on St. Patrick's Day.

But that also means about 80 percent of people who eventually pre-arranged were

not blazing hot leads. The amount of time varied, of course, but over half of them took at least five months to seal the deal, and over a quarter needed up to two years.

Nurturing Cold, Hot, and Blazing Hot Leads

When you are dealing with a long sales

cycle, you need to nurture those leads. Some will start off ice cold, some cold, some warm, some relatively hot.

If you need to grow pre-need sales at your funeral home, you—or your pre-need sales director, if you are large enough to have one—need to focus on identifying where each lead is in the sales cycle.

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Who's cold? Who's warm? Who's hot? How do we move someone from cold to warm, from warm to hot, from hot to signing the contract?

In sales across a variety of industries, it is common that once you have identified a potential group of leads, about 50 percent will never contract with you, no matter what you do. You could have the perfect solutions to that business's pain points and spend years communicating that fact, but you're simply never going to close that sale.

About 8 percent will be hot right out of the gate. These are leads you can convert into clientele quickly—let's say in about three months. They are interested almost immediately, and they do not need a lot of nurturing.

Removing that 58 percent from the equation (50 percent cold, 8 percent hot), we are then left with 42 percent. These we will consider *warm*.

That's where your main focus needs to be—on that 42 percent. The work should go into getting that 42 percent to heat up and eventually contract with you for an advance funeral plan.



You are not trying to push people into making decisions before they are ready. You are letting them know how beneficial pre-planning can be, letting them come to that realization in their own time.

Adding a Sweater: Lead Warming

So how do you warm up that 42 percent? One of the most reliable methods is **email marketing**. The technique has been overlooked lately as fresher, flashier marketing methods have surfaced, but email still works—and it works well.

That is especially true of the 60-and-over demographic, which remains the core target group for pre-need sales campaigns. The Homesteaders study showed that people ages 62–92 comprise 90 percent of all Americans who pre-arrange.

A successful email campaign educates people of your community in that demographic on the benefits of pre-arrangement. That's the nurturing process.

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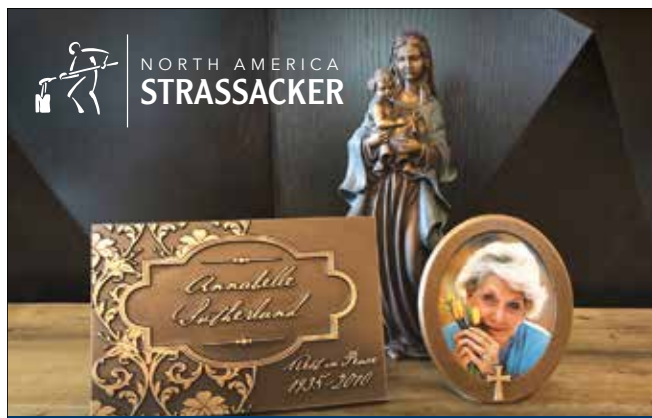
Another important technique is **retargeting**. This digital marketing tool lets your funeral home market pre-arrangement services to people who have visited your website.

How it works is a bit technical, but the short version is that your digital advertisements will continue to be displayed to these visitors long after they have left your website. These ads will show up on many of the websites people visit, sites that are entirely unrelated to deathcare.

Retargeting campaigns must be carefully managed so people don't feel like they're being "stalked" by your ads, which is why responsible, professional marketers are conservative about how frequently ads appear and how long they will continue to display.

Ultimately, the key is to not just ignore the 42 percent of leads who don't immediately convey an avid interest in signing a pre-arrangement contract. Get a plan in place, identify people in your community who are interested in pre-planning, and start your nurturing. **✉**

Welton Hong is the founder of Ring Ring Marketing and the author of *Making Your Phone Ring with Internet Marketing for Funeral Homes*, 2019 Edition.



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