

Mausoleums: Making the big sale **Also in this issue:** • Beekeeping
• Organizing a Grief Garden service • Understanding how SEO works today
• Why managing a national company is hard • What it takes to start a cemetery
• Stopping a brain hijack • Drawing on a funeral directing career as a professor





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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

Does the rise of pay-per-click advertising mean that search engine optimization is no longer important? Is SEO dead? No, it's not, but you need to understand how to do it correctly.

SEO is alive and well

We're all grownups here. You're probably thinking that's not only an obvious point but also a curious way to begin an article, so let me explain:

My firm is constantly working with funeral homes to improve their websites, create blog posts and social media posts and generally improve their messaging.

Given the nature of this industry, we tend to avoid certain terms whenever possible. It's always best to err to the side of caution, lest anyone think for a minute we're making light of something as serious as mortality.

Which makes it a bit of challenge when we need to talk about search engine optimization (SEO). Because if there's one thing most small business owners wonder about as it relates to digital marketing, it's this:

Is SEO dead?

Yes, there's the "D" word. There's no way around it. And while we remain very careful to use other terminology in the messaging we do for our clients at Ring Ring Marketing, there's no reason not get right to the point here. The fact is, that's the #1 question small businesses have for marketers. Every month, hundreds of people search Google for "is SEO dead" or "SEO is dead," etc.

And thus my point that we're all grown-ups here. We can't talk about the state of SEO in 2019 without directly confronting the question of whether SEO actually is dead (or dying). Of course, I've already spoiled the answer to that question in the headline, but before we dive deeper into the ins and outs of SEO, let's explore that point a little further.

Don't believe the hype: SEO remains critically important

No matter what you might hear, SEO remains a vital aspect of your funeral home's marketing and its eventual success. It's far from dead.

While it's certainly true that SEO isn't the "be all, end all" of online marketing the way it was several years ago, that doesn't make it

Acronyms you need to know

SEO: search engine optimization, which comes in a black-hat and a white-hat version

SERP: search engine results pages

PPC: pay-per-click

UX: user experience

IoT: internet of things

something your funeral home can afford to ignore.

If your local competitors are investing in SEO and you're not, your firm is already behind. Even if your area currently has very little competition, you can't depend on that to continue forever. Low-margin direct cremation businesses pop up all the time, and you can be sure they'll be promoting themselves online.

So let's explore why the "SEO is dead" maxim remains so powerful in 2019, despite the reality of SEO's continued importance.

Practically ever since people started researching businesses for products and services online, local businesses have realized the importance of dominating search engine results pages (SERPs) for those particular queries.

That became even truer as Google rose to prominence, thanks to its ability to determine relevance (how relevant a result was to the searcher's intent) far better than other search engines could.

Google also has always been especially responsive to dealing with *black-hat* SEO, which essentially means shady practices to scam search engines into ranking sites higher on results pages. (Legitimate practices are referred to as *white-hat* SEO.)

To appreciate how much SEO and Google go hand in hand, consider that the phrase "search engine optimization" is

More people every year will be using voice search, and there are specific SEO strategies you can use to optimize for that. One way is to include specific short question-answer pairs in your funeral home site's content.

believed to have come into use about 1997, while Google was founded in 1998.

Today, Google owns about 90 percent of the market share in search, which is why it should always be your #1 priority in your SEO efforts. It's good to rank well on other search engines such as Bing and Yahoo, of course, but they're merely minnows next to the great whale that is Google.

In recent years, a large part of the "SEO is dead" claim came from marketers who took note of how Google (in particular) tended not to reward sites as much anymore for packing webpages full of keywords and developing large networks of links.

Frankly, that's a ridiculous take. Google didn't abandon SEO; it simply started providing better rankings for sites that proved themselves to *most relevantly meet the searcher's needs*.

Google knows there's no great benefit to a site that has little "real" quality but is jam-packed with long-tail keywords and a mass of inbound and outbound links. It now rewards sites that are bursting with *high-quality original content*. It rewards sites that provide visitors the information and resources they're looking for.

And with more people using mobile devices today (such as smartphones and tablets), it especially rewards sites that are optimized for those devices. In fact, Google places more emphasis now on user experience (UX for short) for *mobile users* than for desktop users. And its emphasis will continue to evolve, thanks to something we call "the IoT," otherwise known as...

The internet of things

Yes, that's a weird term, but you should get used to hearing it a lot more in the next few years. Because the "internet of things" not only has plenty of relevance for your life in general, but for how your business utilizes SEO.

While the term has appeared here and there over the past decade, it's really taken effect in the past couple of years. The IoT refers to the notion that essentially every device that *can* be connected to the internet eventually *will* be connected to the internet.

In other words, the internet doesn't exist only on traditional computers anymore. It's

in smartphones. It's in smartwatches. It's in refrigerators and lights and home climate control systems and fitness bands.

