



## Generating Five-Star Customer Reviews on Google Why they're critically important in generating at-need calls

By Welton Hong

*Where do I start?*

That's the question I hear all the time from funeral home owners and other death-care professionals looking to generate more at-need calls through digital marketing.

They hear about so many strategies and techniques: re-marketing, geofencing, push notifications, SEO, social media marketing, YouTube advertising, etc.

What works? What doesn't work? What's a good use of my money? Where do I start? My answer usually surprises them. It's not a shiny new object. It's not some expensive new strategy; in fact, it doesn't require any money whatsoever. It's incredibly simple: Online reviews.

That's the secret. That's where it all starts. Before you do anything else, make sure you have great reviews (particularly on Google), and a whole lot of them. There's no point to doing anything else until you've locked that down.

At my firm, Ring Ring Marketing, online reviews sit right at the center of what we call the "At-Needs Bullseye," which is represented by an archery target. We tell funeral clients that if they want more (and better!) at-need calls, just start from the center and work your way

*(con't on page 3)*

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### Need to Hire a Funeral Director or Intern? Get Help at Spring Job Fair

Here's a great opportunity for funeral homes to find that perfect employee: Throughout the months of March and April, the Pittsburgh Institute of Mortuary Science is holding in-person and virtual job fairs.

"In recent weeks, we have received over 40 requests for help by funeral homes in Pennsylvania and several neighboring states," PIMS Dean Michael Burns said. "These funeral homes are searching for interns and directors for immediate placement."

Here's how funeral homes can get involved in the job fair:

**In person:** PIMS will hold in-person job fairs at the school on four Wednesdays (March 9, 16, 23 and 30), when any funeral home employer can come and speak about their firm and conduct interviews for intern and funeral director candidates. In an auditorium, employers will have two-to-three minutes to talk to PIMS students and alumni in attendance about their business and what they are looking for in an employee. These presentations, which will be filmed and added to the virtual job fair in April, will be followed by individual 10-minute interviews with the job candidates. Interested funeral homes can download an application here: [bit.ly/PIMSApplication](https://bit.ly/PIMSApplication). **Deadline: Feb. 28.**

**Virtual:** In April, PIMS will facilitate a virtual job fair for any interested funeral home in the U.S. and Canada. You must submit a five-minute video (MP4) – showcasing your business (include location, history, call volume, best way for candidates to contact, etc.) – for the candidates to review on the PIMS website; email to [info@pims.edu](mailto:info@pims.edu) with "JOB FAIR" marked in the subject line (you can also upload to YouTube and email the link). **Deadline: March 20.**

To find out more about the PIMS job fair, click here: [bit.ly/PIMSjobfair](https://bit.ly/PIMSjobfair).

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**Letter From the Editor**

This week, we are back to basics, with information on how funeral homes can generate more at-need calls, hire tough-to-find employees and hear best practices from industry funeral insiders:



**Customer reviews:** Looking to generate more at-need calls? Find out from Welton Hong, founder and CEO of Ring Ring Marketing, why funeral homes need to make sure they have great customer reviews (particularly on Google) before they spend money on any other digital marketing. Read more in the cover story, “Generating Five-Star Customer Reviews on Google.”

**Spring job fair:** Need to hire an intern or funeral director? Throughout March and April, the Pittsburgh Institute of Mortuary Science is holding in-person and virtual job fairs. The job fair is open to all funeral homes in the U.S. or Canada. Find out how to take part virtually if you cannot get to the PIMS campus, on page 1.

**New industry podcast:** Funeral industry veterans – and Funeral Results Marketing’s co-owners Robin Heppell and Jake Johnson – have teamed up to launch a new weekly podcast called Funeral X. Read more on page 3.

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**This Issue’s Contributor**



Welton Hong, founder and CEO of Ring Ring Marketing ([www.ringringmarketing.com](http://www.ringringmarketing.com)) and author of “Making Your Phone Ring with Internet Marketing,” wrote the cover story, “Generating Five-Star Customer Reviews on Google.”

