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ICCFA Magazine spotlight



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MARKETING & TECHNOLOGY

The internet has changed marketing, even for the death-care profession, and the ubiquity of smartphones has brought more changes. Keeping up with it all can seem hopeless, but it's necessary, at least if you want your business to survive and thrive in the future. Start by making sure you understand these basics.

Four online marketing basics you need to master today

If online marketing still seems a bit foreign to you, don't worry—you're not the only one, not by a long shot.

Even in 2018, the various tools and techniques integral to internet marketing remain intimidating to a lot of brick-and-mortar businesses.

They have a vague understanding of what the process entails: You need to have a website, because, well, every business has a website. So at least, you know, ... have one.

You should try to make sure it has good search engine optimization, because ranking higher in online searches is better than, you know, ranking lower.

You also should have email and check it regularly, because sometimes people email these days, and that sure seems useful.

I admit, all of that might seem a little unfair. A lot of business owners know more than that. But believe me, I've also met a lot who don't.

And if you'll forgive me for being blunt, it's fair to say that the death-care industry tends to be a little further behind the trends than most.

I understand the reasons for that: More traditional industries tend to hang onto more traditional marketing methods longer.

It's a big adjustment for many cemetery and crematory owners to make. It's also not easy to so radically change course when there's so much else going on, specifically the rapid rise of direct cremation.

But this is no time sit tight and see what happens. It's all quite simple:

- Powerful personal computers and reliable home internet access have been common in most American homes for over 15 years.

- Smartphones and tablets that provide easy 24/7 access to the internet have become pervasive over the past five years.

- According to a February 2018 Pew Research Center study, nine out of 10 American adults regularly use the internet.

- Almost two-thirds (66 percent) of American adults over 65 use the internet, as do 87 percent of those age 50-64, and 97 percent of those age 30-49.

There is no 'demographic bubble' giving death-care providers more time

Now that internet use is so universal in American life, there's no escaping the reality: Businesses that evolve to master online marketing will prosper. Those that fall behind face a perilous future.

I know that some death-care business owners think they have a "demographic bubble" for a little while longer, but it's simply not true.

Sure, younger people are essentially addicted to the internet. We all know that's true. They're on their smartphones (or tablets, or even their smartwatches) all the time these days. It never even occurs to them to look up information any other way.

But online consumer research is hardly limited to the young. As I noted above, among Americans in the 50-64 demographic, 87 percent regularly use the internet. And the 65-and-up demo is at 66 percent; in 2011, that number was only 46 percent. No other demo has seen such a sizable spike over a similar period in the 2000s.

In other words, grandparents and even great-grandparents regularly turn to the

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Yes, plenty of older Americans still use desktop computers more than mobile devices, so don't ignore the desktop experience, but do ensure the mobile experience is just as good. That's beneficial in the present, but it will be crucial in the near future.

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internet to research services. They might not do so with the regularity we see in younger demographics, but when they need information on something important, that's where they go.

And which direction will the numbers go from here? Given that no demographic has seen a statistically significant year-to-year drop in internet usage since 2000 (also per Pew), we know the answer: It's just going to keep rising. This is why funeral home, cemetery and crematory owners need to prioritize their online marketing efforts ASAP.

But how should they do that? What follows are four of the online marketing basics every business owner needs to know going forward.

Some of this might seem rudimentary to more tech-savvy readers, so please bear with me if you're in that group. I've learned it's safest not to assume anything, and even if you're pretty familiar with these tools, I believe you'll likely find some new perspectives and pick up some useful information.

1. Unless you're the cheapest option in your area, you must focus on credibility.

If you're already providing the lowest-cost cremation services to local families, you've already figured out your market. You're going after the price shoppers, plain and simple, full stop.

Of course, that's not a realistic plan for a lot of cremation professionals, especially those in highly competitive markets. You likely need bargain-basement prices to edge everyone else in price, and such small margins demand massive quantity.

Also, you already know how shockingly low some direct cremation providers set their prices, and that some try to make up for that with various hidden fees.

So you're probably not the cheapest option in your market. This means you need to attract online clientele by bolstering your credibility.

