

# ICCFA<sup>®</sup> MAGAZINE

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► **Ring Ring Marketing** offers a comprehensive suite of marketing services, from broad techniques such as reputation management, pay-per-click advertising, local search optimization, email marketing and website content generation, to more surgical tools such as geotargeting, remarketing and social media marketing.

## MARKETING & TECHNOLOGY

At-need calls are important, no matter how strong your pre-need sales are, so you need to make sure you'll show up atop the listings when someone in an at-need situation searches for "funeral home" on their smartphone.

# PPC is the key to quickly generating at-need calls

If you needed to put together a coffee table from scratch, could you do it without a hammer? Sure, you could. You could drive those nails with a brick, for example. Maybe you could even use an old shoe, if the heel is hard enough. Those certainly are options.

However, it would be hard. It would be exhausting. It would take a lot of time—far more than if you used a hammer. And you might not drive the nails as straight with a brick or a shoe as you would with a hammer, so the end result might not have the quality you'd hoped for.

At the risk of stating something exceedingly obvious, this is why humans created tools. They make jobs easier and faster. They produce the desired results most efficiently.

You can turn a screw with a butter knife, but it'll go much better with a manual screwdriver. If you have to turn a dozen screws, an electric screwdriver saves you energy and time. If you have to turn 100 screws, get a cordless drill with the right screw bit.

In all aspects of life, you need to use the right tool for the job. This applies to marketing your funeral home or other death care business, as well.

If you want to produce more at-need calls as quickly and effectively as possible, the right tool for the job is quite simple: pay-per-click marketing, typically just called PPC.

That doesn't mean PPC is the *only* digital marketing tool for generating at-need calls from the internet, of course. However, it's unquestionably the best one in existence to immediately get at-need calls flowing into your funeral home in 2019.

For our purposes here, I'll be focusing on the massively dominant player in PPC, Google Ads (previously called Google AdWords).

With Google continuing to dominate

online search with over 90 percent of the market, it's obviously the first place you need to focus your PPC efforts. (For many death care businesses, it likely will be the *only* place, but that could change over time if another search engine makes headway.)

## Understanding Google Ads

First, a little history: A couple of decades ago, most Americans were just starting to migrate from the basic search capabilities provided by America Online to newer search engines such as Yahoo and Google.

While AOL and Yahoo hung in there for a while, it didn't take long for Google's superior search architecture to dominate its competitors. Google's algorithms simply provided superior results, which means it did a better job of understanding what you were looking for and creating lists of options most relevant to that inquiry.

It's as simple as that. It's really just that simple today. Google's entire foundational value is that it does the best job of understanding what you want and placing the best options right up top. That's how its organic (unpaid) listings work, and that's largely the idea behind its advertisements, as well.

Google first launched its paid ads service, then called Google AdWords, on its search engine results pages (SERPs) in October 2000. Yes, that's almost 19 years ago, if you weren't feeling old already.

In 2017, Google brought in \$95.4 billion from paid ads, which was 86 percent of its total revenue. If you're wondering where Google comes up with all that money for self-driving cars and all sorts of other technology development, wonder no more: It's all about advertising.

All of which is to say that advertising on search pages definitely *works*. It works because the ads that appear on SERPs are



PPC fills in the gap while your SEO is taking effect. You don't have to wait for your funeral home website to work its way toward the top. Once you've decided to invest in PPC and create some ads, they can appear on Google search pages in as little as 24 hours.

specifically relevant to what people are searching for in the first place.

If you're looking for funeral providers in Boulder, Colorado, you can simply search for *Boulder Colorado funeral* to see an organic list of local providers, *plus* ads for businesses that have invested in PPC.

This is where I should address a sticking point for some funeral home owners when they consider whether to spend money on Google Ads: They're not sure that people actually click on the ads.

There's a historical consideration here. When paid ads first started appearing on SERPs (again, we're talking about two decades ago), some online searchers found it jarring. They were much more likely to click on an organic (unpaid) listing on the page than click on an ad.