# what's trending

## Funeral Industry Marketing Veterans Launch New Podcast

Listen to this: Funeral industry veterans – and Funeral Results Marketing's co-owners Robin Heppell and Jake Johnson – have teamed up to launch Funeral X, a new weekly podcast to help “funeral professionals think outside the box.”



Heppell and Johnson have been business partners in the digital marketing agency for just over a year but have been friends and colleagues for almost a decade. They've spent nearly their entire lives working in funeral service – from running funeral homes and making funeral arrangements to working as consultants on the business side.

Over the past year, “our regular meetings would turn into discussions and stories of how we have come to this point, what were the situations that made us make certain decisions and what are our philosophies regarding funeral service,” said Johnson, who is president and chief executive officer of Johnson Consulting Group. “We felt that it would be beneficial for our teams to understand the stories and that other funeral professionals may like to listen in on those stories as well.”

Some recent podcasts have included “Jake talks M&A – What do owners need to know today?” and “How WordPress can help Funeral Homes and Cremation Providers.” To subscribe to the free Funeral X Podcast, go to [www.funeralx.com](http://www.funeralx.com). On mobile devices, the podcast can be found on Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Spotify, Stitcher and iHeartRadio.

outward. And the actual “bullseye” of that target, of course, is online reviews.

If we want to broaden it out a bit, we're really talking about your funeral home's online reputation, of which online reviews form the foundation.

A great reputation can be communicated in additional ways, such as text or video testimonials from satisfied families, or citations about your firm in news articles or blog posts and social media posts from other organizations. Those are all important, but none have any real benefit if your actual online reviews are either bad (on average) or are simply too few in number.

Everything begins with generating five-star reviews, particularly on Google – and getting a lot of them. In this case, quantity really is as important as quality. Let's dig into why online reviews are so pivotal in generating at-need calls.

### Your No. 1 Goal: Communicate Trust

It's common sense, but it can't be said enough: In general, consumers want to work with businesses they trust. That's true of every business type and every service. But it's fair to say that we'll make some exceptions depending on certain factors.

If you're ordering paper clips on Amazon, you're not as diligent in identifying five-star providers. You're looking for a low price and free (or at least cheap) shipping. Sure, if everything else is about the same, you'll likely pick the supplier with 4.2 stars over one with 3.8. But that's about it.

“Families don’t go to Facebook to find a provider when someone dies. They’re going straight to a Google search.”

—Welton Hong, founder and CEO, Ring Ring Marketing

Similarly, if you’re visiting another city and hungry for reasonably priced pizza, you’ll likely search Google for “pizza near me” and see what pops up. You’ll certainly ignore a pizza joint with an average of 1.7 stars; after all, you don’t want food poisoning. But let’s say you’re comparing two decent-looking options for cheap pizza with review averages above 4.0.

One has 4.6 stars but only offers a few topping choices and is far away. Another has 4.3 stars but offers lots of toppings and is just a few blocks away. You’ll almost certainly pick the latter option: For cheap pizza, 4.3 is clearly good enough.

Funeral care, obviously, is an entirely different story. It’s as simple as this: No one wants to entrust the care of their loved one to a firm with a mediocre reputation, much less a poor one. Would you?

Granted, families who are tight on money and looking for direct cremation (without a service) will be less discriminating. They’re purely price shopping. But that’s not the audience we’re talking about here. You don’t simply want more at-need calls: You want more calls from families who need the full suite of services you provide.

And those families, quite frankly, are looking for trustworthiness. They want to feel that trust on your website. They want to see it in your promotional materials.

They want it when they visit your funeral home.

