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The Right Tool for the Job

SEARCH
is for
at-needs

**SOCIAL
MEDIA**
is for
preneeds

**Don't
get them
TWISTED**

BY WELTON HONG

Search...



Facebook



Instagram



Twitter

As a funeral professional, you've likely been peppered with misleading information from marketing agencies over the years.

Here's a particular pitch we see a lot lately: "Not getting enough calls? Annual revenue down? Direct cremation firms driving down market prices in your area? Don't worry, we have the solution to all your problems: social media!"

Yes, social media. The cure-all. The salve to heal all wounds. The investment that will triple your revenue in record time, make your family love you more and let you retire as a multimillionaire just 18 months from now.

Okay... maybe the promises haven't gone quite that far, but they are promising a lot. Many essentially call social media a magic button for funeral home success.

Here's the problem: It's not. Not at all.

Social media does not have a significant effect on increasing at-need calls in the short term and, even in the long term, it's far from being the most effective tool.

Social media is much more of a complementary tool when it comes to at-needs.

But before I go any further, I want to be very clear that social media is an important tool for funeral homes. I'm not trying to deter anyone from social media investment. That said, I think it's critical to set proper expectations. Social media gets the job done – assuming that the job isn't rapidly increasing at-need calls.

Similarly, improving your visibility on search engine results pages (SERPs) through organic search engine optimization (SEO) and pay-per-click (PPC) advertising is extremely effective – if your top priority isn't growing your preplanning business.

To make it easy, I put it like this: Search is for at-needs; social media is for preneeds.

That might sound overly simplistic, and it should, because it is. But it's still true overall.

Several different online marketing techniques provide excellent results for rapidly growing at-needs, but focusing on search is the most effective, while social media has a fraction of the same effect.

Similarly, you can generate more funeral preplanning contracts a number of ways, but social media is one of the best tools for doing so with great ROI, whereas search plays less of a role.

With that said, if you do a spectacular job of improving your funeral home's visibility in local search results, will you see some residual effect in preneed revenue? Of course you will.

And if you have a multifaceted social media campaign to brand your funeral home and promote preneed on several major platforms, will some of that glow shine on your at-need business? Definitely.

But that's not the big takeaway here. I want you to understand which tool works best for the intended result. Your marketing budget is limited, and you need to invest those funds in the areas you've labeled as top priorities.

Many think social media is a magic success button. Here's the problem: It's not.

I don't think a single owner has ever thought, "I want to grow our at-need and preneed business by exactly the same amount at the same time." But if that's your situation, great: Allocate 50% of your marketing budget to strengthening your search visibility (through organic SEO and paid search advertising) and the other 50% to social media.

As long as you're working with a good marketing partner or have a truly wonderful in-house team, you'll see improvements in both at-needs and preneeds. (The latter will take a lot longer to kick in, as I'll note later.)

If your funeral home is like most medium-size independent firms, however, then it's more likely you want to prioritize increasing your at-need calls substantially. You might like to improve preneeds as best you can, but that's probably not a higher priority than at-needs. In that case, it would be ridiculous to invest 50% of your budget in social media. Instead, you need a heavy focus on search visibility to rapidly grow at-need calls.

UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENCES

I'm sure you're already aware that ranking better in local search results is important to your continued success, so I won't spend a lot of time belaboring the point here.

Today, search visibility is just as important for small businesses as it's been at any point in the history of the internet. One could argue it's even more important, given how the internet has infiltrated a variety of devices we use daily, even hourly. We've gone from accessing the internet on desktop computers, to tablets and smartphones, and now even smartwatches and smart speakers. The "my refrigerator's also a networked computer" concept isn't just a thing of the future – it's reality.

So, yes, unless your firm literally has more at-need calls than it can handle (congratulations, by the way), you absolutely must focus on visibility in search, particularly when competitors are involved.

Certain analysts have predicted the death of SEO for almost a decade, yet it's still doing just fine in

2020. One of the very best ways to garner at-need calls over your competitors is to be well represented in searches for burial and cremation services in your area.

Additionally, pay-per-click ads play a huge role in search visibility and at-need generation. They have spectacular ROI, take effect immediately (unlike the slower process of improving SEO) and get your phone ringing with new business ASAP.

You might be wondering: If that's all true, then why should funeral homes even bother with social media? Well, one obvious answer (assuming you've been reading this article from the beginning) is that investing in social media will help you grow preneed business. To generate preneeds, you need strong branding in your area. Social media is one of the best methods by which to grow your prominence as a respected expert on local burial and cremation services.

Also, a well-executed social media campaign lets you position yourself as an educational asset in your community. You can post content about all sorts of issues that interest the preneed target demographic (generally 50 years or older and slightly more female than male). You can post about healthcare, caregiving, active retirement, vacationing, estate planning, etc.

That's right: A funeral home's social media content doesn't have to be exclusively about death care. Honestly, death and directly related issues should only be a tiny fraction of your content.

You need a balance of short- and long-term strategies and tools that complement each other.

Speaking of which, the actual sales part should only be a fraction of your posts as well. If you want to grow a following on social media, you can't do that by regularly selling to your audience. Instead, you should build up authority and trust over time by serving readers with informative posts. Only after you've accomplished that should you sprinkle in an occasional post about preplanning considerations, for example.

Does it sound like that takes a while to kick in? Well, that's true. But social media is very import-

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ant to your future, and just like preplanning contracts, we're looking at the future much more than the present.

If you want the best formula for success in 2020 and beyond, employ both tools that work quickly and those that take root to bloom in the future. It's rapidly growing at-need calls while also improving preneed generation over time.

Social media should play a role in your digital marketing, but you need to understand how it works and when you can expect it to bear fruit.

YES, THERE ARE OTHER IMPORTANT TOOLS

And finally, I certainly don't want to leave anyone with the impression that the only way to grow at-needs and preneeds requires focusing on search and

social media, respectively. A successful digital marketing plan involves lots of other aspects, including online reputation, website conversion effectiveness, remarketing, hyper-geotargeting, email marketing and so on.

When you work with a full-stack marketing agency that offers expertise in many different techniques, you can develop a custom plan that fits your budget and your goals. You're no longer putting all your eggs in one basket and simply hoping for the best.

That's why it's important that you learn as much as you can about how digital marketing is being employed now. The more you know, the less chance there is that you'll be sweet-talked by some smooth salesperson claiming to have the single "wonder cure" for your business (as long as you write a fat check and agree to be locked in for a full year or more).

It doesn't work that way. To be effective in digital marketing, you have to feel comfortable using several techniques and understand that some work much faster than others. You need a balance of short-term and long-term strategies. You need tools that complement one another.

You also need to have proper expectations – not higher than they should be but not lower, either. If you've been investing in a particular strategy for a while and you're not seeing even the minimum return on investment you were promised, then it's time to have a firm talk with your marketing partner.

But you can only do that if you've gained a solid understanding of online marketing and how it works. "Search is for at-needs; social media is for preneeds" is just a starting point. Keep broadening your knowledge to really take advantage of funeral home marketing in the digital age. ☰

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



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