

by **Welton Hong**

## ICCFA Magazine spotlight



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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.

### More from this author about this topic

on the  
**RIGHT TRACK** ►

► Hong will give a presentation on “The three online marketing fundamentals you must master” at the ICCFA Convention in Charlotte, North Carolina, April 2-6, 2019.  
[iccf.com/annual](http://iccf.com/annual)

## MARKETING & TECHNOLOGY

Nearly everyone checks out reviews online before making a reservation at a new restaurant. Who doesn't look at the ratings before deciding which gadget to buy on amazon.com?

Yet some funeral directors and cemeterians still have a hard time believing that in today's world, whether people will choose them to take care of their loved ones is increasingly determined by their online reviews—or lack of them.

# How to improve your online reputation—and why you must

**F**uneral directors and cemeterians are experts at being compassionate, empathetic and diplomatic.

They handle challenging situations and anguished family members with tact, caring and discretion.

All of that is why many wince at the very notion of having one particular conversation with grieving family members following funeral or cemetery services: “Hey, would you mind hooking us up with an online review? Five stars would really help out a lot.”

Of course, that's not the way you'd actually express such a request. (On the other hand, if you think that sounded just fine, it might be time to brush up on your people skills.)

In reality, there are quite thoughtful ways to inquire about having your organization reviewed. But it's understandable that some death care professionals remain wary.

They find it gauche to ask a family to review their business, no matter how discreetly it's done. They hold their tongues and hold out hope—hope that family members will simply take it upon themselves to go online and leave them a review on an appropriate site.

Other funeral directors and cemeterians, of course, simply don't give online reviews any thought at all. Yes, they think, it's helpful to get some testimonials, if we're lucky enough to receive them with permission to use them in our marketing.

But online reviews? Those are for restaurants, right? Or hotels, or retail outlets. Not funeral homes. Not cremation providers. Not cemeteries. This is a

different type of industry. We're different.

Well, guess what?

You're not that different.

It's as simple as this: In virtually all industries, a phenomenal online reputation is now one of the chief determinants of success. And while online reputation comprises more than online reviews, those reviews are the foundational elements.

That's not true just for restaurants and hotels, it's true for every type of business, including funeral homes and other providers of death care services.

So that requires you to get comfortable with the notion of encouraging your families to review your organization and the service you provide. I know it might not be easy at first, but believe me, it's essential.

## If your online reputation is bad, your reputation is bad

What matters more in death care services than a wonderful reputation? You wouldn't entrust the care of your loved one to a business with less than a sterling reputation. You shouldn't expect families in your area to do so, either.

That's why funeral homes and other death care providers work so hard to develop a pristine reputation ... offline.

And yes, that's good. Of course you want to develop that relationship with your families. Old-fashioned word-of-mouth and community outreach are essential.

However, everyone knows how much the industry has changed in recent years. Fewer people find death care providers through established family connections and/

Both Google and Facebook reviews can be very beneficial. If you must prioritize one, make it Google, because your overall review rating will show up on Google’s search engine results pages.

With just a glance, potential clientele can see how you stack up against local competitors.

or church affiliations. People move around a lot more. You can’t count on those avenues as much as you could before.

Today’s clients are increasingly likely to find your business online. To them, it won’t matter what people say about you in church or in the football stands, because most are unlikely to hear those commendations. Or, in an at-need situation they might not have time to check around with people, but they can go online at any hour of the day or night and see how you rate in online reviews.

You could be beloved by all the families you served, but if your business has hardly any online reviews, or a couple of significantly negative and unanswered online reviews—fair or otherwise—you don’t have a good reputation anymore.

You have the reputation people see online. It has to be impressive.

**Online reviews by the numbers**

Off the top of your head, how many people do you think read online reviews before selecting a service?

You’re probably already assuming it’s more than you’d expect, because why else would I be asking? So maybe you’re adding a healthy number of percentage points to your original notion.

Now you might be thinking 65 percent, maybe 70. Possibly even 75.

Those are all reasonable estimates. They’re still way too low.

According to BrightLocal’s 2017 Local Consumer Review Survey, 97 percent of consumers reported checking online reviews before selecting a service. (The survey queried 1,031 American consumers in October 2017.)

Another fascinating data point from the survey is that 85 percent of consumers trust online reviews just as much as personal recommendations.

You might be thinking: Well, that’s for consumers of all kinds. Those aren’t specifically people scrutinizing death care services. And sure, that’s a fair point. The latter numbers might be a bit lower. But they aren’t significantly different.

It’s imperative to keep in mind how much things have changed in the digital

age. Technology has massively affected how people research and choose business services.

Death care might have been somewhat insulated from this sea change for a while because it most often serves people in older demographics, but that insulation is quickly being stripped away.

The internet has been around for a long time, after all, and its convenience and utility have made it an intrinsic part of life for people of all ages.

Percentage of adults who use the internet				
<i>(from surveys by the Pew Research Center)</i>				
Year	age 18-29	age 30-49	age 50-64	age 65+
2000	70%	61%	46%	14%
2008	89%	84%	72%	38%
2018	98%	97%	87%	66%

And yes, that means for grandparents and great-grandparents. In the earlier years of consumer internet usage, older people lagged far behind younger ones in adopting the new technology. But that’s no longer the case, as a recent Pew Research Center survey shows.