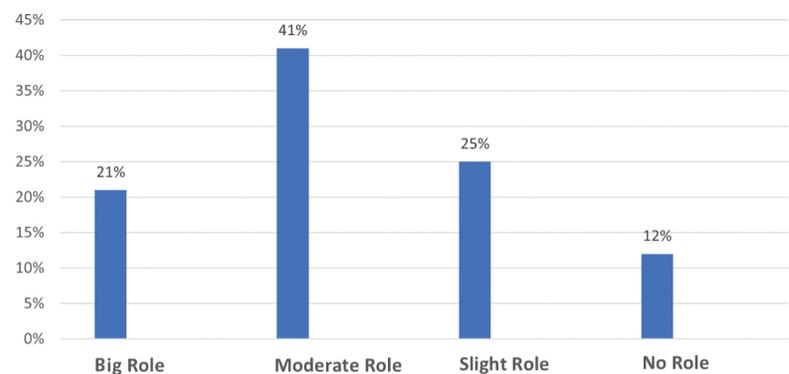
But first, they want to see it in your reviews. Because that’s where they go first.

In 2022, the vast majority of families (who don’t already have a plan in place) will go straight to a Google search when there’s an unexpected death. They’ll see a list of local providers, and those firms’ average Google ratings (along with the number of Google reviews) will be right next to the firms’ names.

It’s not like they have to go to Yelp or do a lot of research to find out how well your funeral home

## Just How Important Are Online Reviews to New Customers?

When asked how big a role online reviews play in finding a local business, customers said:



**In the wake of COVID-19, online reviews have never been so important to consumers, according to a new Podium Interaction Management study. Why? Because they are the first link to connecting with your business and the first deciding factor in moving to a competitor. To stay competitive, businesses must proactively remove any obstacles that prevent customers from leaving reviews, recommends Podium.**

*Source: 2021 State of Reviews by Podium Interaction Management*

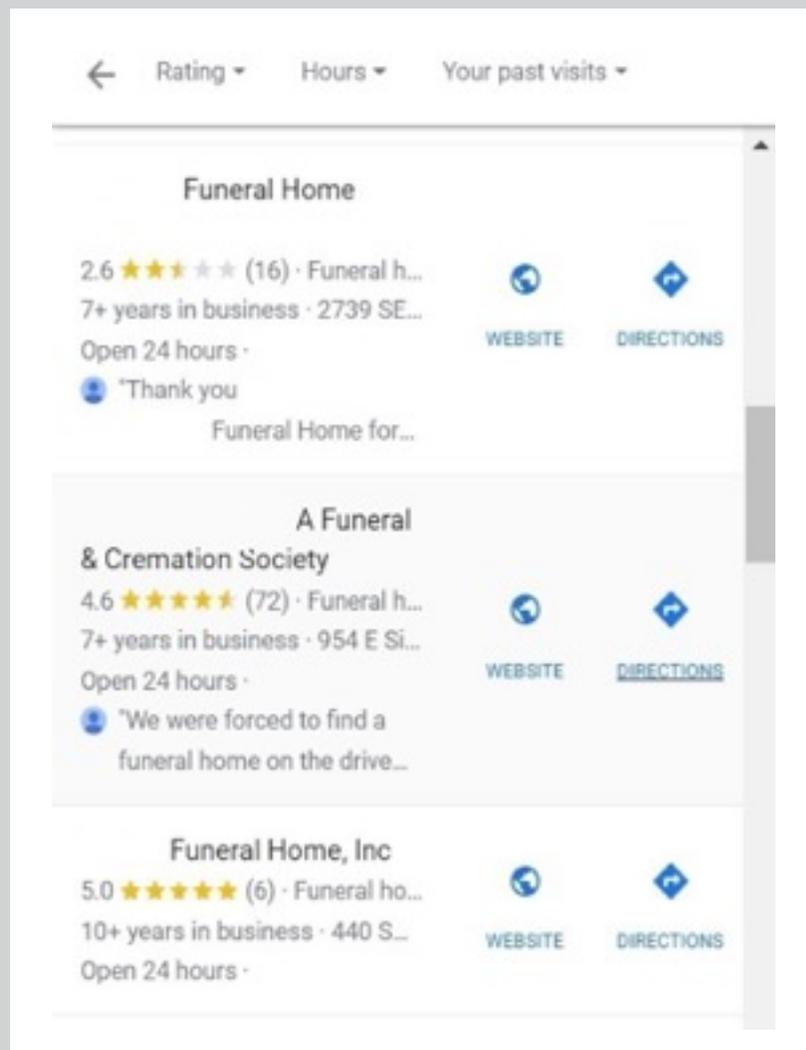
## Which Funeral Home Would *You* Choose?

