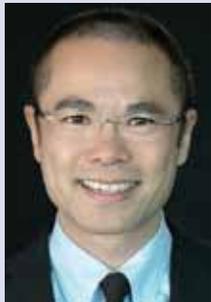


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ICCFA Magazine spotlight



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MARKETING & TECHNOLOGY

Smartphones have made it easier for funeral home, cemetery and crematory owners to keep on top of their businesses at all hours, no matter where they are. So it should come as no surprise to them that death-care professionals need to adjust their marketing to deal with the explosive growth of mobile technology.

What the mobile revolution means for your crematory, funeral home or cemetery

One of my most entertaining conversations in recent memory was with a funeral director about the importance of mobile marketing. If you'll forgive a touch of paraphrasing, I'll relate it (to the best of my recollection) now.

The funeral director and I were at a death-care industry event, having a perfectly pleasant conversation, although he seemed a bit skeptical as I ran through the key facts:

- More than half of all Americans who access the internet now do so on a mobile device.
- Mobile traffic now exceeds desktop traffic.
- Google's new mobile-first indexing initiative means it now primarily uses the mobile version of your website to determine your site's organic and local search rankings.

Persuasive as they should have been, my points weren't entirely sinking in, and I realized why: The gentleman was a bit distracted. The smartphone in his hand kept chirping with notifications—a text message here, an email notification there. Every time, he dutifully checked it. He even took a moment to pull up his funeral home website so I could take a look.

When I regained his attention, I said: "I don't mean to be rude, but would you mind if I asked your age?"

He looked a bit confused. "I'm 61."

"And how often do you have your phone with you?" I asked.

He shrugged, then chuckled. He got it. "I'm on it all the time."

I pushed a little further: "And when you need information, like a restaurant when you're traveling, or if you need an emergency car repair..."

"I look it up on my phone," he said.

"Even when you're home? Or do you use a desktop?"

"Usually my phone," he said.

I didn't have to do any more convincing. He now understood the importance of mobile marketing.

Mobile device use is skyrocketing across all demographics

Over the past couple of years, I've tried to help death-care professionals understand the importance of modern online marketing as simply as possible.

We're now several years into the digital age, and as more people search for services online, "online marketing" essentially could just be called "marketing." If you're not promoting your business on the internet, you're not really promoting your business.

I'm not saying offline marketing is extinct. In an industry as traditional as death care, offline advertising and promotion remain important aspects of a comprehensive marketing plan. However, offline media continues to cede ground as more people turn to the internet for information on every type of service. In 2018, that definitely includes burial and cremation products and services.

Meanwhile, online search itself has radically changed over the past few years, because the personal computer has evolved



The mobile versions of the websites for Habegger (above) and Island (below) funeral services are easy to read on a smartphone and make their “click to call” functions obvious.



If Google finds that your website doesn't look good and operate well on a smartphone or tablet, your ranking will sink. It no longer cares so much whether your site looks and works amazingly well on a desktop computer. If it's a dud on mobile devices, you're in big trouble.

from a large object that sits on your desk into a tiny, incredibly powerful device that rests in the palm of your hand.

We continue to call it a “phone,” and it's certainly still used as a telephone, but for many Americans, making voice calls is just one of many things they do with these devices. Particularly among younger generations—but increasingly for older ones as well—it's really their computer.

According to a late 2017 study by Asurion, Americans check their phone on average once every 12 minutes. The average person, per the study, rarely goes more than 10 minutes without checking his or her phone.

When respondents were asked whether making a call was the main purpose of a phone, almost half (49 percent) said no.

You might think such behavior is limited to teenagers or young adults—hardly key demographics in this business—but that simply isn't true.

Per a January 2018 Pew Research Center study, 92 percent of millennials own and regularly use a smartphone. That's not too surprising, nor is the fact that 85 percent of Gen Xers (ages 38 to 53) do so, as well.

However, as was the case with the funeral director I chatted with, more than two-thirds (67 percent) of baby boomers (ages 54 to 72) also own and regularly use a smartphone, per the Pew study. And while adoption among the silent generation (ages 73 to 90) is unsurprisingly much lower, it's still a significant 30 percent.

While smartphones have become essentially ubiquitous, consumers have rapidly taken to tablet computers, which are also defined as mobile devices, as well. Close to two-thirds (64 percent) of Gen Xers own a tablet, as do more than 52 percent of both millennials and boomers. Also worth considering: A majority (57 percent) of boomers use social media.