Credibility takes lots of forms, but essentially, I'm referring to how legitimate

your business appears to online visitors. Having many testimonials bolsters your credibility. So does having plenty of positive reviews on online platforms. (I'll go into reviews in more depth shortly.)

You also generate plenty of credibility by having a robust "About Us" page with plenty of information about your business, plus pictures of your staff and (as appropriate) your facilities.

Finally, you gain credibility by generating citations, which are references to your business elsewhere on the internet.

2. Your website must be specifically engineered to convert.

In online marketing-speak, conversion refers to the process of turning an online visitor into an actual lead—and ultimately, a client.

Your website could generate a ton of traffic, but if the people visiting it (either for preplanning or immediate need) don't convert, it's essentially useless: All you have is a bunch of window shoppers.

A conversion could be as simple as the visitor filling out a contact form (typically for preplanning) or calling your business (typically for at-need service).

To generate conversions, your website needs to have a clear call to action (CTA) on each page, inducing visitors to convert.

Other big conversion generators include ensuring mobile-friendly navigation (a site that works just as well on smartphones and tablets as on desktop computers) and including lots of original content—another issue I'll elaborate on below.

I realize all this talk about conversions can seem indelicate to providers who are used to a more nuanced approach to the business.

That's fair, but this is today's reality: Small businesses are feeling the pinch from corporate entities and price-focused direct cremation agencies.

Metrics matter. Understanding the relationship between website traffic, conversions and case counts is crucial to success today.

3. The more content, the better.

Most likely, the last thing you want to

think about for your website is producing a lot of content. Why would you? You're in the death-care business, not running an online blog. They don't exactly go hand-in-hand.

Regardless, websites with lots of content massively outperform others in every metric. And that's true of every industry or profession, whether you're repairing bicycles, replacing roofs or providing cremation services. To Google, the line of work doesn't matter; everyone's treated the same.

Having lots of content on your website improves your online marketing efforts in numerous ways. Search engines factor website content heavily into your search engine optimization (SEO), giving you higher rankings in organic search results.

Content also is a major factor in both generating more conversions and producing higher average margins for services.

When you use pay-per-click (PPC) advertising—paid ads on search engine results pages—you'll also get much more bang for your buck if your site has lots of original content.

Content isn't only written text; it also includes images and video, so don't be shy about including both.

You can also regularly update your blogs on a variety of subjects, both directly and indirectly related to death care—it's all content.

But before worrying about blog posts, start by ensuring your site's pages are comprehensive and fully detailed, with lots of great information about your business and about cremation in general.

4. The future is mobile—your website must be, as well.

I went into this in more detail in an article in the August 2018 issue of ICCFA Magazine, but the short version is this: Much as online directories have virtually replaced print directories and mobile phones have massively eclipsed landlines, mobile computers are rapidly pushing desktops to the edge of extinction.

Don't get me wrong—I still have desktop computers at home and in the

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office, and I'm sure you do, too. Much like landlines, they still have a purpose in 2018.

You shouldn't be ignoring the desktop experience. But you definitely shouldn't be treating the mobile experience like the desktop's red-headed stepchild.

Here's why: As of 2018, more people in the United States access the internet on mobile devices than on desktop computers. If your website isn't optimized for mobile viewing, you're essentially ignoring half of your potential clientele.

According to Pew, more than two-thirds of Americans ages 54 to 72 own and regularly use a smartphone. That's obviously a demographic that cremation providers can't afford to ignore.

And while far fewer Americans 73 and older are regular smartphone users, the percentage is higher than you might expect: 30 percent, and rapidly growing.

So instead of thinking of your website as something to be viewed on a desktop first and a mobile device second, it's time to turn that around.

Yes, plenty of older Americans still use desktop computers more than mobile devices, so don't ignore the desktop experience, but do ensure the mobile experience is just as good. That's beneficial in the present, but it will be crucial in the near future.

Remember, today's 40-somethings and 50-somethings have remained in the workforce throughout the digital revolution, so they've learned to adapt to technological advancements at the office, and then at home.

That's something to keep in mind not only as it relates to mobile computing but also to digital adoption in general.

This is where business is being done in 2018, and it just keeps trending upward every year.

Imagine where we'll be in 2020, or 2023—and get ready now. 