Here are three reviews for funeral homes in one small city (with identifying information redacted to protect the innocent – and the guilty). Which would represent a funeral home the best?

If you picked the middle one, you're right. With 72 reviews, it has a great sample size, and although the 4.6 overall rating preferably would be a bit better, it's still quite solid. Limited solely to reviews, most families would select this option.

The bottom firm has a perfect 5.0 rating, but its six reviews comprise far too small a sample size (6) to communicate trustworthiness.

The firm at the top is by far the worst. A 2.6 rating is truly abominable for any business, much less a funeral home, and the 16 reviews are still too few. You want to shoot for a bare minimum of 25, but it's best to have 40 or more. – W.H.



has been reviewed. Google puts it right up front.

As important as it is to have great search engine optimization to be ranked well among funeral service providers in your area, it's just as critical to have great reviews (again, that means quality and quantity).

It looks great to have the top-ranked funeral home in the organic search results for your area, but if you only have 10 reviews, with an average review rating of 2.5, you're not getting the call – at least not from anyone except truly desperate price shoppers.

By comparison, a funeral home in the same set of results that has 80 reviews, with an average review rating of 4.8, will get lots of calls from families who want a full suite of services – even if that business is only fourth or fifth in organic search rankings.

And that's because it's all about trust. Funeral care is one of only a handful of industries where most people won't compromise when it comes to trustworthiness.

If you need major surgery, you're not going to compromise. If you're in major legal trouble and need a great attorney, you're not going to compromise. And if you need to entrust the care of your beloved mother to a funeral home, you're not going to compromise: You're going to pick the provider you can definitely trust.

Do online reviews provide the full picture of how trustworthy you are? Of course not. But they absolutely provide the first impression. You won't get a chance to impress families with everything else you do if you don't make a great first impression with your reviews.

### Google's not the only platform, but ...

Google isn't the only platform where your funeral home can generate reviews, but it is by far the more important one.

Good Facebook reviews can help. So can good Yelp reviews. A few other platforms are beneficial. But when it comes to immediate needs, you can ignore all of those review platforms until you've optimized your reviews on Google (see "Why Google Reviews Come First, Then Facebook" chart, at right).

