

THE DIRECTOR

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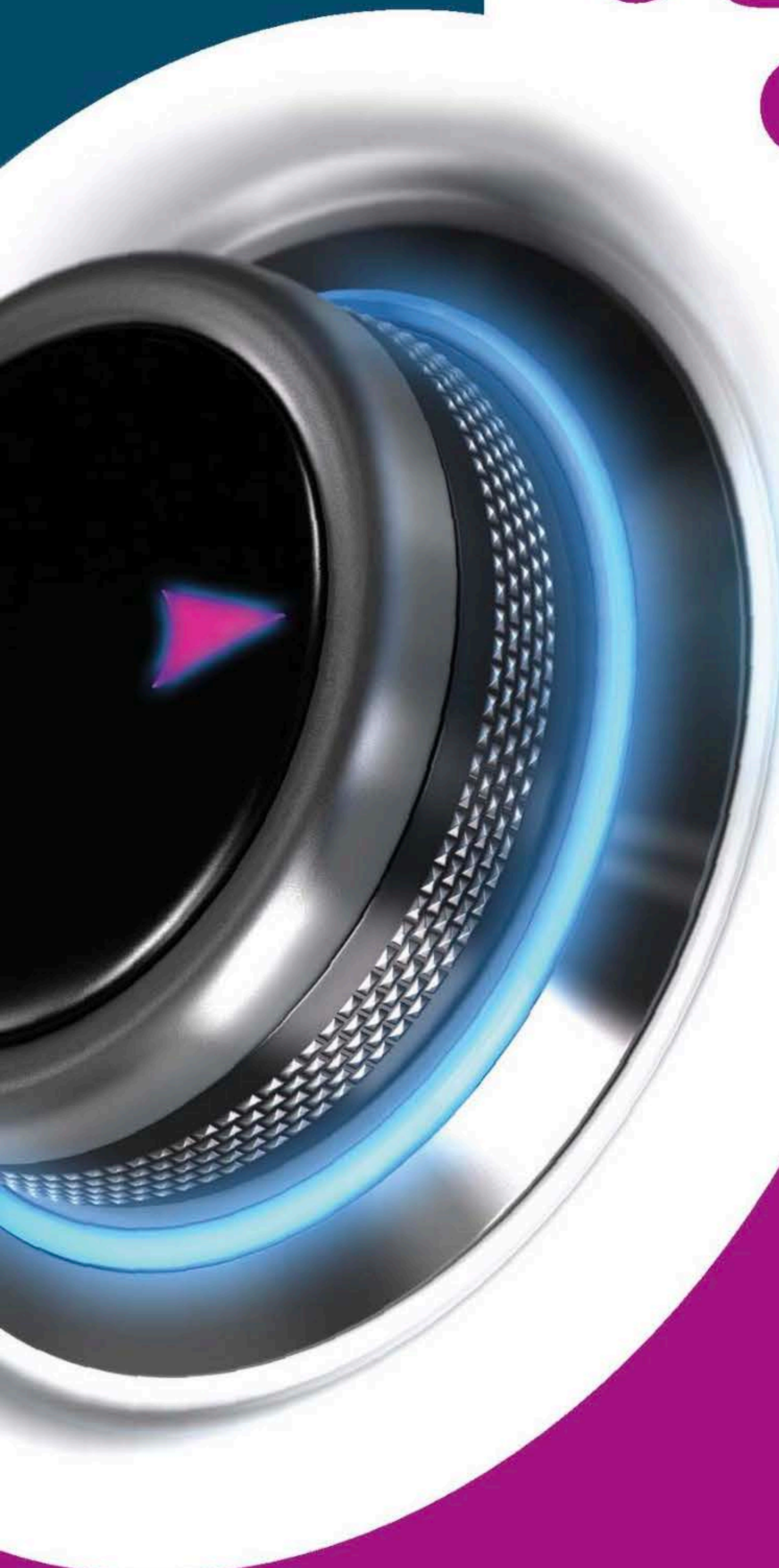
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NO RELIGION
DOESN'T MEAN
NO CEREMONY



● PRINT

● RADIO

● WEBSITE

● SOCIAL MEDIA

Online, Offline, Whatever

**IF THE
MARKETING
WORKS,
DO IT!**

BY WELTON HONG

ONLINE MARKETING, INTERNET MARKETING, DIGITAL MARKETING. These three terms essentially mean the same thing, and if you've been paying attention to marketing experts over the past few years, you've likely been inundated with the same message: Everything's digital now! The internet is the future! It's also the present! Heck, it's everything!

So why are you still wasting time and money on traditional marketing? The whole world is online now, and that's where 100% of your funeral home marketing needs to be.

If I'm being honest, I'm as responsible for that viewpoint as anyone. In working with funeral directors over the past few years, it's sometimes been challenging to convey the importance of digital marketing. For some clients, you can't just softly encourage them to focus more on search engine optimization, website conversions, pay-per-click advertising and online review generation. Your message simply has to be over the top.

Think of it like Dr. Younan Nowzaradan – better known to fans as Dr. Now – does on the popular TV series *My 600-lb Life*, where he deals with morbidly obese patients. Some weigh more than 750 or even 800 pounds, and certain patients haven't even walked in years. To get them ready for bariatric surgery, Dr. Now can't simply suggest to these patients that they cut back a little on sweets or add a few more veggies to their diet. He must demand a radical approach – typically a diet of just 1,200 calories a day (a reduction of 80% or even 90%), most of it coming from lean meats and healthy produce.

