



BY
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HONG

It's All About Interaction

Owners must pay strict attention to how consumers interact with their world, so they can evolve with them and be ready to serve.



In virtually every type of business, success directly correlates with owners' and managers' ability to look ahead – to see the future or at least have a pretty good educated guess about it.

While that's certainly true of deathcare, the reality is that funeral directors spend much of their time focusing on the past. They help families look back, not forward. They help memorialize what has come before.

And thank goodness for that because we live in a world where it's all about the next big thing, where change is a constant and standing still for a few seconds to catch your breath means getting left behind since everyone else is racing forward.

It's wonderful that funeral homes help families appreciate what got them here and how the people they loved built up their lives and relationships. It's the heart of the entire industry. But as it relates to the actual matter of growing a successful business, this is no time for looking back. Save that for the families you serve.

Everything I said about change being a constant and everyone racing forward? It's all true, and the pace gets faster all the time. As we look ahead to the next decade, the funeral industry will only see much more change. I'd go so far as to call it an upheaval.

And at the risk of being blunt, that level of change – particularly for independent, family-owned funeral homes accustomed to doing things the same way for (at least) much of the past several decades – we're talking about a potentially existential threat.

I don't mean "existential" in a philosophical way, the way "existential crisis" is used by navel gazers regarding the meaning of life. I mean it as a threat to the very existence of these family-owned funeral homes.

If they don't adapt to the incredibly rapid rate of change in American business today, they absolutely could cease to exist. Whether that means selling the business to a Wall Street conglomerate or just closing shop altogether, the family funeral home as we've known it simply won't survive if it doesn't evolve.

I don't need to tell anyone reading this about the challenges smaller firms face from direct cremation or increased competition from deep-pocket corporate entities. I'll just remind everyone that those trends show no sign of abating.

So instead, let's talk about what your business can do to evolve along with everything else occurring in the world. Let's look at what's happening now and how you can position your firm with a solid plan that will roll with any new changes on the horizon.

To reach that point, at least as it relates to my particular field – marketing your business digitally – let’s dig into the word I teased up there in the headline: interaction.

People Interact With the World in Whole New Ways

Some people still make first contact with a funeral director via a phone call. That’s not going away anytime soon, but it’s also not as frequent as it used to be. And there are others who still choose a funeral home by digging up a printed Yellow Pages directory and choosing from an ad or listing. And while that still happens, too, it’s a lot less often than it used to be.

Everything changed – and I truly mean everything – when smartphones reached massive adoption levels over the past decade. It’s one of the biggest game-changers in the history of American business. We take it for granted now, but just 10 years ago, having convenient, affordable, 24/7 access to the internet was unthinkable.

We have far more computing power sitting in our pocket today than the average desktop computer had a decade ago. Don’t be fooled by the fact that you still use a desktop computer on a regular basis. It still has its use, but for many Americans, it’s becoming a relic.

It’s true across the world, but it’s especially true for Americans – we have shown ourselves to be amazingly adaptable to new technologies as soon as they emerge. No one’s “scared” of a smartphone or tablet anymore. Many grandparents use them constantly, and more than a few great-grandparents do, too. So do grade-school children.

They might not have their own, but hand your iPhone or Android to a 7-year-old and watch him go to work. (And watch very carefully, lest they purchase \$500 in games and apps before you finish making their French toast in the morning.) And of course, there’s everyone in-between. Studies from the past year have shown that almost 85% of Americans ages 18 to 52 check their smartphone within five minutes of waking up, with more than 65% checking it within the first 30 seconds.

That’s how we interact with the world now – through our smartphones or our tablets or (for many people) both.

Thanks to their larger screens, tablets are often more popular for everyday use by older people around the house, but most of them are still only used over a Wi-Fi connection, meaning you can’t easily access the internet when you’re out and about.