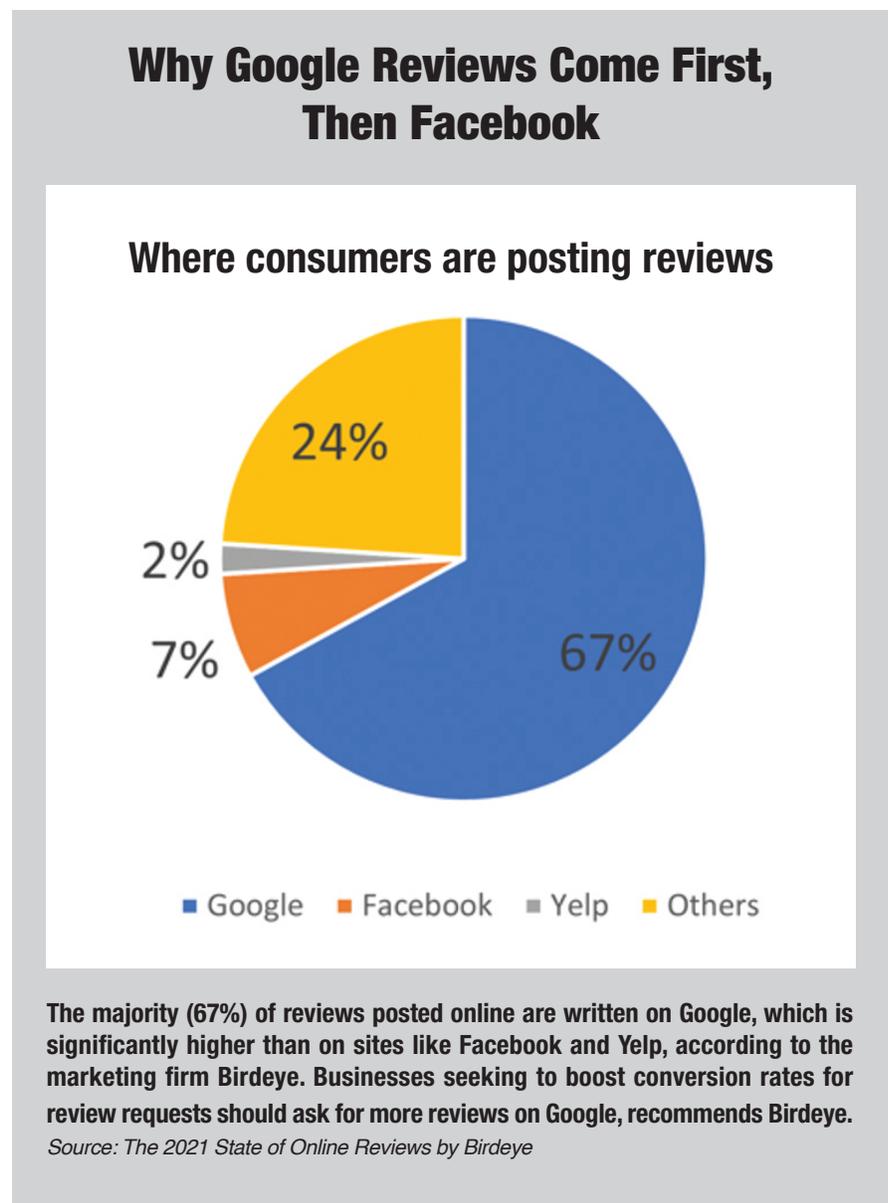
For one thing, at-needs are powered by a Google search. No matter what you've heard elsewhere, you're not going to generate at-need calls on social media. Families don't go to Facebook to find a provider when someone dies. They're going straight to a Google search.

Google isn't the only search engine, but for your purposes, it might as well be. As of February 2022, it maintains a search market share of over 90%. Compare that to the second-place search engine, Microsoft's Bing, which as of February 2022 has just over 3% of search market share.

People search on Google, full stop. And when businesses are listed on a Google search results page, the reviews you see are Google reviews.

### Getting your business to rank

In addition to making your firm more trustworthy to families, having a lot of great Google reviews makes your firm more trustworthy to Google itself. And that's critically important because you want your funeral home to rank well in search results. You want it to regularly appear in the



Google "3-pack," the box of recommended results that appear high on the page, next to the map. Those results also most commonly appear in the map.

While Google is notoriously secretive of exactly what criteria determine how well businesses rank (to prevent people from gaming the system), it's well understood that reviews play a role.

Google's mission is to effectively "recommend" the businesses that

are most relevant to the searcher and the most trustworthy. It "recommends" those businesses in organic search results by ranking them the best. This is why businesses with very few (and/or very bad) reviews rarely appear at the top.

After two years of a pandemic that has kept a lot more people at home for extended periods of time, families are far more likely to turn

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## Get in the Habit of Asking for Reviews: Here's How

I realize there's a difference between an auto repair shop asking for a review and a funeral home asking for one. You're dealing with grieving families. You always want to be thoughtful, caring and professional. You always want to make it about the family, not about yourself. Let's stipulate that right now.

With that said, it's not as tricky as it might seem. I've seen funeral homes in small cities that have hundreds of Google reviews. Even in medium-sized towns, funeral homes can generate 100 or more reviews. It's simply about getting in the habit of asking.

Can it be a delicate process? Sure. But that's what funeral directors deal with every single day. No one is better at handling business matters with thoughtfulness and understanding.

It's important to keep in mind that when a family is thoroughly satisfied with the funeral services you provided, they often want to share their appreciation. They want other families in the community to know how well you cared for their loved one. You just need to give them the opportunity.