Similarly, my messaging about internet marketing has had to be unequivocal. If you're spending a big chunk of your deathcare marketing on a print Yellow Pages ad while ignoring pay-per-click ads or getting your website mobile ready, you're making a big mistake, so I must hammer home the benefits of digital marketing in our increasingly digital world.

But here's the thing: Even it sounds like heresy to most online marketing gurus, I do not necessarily advocate putting all of your marketing dollars into cutting-edge internet tools.

Sure, that's where much – even *most* – of your budget should go today. With more and more people investigating local burial and cremation options online every year, you simply can't compete if you have bad search engine optimization. With smartphones now ubiquitous, you'll miss out on lots of at-need calls if your site doesn't work well on mobile devices.

If you don't proactively generate positive online reviews, internet searchers won't know that you have a great (offline) reputation. If your funeral home website isn't built for conversions, the online traffic it does get won't necessarily turn into clientele.

All of that is true, and I'm certainly not going to deter anyone from putting more focus on these tools as they're requisite elements of dominating your local competition in 2019 and beyond.

However, there are still many benefits to maintaining offline marketing endeavors. For one thing, as digital marketing has taken over in influence over the past few years, the costs for traditional offline marketing have naturally fallen. Your local newspaper likely charges less for a print ad than it did five years ago; the same is true of most print directories.

Also, direct mail remains extremely effective, and it typically delivers good ROI when executed well. For a funeral home, direct mail obviously fits better for promoting preplanning services than at-need services, but in either case, it's a cost-effective way to brand yourself

and stay foremost in the minds of local residents.

Similarly, local radio advertising remains an effective tool. Nielsen data indicate that terrestrial (standard broadcast) radio still reaches 93% of American adults weekly. From a demographic perspective, it's an appropriate medium for reaching older Americans, who are far more likely to listen to standard radio than younger adults. Pairing a well-converting website with an effective radio campaign lets you cover your bases in branding your funeral home locally.

But here's the thing: Even if it sounds like heresy to most online marketing gurus, I do not necessarily advocate putting all of your marketing dollars into cutting-edge internet tools.

ROI ISN'T (QUITE) EVERYTHING

When considering your marketing options, here's one thing to keep in mind: Not everything you do must have a spectacular return on investment. That might sound counterintuitive, but honestly, the more marketing channels you leverage for your funeral home, the more audiences you reach. If all of your marketing focuses on offline channels, you'll miss out entirely on everyone online. The converse is also true. Thus, it's smart to cast a wide net to ensure that your reach is as broad as it can be – even if you're not necessarily seeing a great ROI everywhere you are.

Frankly, even if you just break even with something like a print or radio ad, that's just fine. There's nothing wrong with breaking even. You're still becoming better known in your community, and that can reap benefits down the line.

Your ROI in newspapers depends largely on where you're located. If you're in a big metro area, ad prices will be higher and it's hard not to get lost in the shuffle. You're almost certainly competing against firms that have corporate money behind them as well. In that case, you'd probably be better off focusing on other channels.

If, on the other hand, you're in a fairly small city or even a more rural area, the local newspaper might just be a great avenue for you. Readership is typically higher for smaller papers that focus more closely on local events. Ad prices are decidedly lower. Plus, you have

fewer competitors, so your ad will easily stand out.

According to a recent Harris Poll, 69% of American adults trust their local newspapers, and 54% are more likely to buy a new product after learning about it from a newspaper or magazine advertisement.

HAND IN HAND

At the end of the day, here's the deal: You can't afford to ignore online marketing. The future is online (you can already forget about calling it the future because the future is now).

If you're not transitioning into a focus on digital marketing efforts, no amount of offline marketing will keep your firm from steadily losing business and ultimately closing shop. I know that sounds harsh, but it has to be said. Funeral homes must evolve their business practices for the digital age if they want to endure.

With that said, there's a reason I simply named my business Ring Ring Marketing. There's no "internet" or "digital" or "online" in there. Our focus is purely on making your phone ring as effectively and efficiently as possible.

Email marketing might be a "digital" tool in a technical sense, but it's pretty old-school, having been around for several decades. But it still works! If you're smart about it and never resort to spam – the golden rule is to

only contact people who have opted in – you can grow your preneed base with an excellent ROI.

You must look at your particular needs and goals in determining the marketing approaches that work best for your funeral home. Never believe a marketing firm that claims you can have massive success with the one marketing channel it exclusively employs. You need to do what's right for you, and that will depend on your size, location, demographics, business focus and several other factors.

A smart, comprehensive marketing approach comprises a variety of online and offline approaches. If you have a great website, you can promote it in print and radio ads. If you have a strong preneed sales mechanism, you can communicate that through direct mail *and* magazine ads *and* email *and* social media. The sky's the limit.

I strongly recommend that you take a close look at how you're promoting your firm now and dedicate yourself to trying out at least two new marketing channels. There's nothing to lose and everything to gain. ☰

Welton Hong is founder of Ring Ring Marketing (funeralhomeprofits.com) and author of Making Your Phone Ring: With Internet Marketing for Funeral Homes.

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