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BUILDING YOUR



Directors should not underestimate the importance of storytelling in generating calls for their firms.

BY WELTON HONG

Last year in May, the worldwide sensation *Game of Thrones* aired its final episode. The finale of the beloved fantasy television show set an all-time ratings record for HBO, delivering a monumental 19.3 million viewers.

Although reviews for that particular episode (and the final season in general) were mixed, no one can contest the fact that *GOT* was a massive hit in the United States and across the world.

For six straight years (before HBO improved its security processes),

GOT was the most pirated show in the world (which is a major compliment, certainly, even if the network wasn't too thrilled about it).

Not everyone thought *GOT* would be such a massive hit when it first premiered. Although it was based on a popular series of novels (*A Song of Ice and Fire* by George R.R. Martin), it was a huge gamble for a television series as it was a sprawling, complex tale with dozens of major characters balancing political gamesmanship and backstabbing (both figurative and literal), along with fantasy elements such as sorcery and dragons.

It became a huge hit, however, due to the power of storytelling. In fact, the show's final episode drilled down – a bit too obviously, I think, but whatever – on this very point.

Anyone who was interested in watching the episode mostly likely has by this point, but just to be safe, consider this paragraph your spoiler warning.

In the finale, the show's most popular character, Tyrion Lannister (played by Peter Dinklage), advises the most powerful people in the land

to select a new ruler. Specifically, he suggests they choose the person who has the best story.

“What unites people? Armies? Gold? Flags?” Tyrion asks rhetorically, then shakes his head. “Stories. There's nothing in the world more powerful than a good story. Nothing can stop it. No enemy can defeat it.”

Now, as a deathcare professional, just how much wisdom can you take from a fictional character in a TV show, even if it is the most popular character in one of the most popular shows? That's a fair question.

But I do think Tyrion makes a fair point since storytelling is a key aspect of being a funeral director. Ultimately, you're helping families tell the final chapter of a life.

No less an authority than marketing superstar Seth Godin recently said, “Marketing is no longer about the stuff you make but about the stories you tell.” While deathcare is a bit different, obviously – a funeral director is helping families, not

marketing products –the core message still applies.

But it's one thing to be great at telling the story of a departed loved one and it's another entirely to be great at telling your *own* story. This is where a lot of funeral home owners and other funeral directors really miss the boat.

YOU JUST CAN'T TELL CONSUMERS THEY SHOULD SELECT YOU – YOU NEED TO SHOW THEM WHY.

One of the best ways to attract new at-need and preneed business is to offer a website that *generates* a lot of traffic and efficiently *converts* that traffic into clientele for your firm. You likely knew that already, but you might not realize how much telling *your* story – as compellingly and comprehensively as you can – makes it easier to both drive traffic and convert visitors.

I'm talking about telling your story through content on your website, although there are additional avenues to pursue, such as social media content and offsite blog posts. But that's second-level stuff, and useful as it can be, I'd rather you start off by concentrating on the basics.

The first step is the simplest. I want you to look over your current funeral home business website and try to put yourself in the shoes of a complete stranger visiting your site for the first time. Then think of yourself as a detective, investigating the following questions:

- What can I learn about this business from the content on the site?
- How long has this funeral home been in business?
- Is this firm respected in the community? Is there a lot of objective evidence, including testimonials, supporting that, or does the site just "claim" that the business is respected?
- Who runs this business? Are there pictures of the owners and staff? What is written about caring for families? Do they seem like caring professionals I can trust to take good care of my family?

- What makes this funeral home different from others in the area; what most clearly distinguishes it? Is there a clear reason why I should choose this particular business?

- Does this funeral home have a particular defining feature? For example, is this the go-to option for environmentally friendly burial and cremation? Wildly alternative ceremonies? Military veterans' services? Fully catered services?

These don't have to be the only questions you ask, but you get the picture. Your funeral home website won't be as effective as possible if you're not *clearly defining who you are* through the story you tell on your site.

It's probably obvious how smart storytelling can help convert website visitors into clientele. Let's start with the less obvious point that telling your story actually helps attract families in need to your website in the first place. That's because the more high-quality, original content you have on your site, the better your search engine optimization will perform. As I've noted before, content is king for ranking at or near the top in your local area for organic (unpaid) search results.