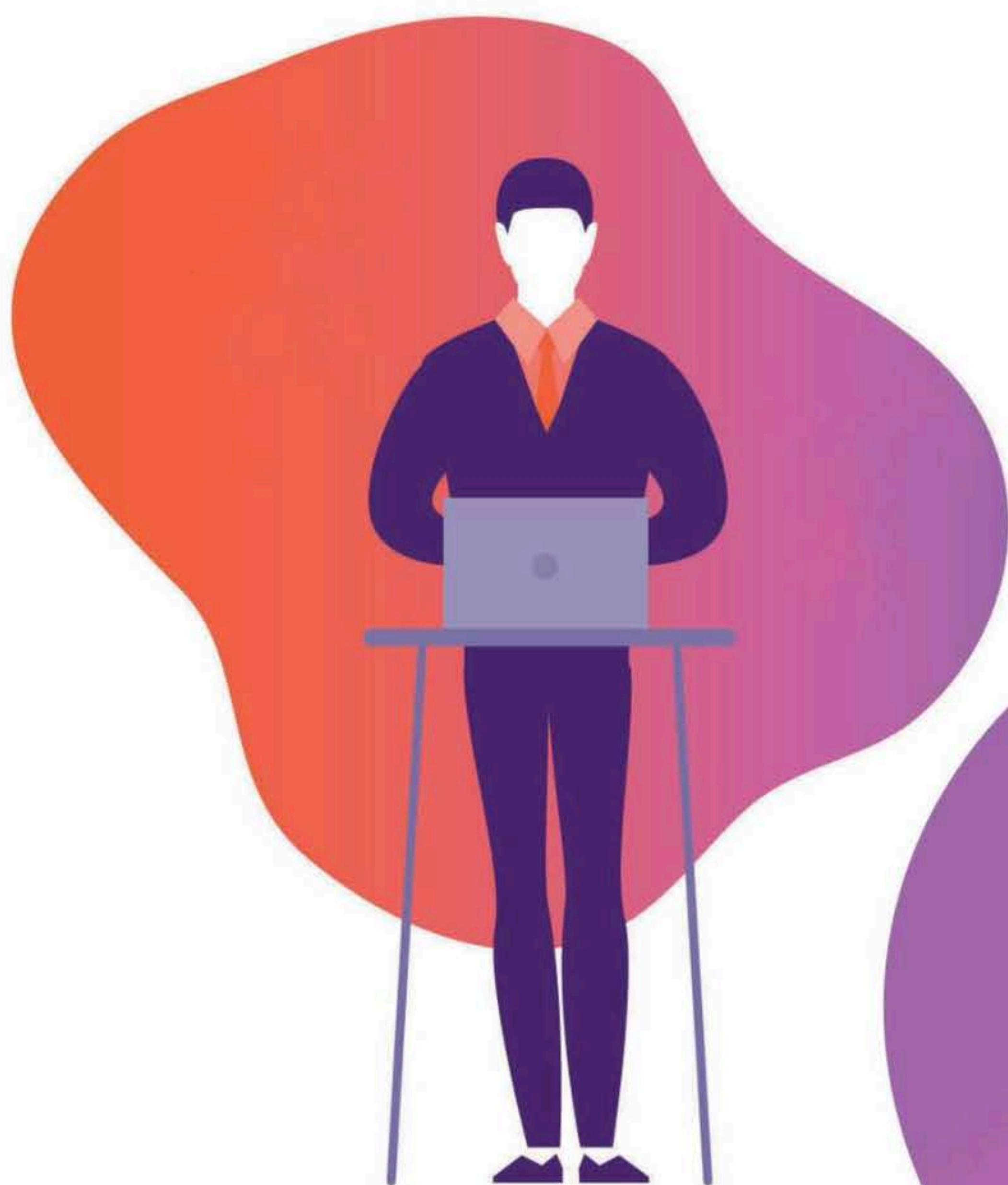
Because all smartphones have a 24/7 connection over mobile data, they get the nod for most people outside the home, which is also why a rapidly growing number of Americans – again, I’m including lots of people in their 50s, 60s, and even 70s here – now have both a smartphone and a tablet.

That was unthinkable a few years ago. As we roll into 2019, though, it’s already become the norm. That’s how fast all of this is changing. Google, the massive leader in online search (with more than 90% of the market), understands this clearly and now prioritizes the mobile experience over desktop.

I’ll put it to you this way: What if I said your funeral home website had to use two website designs and architectures, one of which would be viewed and used by desktop visitors and the other by mobile users. One will be spectacular – beautiful, easy to navigate, easy to use – and the other will be inconvenient and ugly. You must assign one option to your desktop experience and the other to mobile. Which gets the spectacular experience?

