

Technology

By Welton Hong



Make Time or **GET LOST**

This month, I want to talk to you all about time – exactly how you’re spending it, what you’re not spending time on, and what you probably should.

But first, let’s talk about that headline: “Make Time or Get Lost.” I chose that because it’s simple, short and (as is always important) attention getting.

But I need to clarify that I’m certainly not telling you to “get lost” in the most well understood sense.

I’m actually *warning* you that if you can’t find time for critical long-term vision decisions in your funeral home, you’ll *become* lost. In fact, you might be already! You might not be seeing “the forest for the trees,” as they say. You’re so wrapped up in the day-to-day operations of your funeral home that you’re spending virtually no time on the bigger picture.

And when that big picture keeps changing as rapidly as it does today in funeral service, you can’t afford to take your eyes off of it.

I know I’ve been saying that for a while – and you may see other articles in this very issue of American Funeral Director that touch on the same point – but we’re really getting to a crisis point now.

And, as is always the case, some reading this very article are probably still saying: *That’s ridiculous. Business has been pretty good this year. It was pretty good the previous year. It surely will be pretty good next year.*

Perhaps that’s true. Perhaps – *so far* – your independent funeral home has

managed to hold its own against well-financed marketing efforts from corporate competitors.

Maybe skyrocketing cremation rates, particularly those for non-ceremonial cremation services – *so far* – haven’t decimated your average revenue per call.

Maybe newer requirements in your state about clearly displaying your General Price List – *so far* – haven’t hindered your ability to profit appropriately on your services.

But here’s the thing: The question isn’t whether those major developments in American death care have massively impacted your business *right now*. Remember, we’re talking about time here.

You can see how these things work. They're already impacting your funeral home to some degree. What about a year from now? Two? Three?

Are you ready for when these evolutionary changes cut your business's revenue by 20%, 25%, even 30% (or more)? Do you have a plan for how to make up that revenue? Can you even maintain the services you currently provide if/when that happens?

And, of course, I haven't even touched on my typical area of focus: how digital marketing is completely changing the nature of advertising and promoting local burial and cremation services. When you add the technological considerations to everything else, the conclusion is simple: *It's time to make time.*

It's time to take an honest look at your business. Why do many people avoid opening bills that arrive in the mailbox? Why do they fear stepping on the bathroom scale? Why do they dodge opportunities to talk with their families about critical issues affecting their lives?

Because that's human nature. Sure, some people actually enjoy monitoring and scrutinizing all these things, but for many of us, it can be overwhelming.

If your weight has gotten out of control, you might have other health issues. Which means seeing a doctor. Who might diagnose a variety of conditions. Which require lifestyle changes. Possibly medications. Possibly more invasive treatments. And so on.

Who wants to deal with that?

Similarly, your funeral home's "health" – from a business standpoint – might not be as glowing as it once was. Even if you don't pay close attention to the things I write about all the time – search engine optimization, pay-per-click advertising, mobile marketing, etc. – you must realize these changes affect your business. They're either directly affecting *your* firm or those of your competitors.

But if you don't really *understand* those concepts, at least regarding the ways they affect your bottom line, your instinct might be to just ignore them. And they're the simpler ones! When digital marketing gurus like me dig into hyper-geotargeting and remarketing and so on, I know it's hard not to just tune out.

Sometimes it reminds me of taking advanced math classes in school. If you fall behind on any one concept, you won't know how to do the next one, and suddenly – you're way behind and have no idea how to catch up. If you miss a couple of weeks of algebra and never go back to learn those processes, good luck next year with trigonometry!

I see this a lot in local funeral service. The business aspect changed little for a very long time, and now, it's all different. And change is scary, so what do a lot of business owners do? They ignore it. They do nothing, at their peril.

As the Hall of Fame rock band Rush famously noted in their song "Freewill," "If you choose not to decide, you still have made a choice!" If you choose not to take any action, you've chosen inaction. And in the industry today, choosing inaction is choosing to let your business steadily *atrophy*.

I have friends who worked in the newspaper industry for many years, and if anyone can tell you horror stories about waiting too long to adapt to market forces, they can.

For a long time, print newspapers were among the most profitable businesses in the United States. When the economy was good and Americans could only get most of their news from the morning paper, these businesses were printing money just as quickly as they printed papers! The 1980s and 1990s, in particular, were boon decades for the industry. It looked like the good times would never end.

Of course, that was before the

internet became standard in our lives. Before both classified and retail advertising essentially disappeared from newspapers. Before people could get all their news in real time – and most often for free – right on their desktop computers, and later in the palms of their hands.

So how did print newspapers adapt to these changes? Most of them didn't, which is why many went out of business, following long, painful stretches of layoffs and buyouts.

Some have held up a little better over the years – which is to say they're technically still in business – but almost all of those are running on skeleton crews and sell a tiny fraction of copies compared to how many they sold in their heyday.

Today, newspapers are a shadow of their former selves. Within the next five to seven years, many of the best-known papers in the country will only be publishing a digital edition, if they still exist at all.

And given that younger millennials (much less later generations) are unaccustomed to paying anything whatsoever for information, the future for newspapers – in any format – is incredibly grim. And all of that happened in just the past 15 or so years.

Think that can't happen to your funeral home? Think again.

So it's time to make a choice: Choose to *survive* these changes in your industry, first of all, and further decide to *thrive* in the face of them. Which means taking a look at how your funeral home functions as a business.

Make time to scrutinize every aspect of how you create profit in your funeral home. Are there places you can trim expenses without affecting services? Is there money you're leaving on the table in anything you do?

Are you promoting your funeral home in the most cost-efficient, ROI-friendly way? Are your advertisements being seen by the audiences you're targeting? Do you have a system in place

to lock in potential at-need and pre-need clientele? Is the person answering your phone trained in how to turn a call for basic direct cremation into a high-revenue call? (Even if the person who usually answers the phone is *you*?)

It's time to scrutinize all of these aspects. There's no point to continuing your current promotional initiatives (or doubling-down on them) if you haven't audited the current state of your business.

But then there's that nagging issue: time! How do you make time to focus on the big picture?

I wish I had the perfect answer to that, but I don't. I know you're already very busy. I know you always have to put your main focus on the day-to-day operations of your firm.

And I'm certainly not suggesting you put in lots of extra hours, taking time away from your family and needed rest.

Work-life balance is important. There's no point to running a business

if you can't enjoy the fruits of your labor now and then.

However, everything I said earlier holds true: If you're not making time to really scrutinize your funeral home *as a business*, you're going to run into trouble *soon* – if you haven't already. (Many death-care professionals already have.)

So one way or another, you have to make time ... which is why you probably should start this whole process by scrutinizing where time gets wasted in your day.

We all work hard, but almost all of us have places in our workday where we could be more efficient. Maybe you do, too.

If that's not the case for you, is there some way you could hand off certain administrative duties to another person, freeing you up to focus more on the bigger picture? The future of your business doesn't simply depend on you working – it depends on you *working on the right things*.

Alternatively, of course, you could consult with business and marketing experts to analyze your funeral home for you. In certain circumstances, this might be the most efficient plan. However, it still requires some time on your part to get all the pertinent information in order.

Ultimately, the key is to look at where you're spending your time and determine how you can shift some of that to a big-picture approach. It's simply a necessity in today's business climate.

You might be wonderful at everything you do in everyday death-care service, but if you're not investing some of your time into ensuring the future of your firm, none of that will matter. You can't help families in your community if you don't have a funeral home!

So don't get lost in the *busyness* of the day to day. It's time to set aside *busyness* and get down to *business*. •

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