

BEAT THE SOCIAL MEDIA ALGORITHMS TO BETTER MARKET YOUR FUNERAL HOME

BY WELTON HONG

As a funeral service professional, you might have heard about how algorithms relate to your firm's digital marketing. Algorithms control whether your page shows up in searches when people enter certain keywords. They also control when and how your content is displayed to users on social media.

In other words, algorithms have a lot to do with whether or not your online marketing efforts are successful. And I have both good news and bad news about them.

Let's get the bad news out of the way first: Algorithms are powerful. They can decimate a page's traffic overnight, and they're responsible for the organic reach for business posts on Facebook effectively approaching zero.

The good news is that you can act to mitigate some of the impact of algorithms on social media.

What Is an Algorithm?

For those who left high school math behind and never looked back, the definition of algorithm is "a set of rules or a process to be followed when performing calculations or problem-solving operations."

Often, these rules are used by computers and artificial intelligence to perform complex calculations in microseconds and arrive at a decision. For example, in the case of Google, an enormous amount of data is paired with complex search engine rules to determine which pages rise to the top of search results.

No one outside of Google really knows all the rules in the algorithm, although we can guess at a few, and Google tells us about some. For instance, quality pages that work well to answer the intent of the searcher's query get more points in the algorithm than low-quality and/or irrelevant pages.

For extra fun, Google updates its algorithm constantly. It makes about 1,000 updates a year—more than two a day on average. But you only hear about the big ones.

Algorithms on Facebook and Instagram

All of that is true for social media, though Facebook might not make as many updates as Google and users do have some control over what they see.

The social platforms use rules that decide what content people see most often. Those rules take into account a number of factors, including:

- **The user's settings:** For example, if someone blocked your page, it doesn't matter what other rules are in place. They won't see your content.
- **How much someone interacts with your content:** Someone who likes, comments on, and shares your content is typically going to see more of it than someone who regularly ignores your posts.
- **How "popular" your posts are:** Posts that get a lot of interaction are seen as higher-quality or more relevant than those that don't, so social platforms may prioritize them.

- **What's included in the post:** In general, users interact with posts that contain video and images much more than they do with basic text posts on Facebook. Thus the site is more likely to prioritize that type of content.

On top of all that, the social media sites are businesses. Which means they have bottom lines to attend to and (in many cases) shareholders to answer to. They're not in the business of giving free exposure to businesses when they can charge for it.

While Facebook, Instagram, and other sites aren't completely stopping businesses from organically connecting with people (organic means you don't pay for the posts you put on the site), they're certainly not making algorithm decisions meant to heavily support this type of exposure.

For most businesses, Facebook organic reach is about 5.5% or less on average. That means if your funeral home has 1,000 followers, only 55 will see any given post you publish. That number has been decreasing for the past few years and it's likely it will keep inching toward zero.

Instagram reach is higher than that on average but is also declining with every algorithm change.

The conclusion here is that without some intervention, even funeral homes that post regularly on social won't be seen by the right consumers, and that drastically reduces the conversions you might eventually get on these channels.

Then Why Use Social Media?

Does that mean you should quit social media and concentrate on other channels? Not necessarily.

Yes, you should market on other channels—a diverse marketing strategy is as important as a diverse portfolio. If one of your funeral home's channels isn't pulling its weight, another can take up the slack.

But you should also consider keeping one or two social media accounts going and active. The majority of social media users of any age turn to friends and contacts on these sites when they need something, often asking outright for recommendations. They might also look up brands on social media to get a better idea of how businesses—including funeral homes—connect with and care for their clientele.

If you're not on social media, you don't get the benefits of this social proof. And that can mean you lose out to funeral service competitors.

Tips for "Beating" the Algorithm

Staying on social media and actually showing up for consumers does require a bit of work. Here are some tips for "beating" the algorithm and showing up to as many users as possible:

- **Pay.** This is the simplest, most effective way to ensure your posts show up for more users. Convert them into ads

via sponsored post options. This works on Facebook and Instagram, which share an ad tool, as well as other sites such as Twitter. When you pay to boost a post's reach, you can specify the type of audience you want it shown to by demographics, interests, and other factors.

- **Create engaging content.** While the details differ, most social media algorithms prioritize content that more people engage with. If you're getting a lot of likes, comments, shares, and saves, the assumption is that your content is valuable enough to show other people.

- **Ask for engagement.** Ask—nicely!—for engagement that helps you perform better in the algorithms. As of this writing, the most valuable engagement in the Instagram algorithm is a "save." Users can save content to be reviewed later. Many businesses are letting their followers know this is the case and asking for saves, and some are simply providing reference content and reminding people to save it for access down the road.

- **Engage back.** If you set up a booth at a local event to tell people about your preplanning services but you never actually speak to anyone who visits the booth, you're not going to see great results. The same is true on social media. Respond to people who comment on your posts, and like, share, and comment on the posts of others.

Bonus Tip: Consistent Engagement on Social in 15 Minutes a Day

You probably don't have hours a day to sit on social media and chat. While you should put someone in charge of responding to and managing content on your own posts, you can also create engagement outside of your page in just 15 minutes a day. Here's how:

- **Decide on no more than two platforms.** You can't show up well on every platform even if you *do* have hours a day.

- **Follow some pages, people, and hashtags that are relevant to your industry.**

- **Daily, check out a couple of those pages or hashtags and scroll briefly through the most recent content.** Share one or two things that are highly relevant to your own audience and like and comment on a few posts.

That's it. You're done for the day with building off-page engagement. By taking these steps, you get your name and social handle in front of new users, who might click through to your own profile to engage and eventually to your funeral home website. **FBA**

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