The answer today – 10 times out of 10 – must be mobile, as that’s where most people will see and use your funeral home website. We’re already there as we enter 2019, and mobile use will just keep growing.

But that’s not the only way people now interact with



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their world differently, and you need to understand how that will affect your planning for the next several years.

"The Voice" Isn't Just a TV Show

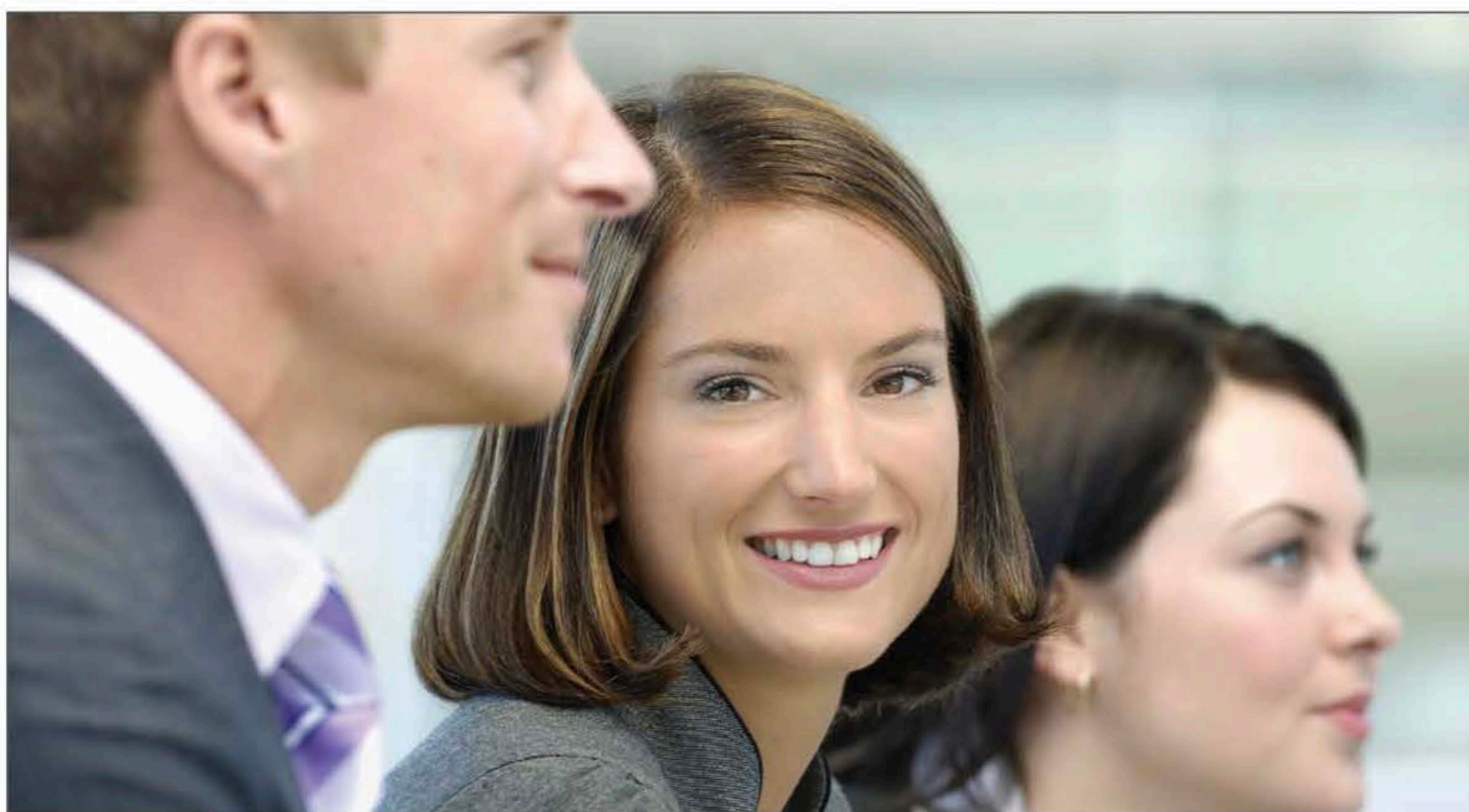
Getting computers to do specific things by just talking to them seemed like a cool idea back when Captain Kirk did it on the original *Star Trek* half a century ago (even if William Shatner did it in the most absurdly overdramatic way imaginable).