That consumer behavior has completely changed over time, but much like an "old wives' tale," the original impression still sticks with some business owners. They remember being distrustful of paid ads way back when, and they don't realize everything's different now.

In 2019, online searchers *absolutely* click on paid ads. If they didn't, Google wouldn't be on the verge of \$100 billion in paid ad revenue alone.

Americans have become accustomed to 24/7 internet access. They're online everywhere they go, all the time, thanks to smartphones, tablets and even smartwatches. And today, they're especially used to online advertising. They see customized ads on their Facebook feeds, Twitter timelines and Instagram feeds.

So there's nothing strange to today's user about seeing ads on search results pages. Google does a great job now of making ads fit in organically on pages while still ensuring every ad is labeled as such. Google is careful to ensure no one is ever deceived into thinking an ad is actually an unpaid listing, but its labeling is also subtle enough that ads always feel appropriate on the page.

Most of the time, if you were to click on a PPC ad instead of a business's organic listing, the result would be the same. Either way, you're typically sent to a business home page or landing page. The only difference is the origin point.

## The symbiotic relationship of PPC ads and organic listings

So if PPC ads essentially serve the same function as unpaid listings, why should death care companies invest in them?

It's as simple as this: You can't directly control how well your business appears in local search results. Through dedicated search engine optimization (SEO) efforts, you can do a lot to improve your ranking (against your local competitors), but there's no guarantee you'll be front and center when someone has an immediate need for funeral, burial or cremation services in your area.

It is absolutely important to rank as well as possible in organic listings. Despite lots of chatter over the past few years about the eventual demise of generating clientele through unpaid listings, they're still going strong—and they certainly will be for some time.

No one wants to search for information on local businesses and see nothing but a list of advertisements. The organic listings themselves bolster the credibility of the very ads you see on the page.

If your funeral home is running PPC ads but your website SEO is so poor that it doesn't even appear on the first page of organic search results (presuming you're not in an incredibly competitive area, such as a very large city), that's not optimal. You need to approach this battle on both fronts. You need to rank as highly as possible organically *and* capture more at-need and pre-need cases through PPC.

When you're running a PPC ad, that ad's credibility is massively bolstered when the searcher sees your organic listing nearby on the search page. That shows you're legitimate. Google considers you one of the top providers in your area, which is why you're organically ranked well.

At that point, it doesn't matter whether the searcher clicks on your organic listing or your Google ad: Either way, that person is about to visit your website or even just call you directly, as is often the case in at-need situations.

On the other hand, if your death care business still isn't ranked well in organic listings, investing in Google Ads is

especially important. In that case, PPC is the only means by which you can enjoy that prime real estate on the front page of search results.

SEO takes time to work. You could do everything in the book to improve your website's SEO this week. You could create tons of original, relevant content. You could intersperse relevant keywords throughout your site. You could create great meta descriptions and title tags. And you *should* be doing all these things.

Regardless, it could take anywhere from six months to a year for all of those improvements to prompt Google to rank you near the top of local search results. And remember, some of your competitors are likely doing the same search optimization, so you'll always be battling with them for position.

PPC fills in the gap while your SEO is taking effect. You don't have to wait for your funeral home website to work its way toward the top. Once you've decided to invest in PPC and create some ads, they can appear on Google search pages in as little as 24 hours. At worst, they'll be up within 72 hours.

That's one reason Google Ads are so powerful for immediately increasing at-need calls. Every year, more people turn to the internet to find local death care providers. They have their smartphones on them constantly. When there's a death with no plan in place or an established provider for the family, your PPC ad is there to target that opportunity.

If that's not all, consider that Google recently made major improvements to the structure of its PPC ads. Last year, it added the ability to include one extra headline and description line. That means your ads can now display up to three headlines and two description lines—letting you more clearly and comprehensively communicate to potential clientele.

In my opinion, no independent funeral home or related death care services provider can afford to opt out of PPC advertising in 2019. It's the best and fastest way to quickly generate at-need calls from the internet, which is increasingly the place where people go to choose death care services. 