Obviously, it's important to consider the timing of asking for a review. But just as you shouldn't inquire the moment the service is over, you also shouldn't wait too long.

In addition to asking in person, you can utilize email templates to politely ask for a review a week or two following services. The messaging in these emails must be thoughtful and considerate, of course. At my firm, we created templates (see example of one, below) for our funeral home clients that are very carefully written to respect the family in a sensitive time while lightly asking (with no pressure) for a review, and they're working wonderfully.

At the end of the day, the more successful your funeral home is, the better you can serve your community. And generating lots of positive Google reviews is a core aspect of generating more at-need calls with higher revenue per call.

Investing in reviews doesn't just help you – it helps you serve more families, and it helps you serve them better. – W.H.

[Remove Email Template](#)

**Sent:**  
As soon as possible

**Subject:**  
[[first\_name]], following up on your experience with us.

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Dear [[first\_name]],

We are honored and humbled that you chose us to serve your family during this difficult time. As part of our commitment to ensure every family receives the very best from us, we're reaching out to see if you'd like to provide feedback on the services we provided.

If you had any concerns at all, please let us know directly so we know how we can do better. Our contact information appears below.

If you were thoroughly satisfied with your experience, we wonder if you would be so kind as to share that in the form of a brief review. It only takes a moment and would greatly assist us in helping other families. If you would like to participate, simply click here:

[Leave Us Feedback Now](#)

We know your time is valuable, so feel free to be brief: Just write whatever seems most appropriate to you. That could be a couple of paragraphs, a couple of sentences, or just a couple of words.

And again, if you had any issues with our services, don't hesitate to let us know. If you're not happy, we're not happy, so help us help you. Our contact information follows below.

Thank you,

[[signature]]

“Do online reviews provide the full picture of how trustworthy you are? Of course not. But they absolutely provide the first impression.”

– Welton Hong, founder and CEO, Ring Ring Marketing

to the internet to choose a service provider. And for virtually all of them, that means Google. The better the quality and quantity of your reviews, the better you rank, and the more likely you are to get the call.

I’m not saying you should ignore Facebook, Bing and Yelp reviews, especially if you’ve received some negative ones on those platforms. You should work to generate more positive reviews to mitigate the negative ones. But don’t spend any energy or resources there if you haven’t already locked down a lot of five-star reviews on Google. It’s just not worth it.

## Got a Negative Review? Not to Worry, But Do This ...

How to handle (and mitigate) negative reviews is a massive topic by itself, one I frankly don’t have space to dig into deeply here. But I would like to share some brief thoughts on best practices.

Presuming you provide great services to families, a negative review is most often the result of a miscommunication or an internal family conflict.

Regarding the latter, I can’t even count how many funeral directors have complained about getting a negative review from a family member they didn’t work with directly or possibly never even met!

Typically, there was some disagreement between family members on what they wanted from the service, and there’s nothing stopping someone from posting a negative review even if you did everything you promised spectacularly well.

One thing to remember is that the occasional negative review isn’t the end of the world. Frankly, most families trust businesses that have a few negative reviews more than those with a perfect 5.0 rating. That’s because a perfect rating (especially if you have 50-plus reviews) looks dubious.