Searching for death-care services on mobile devices

Mobile devices, and in particular, smartphones, make it incredibly easy to search

for any type of service, anytime, anywhere. So that's exactly what's happening.

Per a Statista study, in the final quarter of 2016, mobile searches finally overtook desktop ones, accounting for 51 percent of organic search engine visits. That percentage remained fairly consistent (within a couple of percentage points) over 2017, but in the first quarter of 2018, it leaped to 64 percent.

The writing's on the wall: Online search is a predominantly mobile endeavor now, and its dominance will only magnify going forward.

But do people search for death-care services, in particular, on mobile devices? Absolutely. In the third quarter of 2017, more than half (56 percent) of funeral and bereavement searches came from mobile devices. Searches for burials and cremations grew 13 percent in the third quarter of 2017 compared to the same quarter in 2016.

One reason should be fairly obvious: If a family member unexpectedly dies and there's no preplanning in place, most people will search for a death-care provider immediately.

The easiest way to do that, especially if you're not at home (e.g., at a hospital) is on your smartphone. You have a 24/7 connection to the internet right there in your hand, pocket or bag. You need information on local burial or cremation services right now.

That's a primary reason why focusing on a mobile presence is imperative to generating more at-need cases. The firms that have great organic rankings (and appear in Google's “three-pack” of featured businesses) for that location will capture those calls.

And because smartphones take advantage of “call-to-click” technology, a family member can be on the phone with a provider with just a single touch.

Mobile marketing starts with your website

Several highly effective, cost-effective tools are available to generate calls from mobile users, but none of them matter if

Your website must be designed so that a potential client can call you with a single tap on the phone. The same is true for mobile advertising. A grieving family member doesn't want to go through a complex process to reach you immediately following a loved one's passing.

your website isn't up to snuff.

Quite simply, the mobile version of your website is now more important than the desktop version. As I noted, mobile searches are more prevalent than desktop searches, so it makes sense to prioritize mobile. But you also need to focus on mobile searches because that's what Google does now.

Just this year, Google fully adopted a "mobile-first index," which is exactly what it sounds like: When determining how to rank your website in organic searches and the "three-pack" for local searches, it's going to start with your site's mobile version, not the desktop version.

In other words, if Google finds that your website doesn't look good and operate well on a smartphone or tablet, your ranking will sink. It no longer cares so much whether your site looks and works amazingly well on a desktop computer. If it's a dud on mobile devices, you're in big trouble.

Keep in mind that Google massively dominates market share in organic search: Over 86 percent of U.S. internet searches are on Google, compared to runner-up Bing (less than 8 percent) and third-place Yahoo (less than 4 percent).

Even today, I still come across lots of independent cemetery and funeral home websites that do not display or operate well on mobile devices. Every site must be optimized for mobile use.

Two funeral home sites you can look up on your mobile device to see what good ones look like are:

www.theislandfuneralhome.com/

www.habeggerfuneralservices.com/

Cool tools for mobile marketing

Yes, mobile marketing can be cool. Savvy developers have come up with some fascinating ways to take advantage of the mobile revolution, several of which can work wonders for death-care firms. These include:

Geotargeting: Every smartphone comes with location technology, constantly updating where that phone is in the world.

With geotargeting, you can create a campaign that reaches out selectively to individuals in a specific area. Given that at-need clientele almost always seek a nearby provider, you can target these people based on their proximity to you.

Targeted ads: Another option is to create paid advertisements on search engines (such as Google) to target very specific locations. When someone in the defined area searches for "funeral services," "cremation," "cemetery" or similar terms, your ad will be positioned to immediately catch the searcher's eye.

Click-to-call: I mentioned this earlier, but it's important enough to reiterate. Your website must be designed so that a

potential client can call you with a single tap on the phone.

The same is true for mobile advertising. A grieving family member doesn't want to go through a complex process to reach you immediately following a loved one's passing. Click-to-call makes it incredibly easy.

Mobile isn't just the future —it's the present

I realize it's not easy to adjust to the mobile revolution. Many death-care professionals are still just warming up to online marketing in general, and now they're being told the desktop experience is on the way out, so it's time to focus on mobile devices.

Regardless, it's imperative that they immediately start putting mobile first. That's what potential clients are doing. That's what Google is doing.

It's a mobile world now, one being adopted by baby boomers almost as much as by those in younger demographics.

Mobile marketing isn't a passing fad or something to consider for the future. Consider that in 2004, according to Statista, over 92 percent of households had a landline. Today, it's fewer than 44 percent.

Just as mobile phones are making landlines irrelevant, smartphones are doing the same to desktop computers. The time to act is now. 