It took a while, but this is a reality today. Voice search is a real thing, and much like smartphones reinvented our daily lives, it's transforming how we interact with our

world today. It's also how many people now gain information about products, services and more. Amazon's Echo devices let people immediately order products just by speaking to them using the Alexa intelligent voice search feature.

Today, if you live in an area that gets Amazon Prime Now delivery service (the list keeps growing rapidly) and own an Echo, you can simply tell Amazon you need to purchase baking powder. Within a couple of hours, a box will arrive at your front door with baking powder! No need to run to the store to make those cookies for your nephews and nieces. You literally just solved that issue by speaking to a computer for less than 30 seconds.

The question I suspect is on your mind right now: How on earth does that relate to funeral homes? I'm glad you (probably) asked.



How's Life?

Everything going well? Business and personal lives working together in perfect harmony? We hope so!

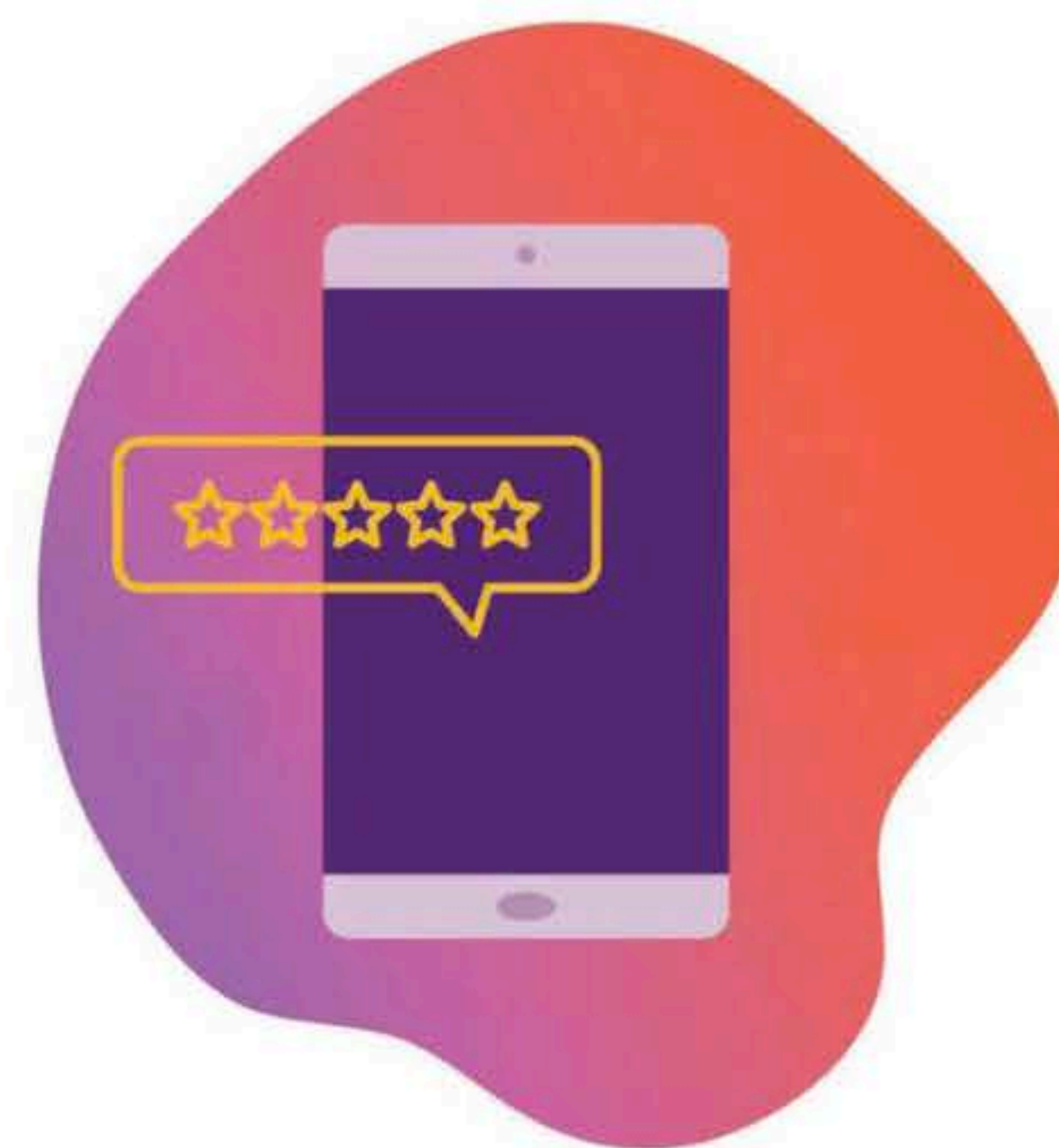
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Think about it: When someone gets the call about an unexpected death of a family member, presuming there's not already a relationship with a funeral home or preplanning in place, he or she needs information immediately. A Google Home device does with Google search what an Echo device does with Amazon shopping. If this family member has a Google Home sitting on her counter, she can literally just say "funeral homes near me" or "burial services in Tucson" or "nearby cremation providers" or whatever – and the device will immediately produce that information. And Apple, of course, is doing the same thing with its Siri voice search. Siri users can now search just by talking to their Apple watches!