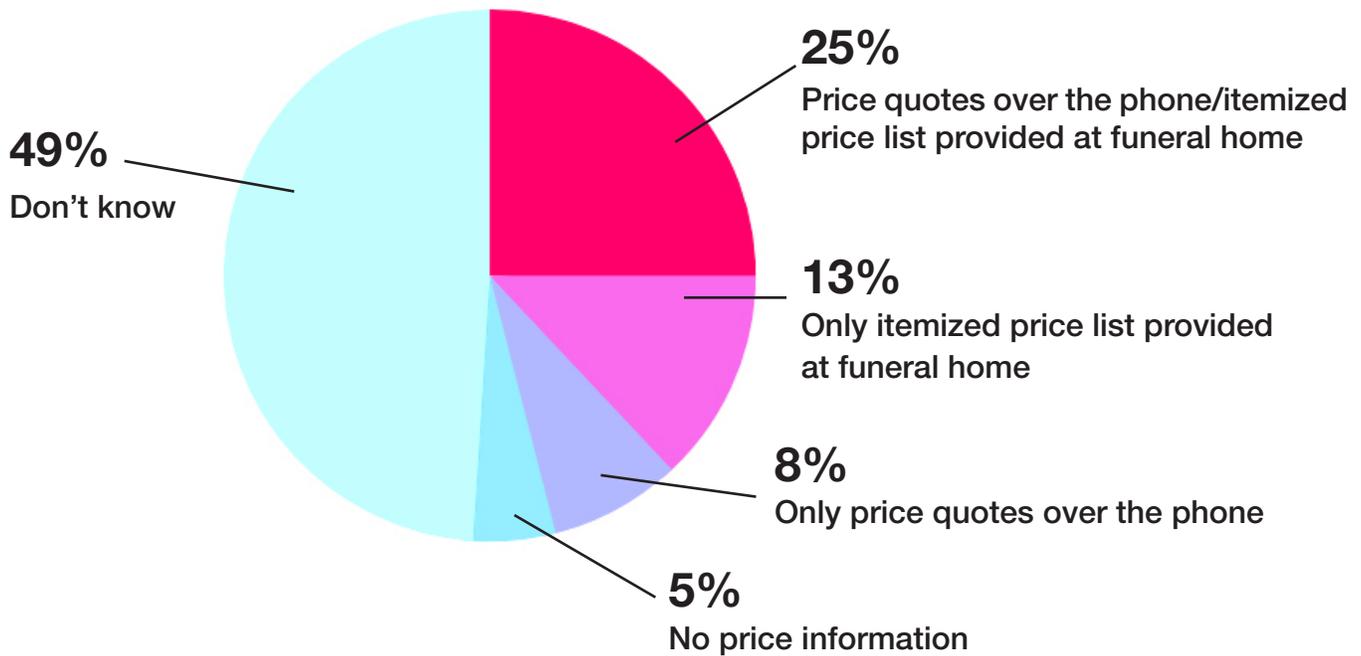
But you also don’t want many negative reviews; that can be devastating for a funeral home. When you get one, reach out to the reviewer if possible and be understanding. Try to understand why they left a bad review and see if there’s anything you can do to satisfy them. Many people go back and delete (or improve) a bad review once their concerns have been heard.

If you can’t connect with the reviewer, or if they refuse to remove or alter the review, you can also leave a public comment. Be thoughtful and professional (leave your emotions out of it), explaining your side so anyone who comes across the review understands the context.

There’s also a big difference between “negative but legitimate” reviews, as discussed above, and fake reviews. If you get a review that’s literally fake, you can flag it with Google. Unfortunately, Google rarely removes flagged reviews, but it’s worth a shot. If it doesn’t get removed, definitely leave a public comment noting that it’s a fake review and that you never provided any services to this person. – W.H.

# Are Your Price Lists Easy to Access for Families?

When asked what prices funeral homes are required to provide, consumers said:



Only one-quarter (25%) of consumers surveyed (and 15% of those 65 and older) know that funeral homes are required to provide price quotes over the phone and an itemized price list at the funeral home, according to a Funeral Consumers Alliance and Consumer Federation of America survey in November 2020. These consumer groups are advocating for easier access to funeral home price lists, which “would dramatically increase a consumer’s ability to cut funeral costs,” suggests the survey. *Source: Funeral Consumers Alliance and Consumer Federation of America*

## the last word

“ When you work in death care for an extended period of time, you have to learn ways to cope with what you do. You will either burn out from the weight of death or become so hardened that you forget about what has actually happened. Someone has died, and because of that someone else’s world is now forever changed. Hopefully, you will find a third option, which includes compassion and love for the people in your care, with just enough distance for your own mental health. ”

– Lauren LeRoy, aka “Little Miss Funeral,” from her website, [www.littlemissfuneral.com](http://www.littlemissfuneral.com)

