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OCTOBER 2020

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OCTOBER 20-22

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THE ESSENTIALS

A digital marketing compendium for funeral homes.

BY WELTON HONG

While funeral homes certainly continue to face a big challenge from the rise in the cremation rate (and its corresponding negative correlation on average call revenue), in a more universal sense, the industry's future looks bright.

According to a recent market research report by TechNavio, the global funeral homes market is projected to have a compound annual growth rate of 4.89% between 2019 and 2023. (Obviously, that's related to the steadily increasing mortality rate of the baby boomer generation over the next several years.)

Thus, to be sure you're capitalizing on every possible opportunity to grow your death-care business, strategic marketing is crucial. And while local word of mouth still plays a role, digital marketing is the name of the game in our cyber-driven marketplace when it comes to attracting potential clients.

Most Americans spend almost a full 24 hours each week online, even searching for local businesses. In fact, nearly a third won't even consider using a business' services if it doesn't have a legitimate, credible website.

But your online presence does not stop at the homepage. For acute needs like funeral services, where decisions are made quickly and quality matters deeply, online reviews are critical.

AS WITH MOST KINDS OF DIGITAL MARKETING, THE BEST STRATEGY IS TO DIVERSIFY.

Finally, using social media platforms effectively can serve as a high-impact digital marketing tool for your funeral home. Nearly 80% of Americans use social media on a regular basis, making it a perfect way to raise your firm's profile and reach out to potential

clients proactively (especially for preplanning services).

From improving your online reputation to dominating Google searches, you don't have to be afraid of the digital marketing landscape. These techniques let you take control of your business' future and attract more satisfied clients.

Improving Local Search Ranking

In the past, local families might have learned about your funeral home through churches, community organizations, local directories, etc. Some might even have simply spotted your business on Main Street, allowing you to grow your visibility organically. And of course, virtually every funeral home advertised its services in the now obsolete Yellow Pages.

But today, much of that visibility takes place online. In fact, 97% of Americans say they search online even for local businesses, with most of them using search engines like Google (the massive search market leader) to do so. That makes driving organic traffic by improving your SEO (search engine optimization) rankings an important first step

in growing your business.

You needn't become an SEO expert to improve your firm's rankings in Google. Using a digital marketing tool such as Google Analytics, you can research keywords your clients might search for ("cremation services in Atlanta," "funeral planning in Butte") and incorporate them into your blog or other website content. You can also research SEO link-building techniques to gradually generate more traffic to your website.

Know, though, that SEO is a long game. The goal is that potential clients searching for funeral homes in your area will start to see your business first in search listings. Remember to use localized terms (geo-modifiers), such as the name of your city, town or region, to make sure your neighbors can find you. This is especially true for funeral homes often used by hyper-local clients conducting "near me" searches.

THINK OF YOUR MOBILE-RESPONSIVE, EASY-TO-NAVIGATE SITE AS YOUR FIRST WAY TO SHOW POTENTIAL CLIENTS YOU CARE ABOUT PROVIDING QUALITY SERVICE.

Pay-per-click ads show up above organic Google search results. While SEO involves more research and is beneficial over the long term, PPC search engine ads get you calls almost immediately. The downside, of course, is that PPC campaigns cost money.

Using a service such as Google Ads, you can launch a few keyword-specific campaigns centered around your local area. As your PPC ad campaign progresses, use Google Ads to monitor how much traffic you've generated with each key phrase.

As with most kinds of digital marketing, the best strategy is to diversify. Use a two-pronged ap-

proach to market your funeral home with both SEO traffic-building techniques and PPC ads.

More Website Conversions

The importance of an effective website for digital marketing for your funeral home is clear. Not only is it a place for families to learn how to get in touch with you, it's your firm's calling card, the first step in building what is hoped will be a strong relationship. But how can you ensure that website visitors turn into clients?

The first step is to keep visitors on your site as long as you can. Most look at a given site for less than 15 seconds, meaning you have a very short amount of time for your content to leave a big impression. If the site isn't optimized for readability or is hard to navigate, a visitor is likely to leave and find services elsewhere.

To ensure that your website is optimized to convert visitors into clientele, craft plenty of original content. Each landing page should have plenty of original, relevant content for visitors to dig into. This is especially true for the About Us page, where you have the opportunity to show your expertise in the funeral home industry and tell your business' story.

Second, optimize your site for mobile use. If it is mobile responsive, meaning it shows up perfectly for smartphone and tablet users, just as it would on a laptop, Google will reward your website by elevating it in search rankings. In addition, potential clients will be easily frustrated if they can't pull up your site easily on their phone. Think of your mobile-responsive, easy-to-navigate site as your first way to show potential clients you care about providing quality service.

Strengthening Online Reviews and Your Reputation

If you think online reviews of your funeral home don't matter,

think again. Nearly 91% of clients read online reviews on platforms such as Yelp, Google and Facebook when making decisions about using a business' services. And more than 80% trust an online review from a prior client even more than a friend or family member's opinion.

Building an online reputation isn't just about your business' website. It's also important to accumulate reviews on a variety of platforms. Positive reviews will ensure that potential clients see your funeral home as a flagship local business with a solid reputation and good relationship with the surrounding community.

In addition, it's important not only to have positive reviews but to have lots of them, which make you appear credible, and more positive reviews from satisfied clients can help mitigate the effects of an occasional negative one.

If you do receive a negative review and decide to respond, be sure to approach the reviewer with compassion and professionalism. Arguing publicly with a former client will have more of a downside than a negative review ever could.

Using Social Media Effectively

Funeral homes can market their services directly with social media platforms such as Facebook or Twitter in several key ways. First, Facebook or Twitter can serve as a place to advertise your funeral home's blog content. While your business' website might provide users the key information they're looking for, such as location, services, prices and contact info, an accompanying blog is your place to showcase your firm's expertise.