Most notably for businesses such as funeral homes, it's in *smart speakers*, which let users inquire about local services (such as death care) just by speaking aloud to the device.

Worldwide, there are already *more than seven billion* IoT devices, and that's not even including smartphones and tablets!

This simply means that the old days of interacting with the internet simply through typing queries into a search engine in a web browser are beginning to wane.

Only a few years from now, we very well might reach the point where virtually no one—and yes, that includes Americans in their 60s, 70s and even 80s—queries the internet that way.

Think about it: If a grandmother or even great-grandmother can get information simply by asking a question aloud—and hearing the answer declared through a speaker—why would she type queries into a search engine? It removes concerns about declining vision, or arthritis or diminished mobility.

With the advent of IoT, again, some people have questioned whether SEO will remain relevant. Again, the answer is *yes*. In fact, it might be more relevant than ever.

More people every year will be using voice search, and there are specific SEO strategies you can use to optimize for that. One way is to include specific short question-answer pairs in your funeral home site's content.

Additionally, when people do voice searches for local death care providers, they won't necessarily see a big list of options like they do now on SERPs. They might only hear a single reply at first.

So if they simply say "local funeral home" or even "call a local funeral home" (that functionality exists now), you absolutely want that funeral home to be *yours*. And that happens from having great SEO.

The pay-per-click ad wrinkle

The effect of PPC on SEO has been going on longer than that of IoT (yes, we've reached acronym overload at this point), but it's

something I can address even faster.

Search engines provide organic results for free—that's why they're called free results, after all. So one of the biggest ways search engines make money is by selling advertising.

For Google, a huge revenue stream comes from Google Ads (formerly Google AdWords), its PPC offering. It earns more than \$1 billion every year from Google Ads alone.

When you do a search on Google, you'll often see Google Ads on the results page, typically about three on the top and three more on the bottom, effectively "sandwiching" the free organic search results.

Marketers who prematurely declared SEO dead figured these ads would effectively eliminate the power of organic results. But nothing could be further from the truth.

It's certainly true that consumers trust paid ads on SERPs much more today than they did in the past. That's why PPC is one of the most effective marketing strategies for local businesses. But many people still trust organic search results more and prefer to click on them.

In truth, paid ads and organic results work together to benefit local businesses. Searchers trust a PPC ad more when they see an organic listing for the same business on the page, and the same is true in reverse.

Thus it's just as important as ever to ensure your funeral home website has great SEO. While Americans today use the internet for many things, search remains incredibly dominant: A full *93 percent* of online experiences begin with a search engine.

Additionally, four out of five people perform some type of online research before making a large purchase (of either a service or product).

And it's more important than ever to get your funeral home on the first page of search results, because three out of four people *never* scroll past the first page. If you're not on the first page, you're effectively invisible.

PPC ads haven't diminished the power of SEO at all. PPC and SEO actually have a symbiotic relationship. To attract families to your funeral home in 2019, your best strategy is keep improving SEO while also investing in PPC.

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Making sure your SEO is solid

So are you doing everything you can to ensure your funeral home website has excellent SEO? Consider these questions:

Is your site full of original, relevant content? That's the top priority for Google. The more high-quality content, the better. Look for places where you can better inform families in your area about all aspects of funeral service, along with related issues.

Does your site have enough (but not too many) relevant keywords? The key here is to have *long-tail keywords*, which is another way of saying "keyword phrases." You should ensure they appear organically in website copy, but don't try to stuff in extras where they don't belong. That actually can hurt your search ranking.

Does your site provide an excellent user experience on mobile devices? It's as simple as this: If your funeral home site doesn't look good and work well on smartphones, you're in big trouble. Make it as easy as possible for mobile users to navigate your site and contact you. Click-to-call functionality is an absolute must.

Is your site loading as fast as it should be? The loading speed of your site is imperative to ranking well on Google in 2019. Google says many websites lose half their prospective visitors just while the site is loading. If yours takes more than a couple of seconds to load, you'll lose visitors.

Are you incorporating social media into your marketing? In the past, funeral homes have been (understandably) wary of exploring social media strategies, but it's time to move past that. Social media works well for promoting pre-need services, and by increasing engagement, your site can build more links to other relevant sites and improve overall SEO.

Is your actual site design simple and easy to navigate? While I strongly encourage you to bolster site content, that doesn't mean you should get too complex. Google rewards sites that have intuitive designs and make it easy for visitors to find what they're looking for.

Are you effectively using images and video? Users like images and videos, so Google likes those elements as well. Showcase your funeral home with high-resolution photos of the facility and staff. Make a video that tells your story and generates trust with visitors. You'll convert more visitors into clientele and improve your SEO. □

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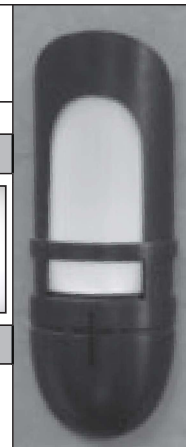
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