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DECEMBER 2019

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SOCIAL



JIM TEGMAN ON UNSPLASH

PROOF

The Jedi mind trick that grows business.

BY WELTON HONG

Social proof is one of the odder terms you hear now and again from marketers. Because of that, I've found that many deathcare professionals don't really understand what it means or what utility it has for their businesses. Now seems like a good time to rectify that.

If you Google "social proof," you'll find a variety of definitions, some a bit more academic than we might find useful for this discussion. For example: Social proof is any piece of evidence from the peers of your intended audience that verifies some element of your argument.

Yeah... that one simultaneously sounds both entirely logical and awfully confusing. Let's see what Wikipedia says: Social proof... describes a psychological and social phenomenon wherein people copy the actions of others in an attempt to undertake behavior in a given situation.

No help there. Let's see if I can simplify this. Human beings tend to "follow the pack" when they see other humans engaging in some type of behavior or activity. It's a bit like when your mom asked you if you'd

jump off a cliff if everyone else was doing it. While most of us wouldn't take *that* particular leap, we *will* often follow suit when we notice many others taking a certain action.

You can think of it as a type of peer pressure, except you're not being acted upon by an outside force (your peers) – you're electing to take a course of action specifically because you want to emulate the pack.

Certain people are innovators – the very first to try any radically new product or service. They're followed by the early adopters, who give it a shot shortly thereafter.

But research has shown that just 2.5% of people can be classified as innovators, and just 13.5% fall under the early adopters category.

Comparatively, 68% of us are either part of the early majority (34%) or late majority (also 34%). We wait to see what everyone else is doing and how it's working out for them, and only then do we act.

For the record, the remaining 16% are considered "laggards" (if you have a friend or relative who held out on getting a smartphone until recently, he or she falls in this group).

SOCIAL PROOF IN BUSINESS MARKETING

Now let's move on from the academic discussion and look at what social proof means for your business. From a marketing standpoint, we look at social proof as any type of messaging or evidence you provide showing that other people similar to your intended audience like and use your services and/or products.

As an example, let's say you're a middle-aged man with a small family in a suburban area, and you enjoy golfing. You see that John Smith, another middle-aged man with a small family in a suburban area, is a big fan of a certain golf instructor. He raves

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about how great this instructor is and how he helped him drop 10 strokes off his handicap.

Now, you're very interested in paying for the services of this particular instructor, and it's not just that "someone" praised the instructor's abilities; it's that someone *like you* did the praising.

That's social proof. A service or product is essentially recommended to you by a peer or group of peers, either directly (e.g., word of mouth from friends or relatives) or indirectly (e.g., testimonials, online reviews, news stories).

And now that you've received social proof of the service or product, you're much more likely to spend your money on it.

In a sense, social proof can be like a "Jedi mind trick" because you don't necessarily need to receive a direct recommendation to alter your mindset regarding a potential action. The effect is often much more subliminal – you see your peers doing something, and deep inside your mind, you're compelled to do the same.

SOCIAL PROOF AND FUNERAL HOMES

This is the point at which I break the tension and plainly state what's on the minds of virtually everyone reading this article: Deathcare isn't like every other industry. No one hears about the death of a peer and thinks, "Hey, I need to do that, too!"

That's obviously true, but as usual, I'll note here that deathcare isn't quite as different from every other industry as we often make it out to be.

Social proof actually does work for funeral homes; we know this as it pertains to online reviews and testimonials. We often refer to those elements as bolstering a firm's online credibility or online reputation, but that all goes hand in hand with social proof.

We're in the home stretch of a decade that has witnessed a massive sea change in how people choose local burial and cremation service providers. Within seconds of doing an online search for local funeral homes, you'll see an average review score for every firm that pops up. You'll know right away which ones you'll consider and which ones (i.e., those with fewer than three stars) definitely won't make the cut.

Just as quickly, you can see specific reviews and testimonials for these funeral homes or cremation businesses. Right there, you have a wealth of social proof to support you in making your decision... unless, that is, a particular business hasn't provided you anything to go on – few to no reviews, few to no testimonials, no badges from the Better Business Bureau, industry groups or respected local associations.

Frankly, that's just as bad as having negative reviews. Today, if a family has nothing to go on – no body of evidence to consider – they'll just move on to a competitor.

That's why I strongly recommend that funeral home owners work diligently at generating a large number of high-quality reviews. They should also work at getting descriptive testimonials from families that were thrilled with their services. Those testimonials need to have first and last names because prospective clientele always want to know they're reading real raves from real people.

Social proof extends to the media as well. It can be difficult to get a local newspaper or television station to do a story about a business, but if you can come up with an interesting, newsworthy angle about something you do, put together a solid press release and try to get some coverage, that's one of the best types of social proof you can have.

If you don't have any luck getting a reporter to cover something specific to your business, pitch a story about a local cause you're involved in or some other community service related to you. Even that "indirect" publicity provides social proof for your deathcare business.

FOUR ELEMENTS OF SOCIAL PROOF

While testimonials, reviews and badges are some of the more beneficial ways to establish social proof for a deathcare business, there are broader elements to the concept, including:

Uncertainty This pertains to how we interpret the way other people react to a situation when we are uncertain about it. For example, if you provide alternative funeral services, social proof examples can help prospective clientele feel more comfortable electing those services.

Similarity When you experience something unfamiliar with a large group of people, you're more inclined to follow the actions of those similar to you. By providing social proof from people in a variety of demographics (male, female, older, younger, higher or lower income), you're more likely to connect with a variety of potential clients.

Expertise Students are more likely to look to their teachers for signals of how to react in uncertain circumstances; in other words, those with more expertise tend to lead the rest. Thus, deathcare businesses should look for ways to display laurels from people or associations noted for their expertise.

Number When a group of people experiences something uncertain together, the actions of the majority will be seen as correct and valid. This is basic "herd mentality," and it's a powerful concept, underlining the need to not only generate reviews and testimonials but lots of them. ☰

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