## in the next issue

Crisis management lessons from the pandemic for funeral service professionals



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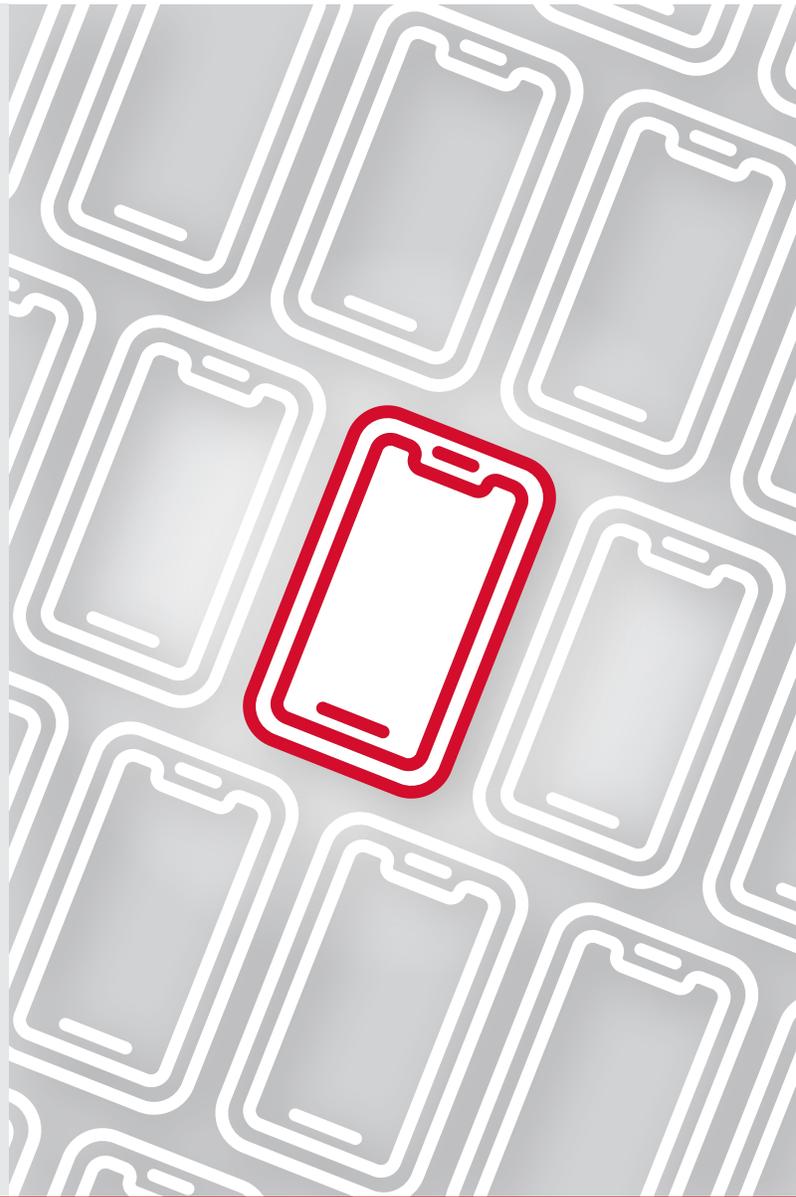


# Experience the Matthews Aurora **DIFFERENCE.**

**IF** you want simple solutions to engage with families both in-person and online.

## What is the Matthews Aurora Difference?

As families' needs evolve, funeral technology needs to evolve with them. That's why Matthews Aurora is focused on creating solutions that make it easy for you to serve families in today's digital world. Our *Family Connections* technology enables your firm to help families make arrangements from anywhere. Our *Arranger* software offers a simple presentation system to educate families about all your service and merchandise options. And our Solution Center is your one-stop-shop for quick and easy online ordering, product customization, digital merchandising and much more. Contact us today for a demo and learn how our technology solutions can help you grow your business.



**Discover Matthews Aurora Funeral Solutions.**

Please contact us at 1.800.457.1111 to be connected with your Matthews Aurora Funeral Service Consultant.