In fact, the newest devices – many of which were big sellers in late 2018, especially entering the holiday season – come with display screens. By asking the device for that informa-



As technology becomes more affordable and easier to use, it will permeate every aspect of American culture.

tion, you not only get a voice response but a search results page. Funeral home websites optimized for voice search will most often appear right at the top.

That's not to say Yellow Pages listings and traditional print ads are gone for good, but the writing – the digital writing – is on the wall.

When desktop computers gained traction in American homes, use of print directories took a big hit. Then smartphones and tablets cut into print and desktop. Now voice-controlled devices in the home will cut into everything that came before them. It's human nature to take the most convenient path.

This is how people interact with the world now. It's

night and day from how it was just a decade ago; that's how fast everything is changing.

This is why I feel a great responsibility to communicate this change to independent funeral home owners. This industry is not immune to such massive change, even in rural areas. Technology obviously won't influence life in rural Nebraska as quickly or as completely as it will in southern California, but it is happening. And as companies such as Google, Apple and Amazon keep making this technology more affordable and easier to use, it will permeate every aspect of American culture.

And I'm not talking about sometime far in the future – I mean over the next couple of years.

A Note on Social Media

The way we interact with our world similarly plays a big role in preneed sales as we look toward the future, which fits perfectly since what is prearrangement but making plans for the future?

According to a 2018 Pew Research Center study on social media habits, 3 of 4 adult women in America are active on Facebook. That's relevant because women make more prearrangement decisions than men by a ratio of 6-to-4.

This is why a social media campaign for preneed, particularly on Facebook, is an excellent way to target those decision makers now and in the coming decade.

There is one critical caveat on that point: By the end of 2018, average organic reach on Facebook – defined by the platform as “how many people you can reach for free on Facebook by posting to your page” – had declined to single-digit percentages, particularly for posts from business pages.

This means three things: Businesses need to be more selective about what they post; they should amplify the reach of their posts by including images and video, which automatically magnify reach; and they should consider “boosting” particularly important posts, which simply means you pay Facebook to give those posts more reach.

Social media simply can't be ignored as we look at the big picture for how funeral homes need to plan for changes in how people interact with their world. It's not going to play a big role in at-needs – and most likely never will – but for preneed, it's a critical factor.

Again, if you go back and consider how 24/7 access to the internet is affecting every element of American life, you must think about your preneed goals and how you can incorporate social media into attracting more contracts.

Social media isn't just for kids anymore. It's for moms and dads, grandmas and grandpas. It's the way many of them interact with their families and the world at large, so it's time to include that in your big-picture plan for your firm's future. ☰

Welton Hong is founder of Ring Ring Marketing (funeralhomeprofits.com) and author of Making Your Phone Ring: With Internet Marketing for Funeral Homes.

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