



(Re) Building Consumer Trust

The Google reviews freeze, expanding your reach and other marketing lessons learned from the pandemic.

BY WELTON HONG

Funeral homes had a lot going on in the early months of the pandemic. Working to serve at-need families while governments limited the ability for people to gather in person may have taken up most of your time in spring and summer of 2020. And for all those months as well, deathcare professionals also worked to find ways to secure and support their businesses through the pandemic.

With all that going on, you may not have even noticed that Google suspended consumer reviews and business responses early in the pandemic. But by mid-May 2020, the internet giant was publishing reviews again.

Now that we near the end of 2021 and have a chance to look back, there are lessons to learn about the temporary blip on the Google review radar, along with more general marketing takeaways generated from the pandemic itself.

Your Mailing List Is as Important As Google Reviews

Mailing lists can be especially powerful marketing tools at any time. Your list is filled with self-selected leads; for whatever reason, they're interested in hearing from you, and that makes them more likely to be interested in your services. This is just one reason 80% of marketers say they'd give up social media marketing before they gave up email marketing.

During times of stress on the industry or periods in which one of your marketing channels is down, that mailing list becomes even more important. Google suspending consumer reviews and business responses is just one example of how marketing efforts can be hampered by external actors. Consider some other potential challenges funeral homes might face:

- Facebook or another social media site could suspend your business page for all types of reasons. Page suspensions even happen by mistake. That leaves you permanently or temporarily without that channel for reaching out to and engaging with potential clientele.

- Your website can go down. Whether it's an issue with your own design or an attack on (or failure of) your hosting company, these things happen. During that time, people who are looking for information about preplanning or at-need services won't be able to connect via your site.

- Your Google (or other review site) profile could be targeted by malicious fake review schemes. Suddenly your 4.5-star average is a 2.5, and you've got dozens of negative reviews. Google provides tools for handling fake reviews, but in the meantime, your email list lets you stay in touch with prospective clientele and even ensure that they get your side of the story.

The takeaway here is that Google reviews are great, and asking for them is a good marketing move. But so is asking people to sign up for your mailing list, so put in as much effort on building your list as you are on Google reviews.

Google Isn't the Only Review Site

Google reviews are powerful. They help your business show up in search results and can influence whether your link gets the click when people are considering the results on the page.

If you only have time to worry about one review site, it should be Google. But it's not the only one, and Facebook and Yelp reviews can be equally as powerful.

When asking for a review, consider giving people options. Train your staff to do so when a family com-

municates appreciation for a job well done. They might say something like, "Thank you, it's important for us to help families honor their loved ones in unique, personal ways, and we're glad to be part of your service. If you'd like to share your experience, reviews on Google or Facebook help our business."

You can also include links or invitations to leave reviews on Google, Yelp or Facebook in follow-up emails with clientele.

Asking for Reviews Is Almost Always a Good Idea

You may not think that asking for a review is appropriate at certain times. For example, the overwhelming atmosphere that many have experienced during the pandemic can leave people floundering when it comes to standard policies or even social interactions.

Is it okay to continue to ask for reviews during the "unprecedented" times? Yes, tactful review requests are appropriate, especially when clientele have taken the first step in providing praise for your services or business.

In fact, the fellowship created in such times can lead to getting more reviews. Consider what happens in a natural disaster such as a hurricane. People and businesses pull together to uphold each other through the event and the recovery afterward.

In general, individuals want to help each other, but they might not know how they can support your business. If your funeral home is struggling – whether due to a global issue like the pandemic or something closer to home – letting clientele know that one of the best ways to support your business is by leaving a review is a completely acceptable marketing move.

Always Keep Profiles Up to Date

Reviews are an important source of information for consumers. More than half of all consumers read at least four reviews before making a purchase decision, and almost 80% say they trust the information in reviews as much as they would trust a personal recommendation from a friend.

But if reviews aren't available or contradict each other, consumers need a solid source of information about your business. Your website is obviously important for this purpose, and consumers expect a business website to be the most accurate authority on that business.

But you can't rely on 100% of potential clientele clicking through to your site. Many want to see the information they're looking for where they began their search, whether that's on a social media plat-

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form, in Google search results or on a site such as Yelp.

Make sure your business profiles are updated in all these places, especially during times when consumers might

be worried or stressed about things. When it's easy to come by accurate information about your funeral home, potential clients are more likely to trust you with their needs.

Set a date each month (or have an employee in your funeral home tasked with doing so) to check the following profiles and make sure everything is accurate.

- **Google My Business:** Are location(s), phone numbers and hours accurate? Provide an update on what you continue to do to protect people's health and safety, including how you've complied with any government mandates that have impacted your

business. While many businesses offer COVID-19 information on their profiles, it's months out of date and potentially confusing.

- **Facebook:** Are contact data, website links and information about the services you offer all up to date?
- **Yelp:** Make sure your business contact information is current.

Transparency and Authenticity Build Consumer Trust

One reason people turn to Google reviews is that they believe they'll find an honest discussion of your business and services, so your level of authenticity as a business can work alongside positive reviews to help convert potential clientele.

Some 90% of consumers say authenticity plays a role in whether they'll choose a business, and that's even truer in deathcare. If people can't trust what you say and do online, they're much less likely to trust you to help them honor a loved one or uphold their preplanned wishes.

The pandemic has only served to strengthen this point. During a time in which people hear conflicting information daily, it's refreshing to engage with a business that's transparent about its services and follows through on its promises. Remember that funeral home marketing efforts must be honest above all else.

Google Reviews Are Just One, Possibly Temporary, Tool

A final takeaway of the temporary Google freeze on reviews is that Google reviews are just one tool for funeral home marketing. They may be a highly effective, important tool, but Google reviews should never be the only option you embrace.

Now that we've seen Google freeze reviews, who knows when it might happen again? And you also don't own your Google reviews. The search engine giant can – and has – removed reviews for businesses in the past for a variety of reasons.

The pandemic taught many businesses, including those in deathcare, that diversification of services is one of the truest ways to survive. The same is true for marketing. Always put your efforts across multiple channels so you can continue to connect with and convert potential clientele even if one option disappears, whether temporarily or forever. ☰

Welton Hong is founder of Ring Ring Marketing and author of Making Your Phone Ring With Internet Marketing for Funeral Homes.



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