

Online Reputation's Critical Role for Cemeteries

By Welton Hong

Online reputation is one of the most overlooked, yet one of the most critical, tools for effectively marketing your cemetery in 2021.

More people now get recommendations from the internet than they do from word of mouth or other local relationships. In fact, recent surveys find that most people now trust online reviews even more than personal word of mouth!

No cemetery can thrive in this digital age—either during a (thankfully now waning) pandemic or “normal times”—without a great online reputation.

A pristine reputation conveys credibility, trustworthiness, dependability, and attention to detail. It's hard to imagine that anyone, presuming they had other options, would select a cemetery that lacked a stellar reputation for the final resting place of their loved one.

And frankly, your reputation is more critical than ever as we continue to deal with the remnants of the COVID-19 health crisis. Any business that conveys trustworthiness and security has a strong upper hand over competitors that do not, and that's truer for cemeteries than it is in most other industries.

A large quantity of positive reviews conveys this trustworthiness, letting people know at a glance that they can expect a positive experience with your cemetery.

So if you're still not making a point of generating positive reviews, don't wait another second. It might not seem like the most important concern given everything that's going on right now, but it really is. Here are the answers to a few questions you might have:

Q: Is it rude to ask grieving families for reviews?

A: Not at all, although I completely understand why many cemetery owners and staff worry about this.

Of course you never want to seem focused on your own needs when helping families who recently lost a loved one. But that doesn't mean you must avoid the topic of reviews.

The reality is that independent small businesses must generate positive reviews to succeed in the digital age—and that includes your cemetery. By providing you a positive review, they're helping you continue to be a benefit to your community.

Granted, you face a slightly higher “degree of difficulty” than other business owners do in soliciting reviews. If you own an auto repair shop, there's nothing easier than asking a patron for a review; it's quite different to make the same inquiry of a family member following services.

But it's not as different as it might seem. You just have to be much more thoughtful and tactful in asking for reviews than, for example, the auto repair shop owner. Tact is a key aspect of deathcare, of course, so that shouldn't be too hard.

Q: How should my staff and I ask for reviews?

A: After providing services, get a feel for the particular situation. If the family representative you're working with seems greatly satisfied and likely receptive to providing a review, you might want to (delicately) broach the subject right away.

Most often, it's better to inquire after a bit of time has passed, but that doesn't mean you should let the grass grow under your feet. Presuming that you have some type of aftercare process that includes calls and/or emails, you can incorporate a mild review solicitation in those.

There are also a variety of review solicitation software applications for this purpose. They're customizable for deathcare businesses such as cemeteries, so you can carefully craft the language to engage families in a considerate way.

Q: What should we do about negative reviews?

A: Honestly, the answer to that covers a whole lot of territory—more than I have room to address here in proper detail, but here are the basics:

Reputation monitoring: This type of service notifies you of all reviews of your cemetery across the internet in real time, and it's an absolute must. You must be able to respond to negative reviews (and other client concerns) as quickly as possible. Even a handful of bad reviews can do extraordinary damage to your cemetery's reputation!

Dealing with negative reviews: You can often mitigate the damage from negative reviews by responding to them appropriately. If you handle it right, the reviewer could update the review (from negative to positive) or remove it entirely. Always be polite and professional in responding. Your goal is to understand why the reviewer had concerns and respond empathetically.

Handling fake reviews: Some negative reviews are legitimate (posted by actual clients), whereas others are fake (posted by trolls, sneaky competitors, or other shady interests).

You sometimes can get fake reviews removed by reaching out to the particular platform (such as Google, Facebook, or Yelp). Even if you can't, you can often mitigate the damage by making a public comment that you don't have any record of working with the reviewer.

That's just the tip of the iceberg regarding negative reviews, but it gives you a place to start.



The Big Picture

As Benjamin Franklin once said, “It takes many good deeds to build a good reputation, and only one bad one to lose it.”

It’s safe to assume that Franklin, for all his wisdom, couldn’t have imagined a time when a business’s reputation could be so easily shattered. But that’s the truth in this digital age. For all the advantages we gain from the internet, its speed and force demand a consistent focus on how your cemetery is perceived.

If you’re still not sure whether online reputation management matters, consider a few more key statistics:

- More than 85 percent of consumers say negative reviews impact their buying decisions.
- Reviews are critically important as your target deathcare audience moves from Boomer and Gen X to younger generations; people age 18 to 34 trust online reviews as if they were personal recommendations from friends.
- Close to 90 percent of consumers look for and read a business’s responses to reviews.
- Consumers want to engage exclusively with firms that have at least a 3.3-star rating—and you can round up that number considerably for cemeteries.

Ultimately, the most important thing is that you keep an open mind about actively generating more positive reviews for your cemetery. For many deathcare professionals, that’s not an easy transition to make, but you’ll find it’s an incredibly beneficial one.

Your reputation is critical to defining your cemetery at a time when families are desperate for trustworthy providers, and it will remain a core element of your business once this crisis has passed. ♦

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Economic Update from Cobleskill

By John Fox, CFA, *Chief Executive Officer*

Fenimore Asset Management (manager of the FAM Funds)

Last year at this time, our economy was caught off guard by a pandemic few of us saw coming.

This year, I think what is coming is pretty clear — and it is bright. Our team believes that the U.S. is heading into a strong economic recovery.

Let’s put 2020 in our rearview mirror and look at what is before us:

- Projections are that we will have enough vaccine for every American adult by mid-year.
- We are expecting the economy to fully reopen and people to resume out-of-home activities. That will be great news for airlines, hotels, restaurants, sports venues, theaters, and other hospitality businesses — and for their employees, who account for about 40% of the jobs lost over the past year.
- People have money to spend. Many of those fortunate to have continued working the past 12 months have socked a good chunk of their paychecks away for a sunnier day. A recent report from the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis found that Americans have more than \$2 trillion in savings — nearly three times what we had just one year ago.
- Interest rates have started to creep up off historical lows, but the housing industry is still soaring and driving spin-off spending. This includes realtors, attorneys, title companies, lumber manufacturers, appliance makers, and everyone else who has a hand in building and equipping a new home. It also means more people back to work.
- Virtually every company that I have spoken to in recent weeks, including those we own and those we do not, is projecting 2021 growth that could achieve record-high profits, sales, and dividends. This, in turn, should create an economy where everyone who wants a job can find one.

Are there risks? Of course. It will be some time before we know the true cost consequences of the federal stimulus spending, including whether it leads to a period of inflation and higher interest rates. We will keep these things in our peripheral vision, but our focus is on the positive signs we see ahead.

As always, Fenimore Asset Management will continue to put our confidence only in businesses that meet our stringent quality criteria. We believe in owning shares in businesses that can maximize their growth opportunities, but also have the financial strength and intellectual capital to weather the types of challenges we have been through over the past 12 months.

Our goal every day is to protect and grow your wealth over the long term while providing service that is steeped in responsiveness, transparency, and integrity. We hope that you found this to be true during the very trying past year and we look forward to being alongside you for what we expect to be a much more enjoyable 2021. ♦