In 2008, 89 percent of Americans ages 18-29 used the internet, compared to 38 percent of those 65 and older.

Today, 98 percent of the 18-29 demographic uses the internet, while the 65-and-older group has skyrocketed to 66 percent.

Also worth noting: The survey showed that 97 percent of Americans ages 30-49 use the internet; for ages 50-64, it’s 87 percent.

So yes, virtually seven out of eight Americans ages 50-64 use the internet—a demographic no death care service provider can afford to ignore, whether considering pre-need or at-need services.

**What matters more: quantity or quality?**

Well, this one’s not hard, right? Common sense tells us it’s better to have a handful of reviews that all give us a perfect five-star rating than 100 reviews that average,

let’s say, a 4.2 rating.

Except that thinking is completely wrong.

Of course you want five-star ratings on platforms that employ that scale (Yelp, Google and Facebook, among others). And yes, as a general principle, the more stars, the better.

But in truth, having your number of reviews total in the single digits, even if every one gives you a 5.0 overall rating, is substantially worse than having around 100 or even just 50 or 60—if those reviews average out to a rating of at least 4.0 or so.

There are several reasons for this. First, consumers simply don’t trust a small sample size. They believe virtually any business can elicit six or seven perfect reviews, but once you’ve accrued a massive number of reviews, they believe those are legitimate.

No one believes that any business will be beloved by everyone. That’s impossible. Everyone has a different interpretation of excellent service—whether in death care or any business. Some people are extremely nitpicky. That’s normal.

So if you have nothing but perfect ratings, it looks suspicious. It’s like when you come across a self-published book on Amazon that has nothing but five-star reviews. You don’t know for sure, but you strongly suspect either they were all written by the author, or the author’s friends and family. (And frankly, they almost certainly were.)

Additionally, having many reviews often matters more than the quality of those reviews for SEO purposes. For example, the number of Google reviews your funeral home receives is a positive factor in how much credibility Google believes your site has. It doesn’t care whether the reviews are mostly five stars or one star!

If a lot of people are reviewing you, Google considers you influential and credible. That equates to higher rankings in search results. If very few people review you, Google considers you less legitimate.

With that said, here’s an important caveat: You want to have at least a four-star rating overall, regardless of the

particular platform. In the BrightLocal survey, almost half (49 percent) of the respondents said they would only choose a business that had at least a four-star rating. Anything lower, and you're in trouble.

However, that shouldn't stop you from working hard to generate reviews. Yes, you might get the occasional negative review, but that happens to everyone. And I'll talk about ways to deal with that in the next section.

### **Generating rave reviews and mitigating critical ones**

As I noted right up top, it's important to become comfortable with asking for reviews.

In a certain sense, this actually should come easier to funeral directors and other death care professionals than to most businesspeople.

Think about it: You're skilled at navigating tricky conversations with people at a very tough time in their lives. When it comes right down to it, you're marketing your business and your services to them. This is simply an extension of that, and not very different from asking for written testimonials for use in marketing, which some funeral homes and cemeteries already do.

You need to know the right time to approach them. It's obviously not immediately at the conclusion of services. But it could be done during a follow-up phone call a few days afterward, particularly if the family member you're speaking with opens the door by lauding your business.

Another option is to reach out by email. Show the thoughtfulness and care you're known for in your communications, and at the end, note that a positive review will help your organization serve other families just as well.

One important thing to note here is that Yelp, a very popular review platform, plainly states that businesses must not directly solicit reviews for its platform. Please take this very seriously. Yelp can effectively punish businesses (on its platform) for violating this requirement.

However, at this time, there's no prohibition on soliciting reviews for Google, Facebook and most other platforms. Both Google and Facebook reviews can be very beneficial. If you must prioritize one, make it Google, because your overall review rating will show up on Google's search engine results pages. With just a glance, potential clientele can see how you stack up against local competitors.

Let's finish up by talking about how to deal with negative reviews. Again, these are just a fact of life, and it's important not to get too worked up about them. If you provide great service, the vast majority of reviews you receive should be very positive.

However, if you do get a negative review, it's important that you don't just ignore it. On most platforms, you can reach out privately to the reviewer and get more information about why that person had a bad experience.

If you can clear the air and communicate that you're sincerely sorry things

didn't go as well as they should have, the reviewer often will update the review with an improved rating and comments showing their appreciation.

Additionally, on virtually every platform, you can respond publicly to a negative review. This is a great opportunity to show you can handle criticisms professionally and with compassion. This goes a long way with potential clientele who might be viewing the review and your response.

Now, if you believe a review is "fake"—unquestionably unfair or illegitimate, such as when someone reviewed you but never used your services—you also have the option of flagging and/or reporting the review. This doesn't always help, but sometimes it does. In the latter case, you might be able to get the fake review removed entirely.

Overall, the key is to accept that online reviews are here to stay, and the best thing you can do is to work hard to generate positive ones. This is what determines your organization's online reputation right now, and as I noted, your online reputation is quickly becoming your reputation in a universal sense.

Consistently monitor your online reputation. Pay attention every time your business is reviewed online. Be proactive about generating positive reviews. Take immediate action—politely and thoughtfully—when confronted with a negative review.

If you do all this, your reputation will shine—and you'll be primed for success going forward. 