And what better original content to have on your site than your own story? It's obviously original because no other site can claim your individual history. This is a great place to tell visitors all about you, why you enjoy helping families through burial and cremation services, the full history of your business, etc. This is where you can talk about your employees. You can include biographical information that helps visitors feel like they "know" the employees as the real people they are.

By content, of course, I'm not just talking about text. True, words are powerful and you should use as many as you can; the longer your written content, within reason, the more "SEO juice" you'll receive from Google.

However, at the risk of being trite, a picture really is worth a thousand words. The more high-quality im-

ages you have on your site, the better. You absolutely need professional pictures of the owners, other funeral directors and key staff.

I realize that in deathcare, the idea of "images of your business itself" isn't as simple a matter as it might be for most other industries, but it also doesn't have to be a big mystery. You can include professional, respectful pictures of your facilities. The more visitors see of your business on your site, the more comfortable they will be when they visit.

Similarly, I'm a huge proponent of including video on your website. Record a high-quality video of yourself and other key staff talking about your business. Once visitors see and hear you, they will promptly trust you more. Most of this would naturally appear in the "About Us" section of your website, and I encourage you to ensure that that's a content-rich area.

You can also include storytelling elements in other places, such as on your home page (great for testimonials and at least an image of the owners) and a dedicated blog page on the site.

YOU MIGHT NOT REALIZE HOW MUCH TELLING YOUR STORY – AS COMPELLINGLY AND COMPREHENSIVELY AS YOU CAN – MAKES IT EASIER TO BOTH DRIVE TRAFFIC AND CONVERT VISITORS.

When you think you've created enough storytelling content (text, images, video, additional "About Us" copy) to improve your site's SEO and conversions, don't hesitate to make the changes. Meet with your webmaster or the person who handles your site to upgrade immediately. There's no time like the present to start generating more calls!

But don't just stop there. Go back to the questions listed above. Does your business distinguish itself from others? When people visit your site, is there something obvious that makes them think, "This may be the one"?

That's the concept of the unique selling proposition, and if you don't know what yours is, stop everything right now to figure it out. If you can't think of a single quantifiable reason people should choose you over a competitor, few people ever will. You can't just tell them they should select you – you need to show them why.

It goes without saying that a family in an at-need situation must make decisions quickly, so your site needs to tell a story that helps them make that decision immediately. That's all part of your storytelling process.

Testimonials are stories, too, as each person is telling a story of how you helped their family in their time of need. Don't hesitate to ask satisfied families for testimonials and post them on your site.

Online reviews, of course, are also stories and a type of testimonial. Display highly positive reviews on your site, either on a dedicated reviews/testimonials page or on your home page (or both). Every time someone talks about your business, it builds your story.

So, why don't more businesses – and funeral firms in particular – employ these powerful storytelling techniques on their websites?

Earlier in the article, I noted that funeral directors are great at telling other people's stories, but many have trouble finding their voice when talking about themselves. That's just human nature. Ask someone to give a speech at a wedding and he or she will be overflowing with lovely stories about the bride or groom. Ask the same person to talk up his own strengths on a résumé, and he'll be flabbergasted. He'll have such a hard time extolling his own virtues that he'll lose the job purely out of self-sabotaging modesty.

Most people don't love talking about themselves; they don't want to be seen as egotistical or narcissistic. But talking honestly and positively about yourself (and your business) isn't egotistical – it's simply good business.

When I have family members

or friends struggling to put their best foot forward on a résumé, I offer them a trick. "Forget that you're writing about yourself," I say. "Write about yourself like you're a completely different person and you've been hired to say glowing things about you and help you get the job."

It might sound crazy, but it works. This is no time to be modest. You have a great business. You have an excellent staff. You're a wonderful owner. There's no room for false modesty.

Get out there and tell people who you are and what you stand for. Remember what Tyrion Lannister said: "There's nothing in the world more powerful than a good story."

And while Tyrion may be a fictional character, that doesn't make him wrong. ☰

Welton Hong is founder of Ring Ring Marketing (funeralhomeprofits.com) and author of Making Your Phone Ring With Internet Marketing for Funeral Homes (2019).



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