For example, blog topics could focus on the why, when and how of preplanning a funeral, as well as related topics such as end-of-life care and grief management. Post these blogs to your chosen

social media platform with relevant hashtags to drive more traffic to your site.

You can also employ social media to involve yourself and your firm in the community – even more than you already do. I'm sure you participate in various local charity events, philanthropic endeavors, community festivals, etc. When you do, post photos on social media. Relevant holi-

days, such as Memorial Day, Veterans' Day and the winter holiday season, also provide a chance for you to post messages of support for family members and friends.

And due to the decline of many printed community newspapers, Facebook is also becoming a popular place for family members to post obituaries and messages of love and healing during times of loss. This means your social me-

dia page can be a place for the community to support the families you serve.

At all times, it's absolutely essential to remain positive and compassionate on social media, establishing your funeral home as a source of comfort and quality service during a difficult time.

Mastering Digital Marketing

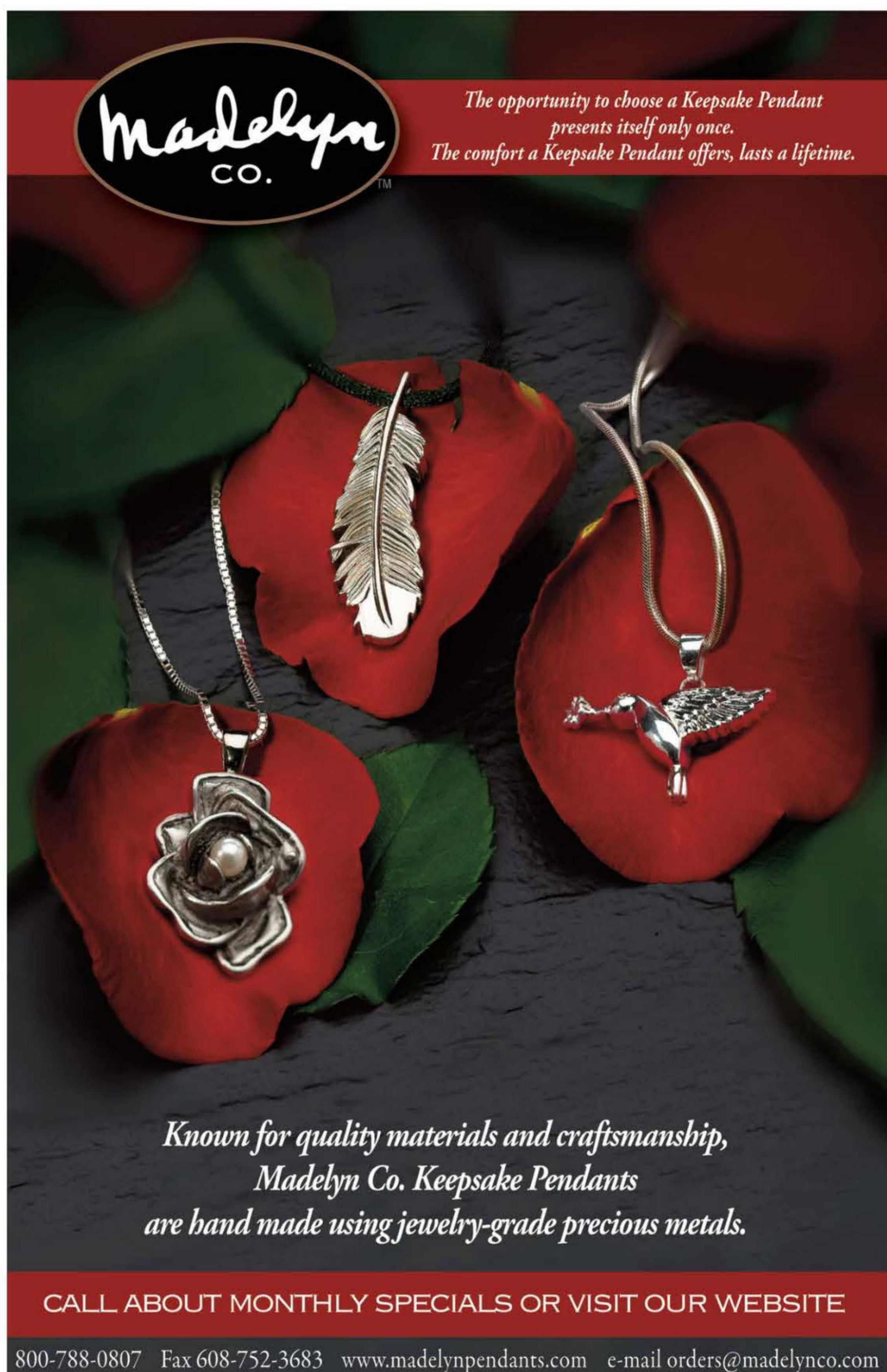
Although internet marketing can seem overwhelming if you're not accustomed to it, a bit of strategy can go a long way. So, instead of trying to do everything all at once, home in on one piece of the puzzle at a time with an eye toward your business' vision for the future.

While your long-term goals should be to build organic online traffic, connect with the public and improve your online reputation, you can start just by making small adjustments to your existing website to improve it. Focus on building one digital marketing strategy at a time for optimal growth.

Also remember that many aspects of digital marketing take time to flourish. Improving your content for search engine optimization won't drive major traffic in a day, but stay the course for nine months and you'll be singing a different tune. If your digital marketing campaigns begin to take off, you can always hire a professional to build your content library and manage your social media channels in the future.

Finally, stay flexible. Monitor pay-per-click campaigns and social media responses regularly and don't be afraid to modify or change your strategy if it's not working after several months of consistent effort. ☰

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



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