

Post-COVID Funeral Marketing Fundamentals

By Welton Hong

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MARKETING

The "digital age" has been in full swing for several years now, but it's different in 2021. We're all getting back down to business after the COVID-19 pandemic turned everything on its ear. And independent funeral homes find themselves reckoning with the most significant "disruption event" they've faced in years.

That's not to diminish all the significant events of the past decade—cremation rates skyrocketing, a sudden influx of discount direct cremation businesses, corporate interests flooding into markets large and small—but the restrictions and constraints resulting from COVID changed the game in a whole different way.

Suddenly, the few remaining holdouts who hadn't embraced technology (and that includes families and funeral homes alike) found themselves with no other choice.

Many funeral homes had to rapidly learn how to switch to virtual meetings with families and even employ livestreamed remote funeral services in many areas. They also had to adapt immediately to the new ways families were being required to interact with the world during the pandemic.

Word of mouth, which was already occurring more over the internet than in person, essentially became fully digital (through online reviews and recommendations). People turned to their computers exclusively for information about services, including immediate needs and preplanning.

Now, of course, things have opened up significantly. It's finally safe to say we're officially in a post-pandemic landscape. But the changes in Americans' behavior aren't so temporary: Maybe some felt "forced" to use online services during COVID, but most have discovered that they like it!

Long story short: The world was going digital long before COVID reared its ugly head. But COVID **massively accelerated** this process, particularly among the demographic targeted by deathcare professionals. Young people were already fully invested in the internet, but COVID played a huge role in bringing older Americans to the party.

That's why it's so critical for independent funeral homes across America to invest much more strongly in their online presence and in their digital marketing strategies. There's nothing wrong with continuing to market offline, but today, offline channels should **complement** your marketing approach.

Let me take a moment to highlight some of the most effective digital marketing tools funeral homes should be employing today:

SEO/SEM

The number-one formula for growing at-need calls is to perform better on search engines, specifically Google. It's the first part of simple equation I express like this:

Google = at-needs / Social media = preneeds

So let's focus on that first part. It means that you need to optimize your funeral home for search through **search engine optimization**, aka **SEO** (organic listings) and **search engine marketing**, aka **SEM** (paid search).

When there's a death with no plan in place, a family member will typically go online and do a simple search for a funeral home with the location, e.g., "Tucson funeral homes." The funeral homes best represented on that search have a massive advantage over their local competitors at getting that call.

For the greatest advantage, a funeral home will leverage all three of these areas:

- **Pay-per-click advertising:** These simple ads ensure high visibility on the search engine results page (SERP) for a specific query, and you're only charged when someone actually clicks on the ad, sending them to your website or a specially designed landing page for your business. PPC ads create *immediate* visibility.
- **Local search map listings:** This ensures your funeral home appears on a map of search-specific businesses on the SERP. At-need clientele need a provider who is close by, and this lets them see your location at a glance. It also increases your visibility on massively popular apps such as Google Maps.
- **Organic search results:** These are the "standard" unpaid results on a given SERP. By improving search engine optimization (SEO) for your website, your funeral home appears higher on this list, increasing the likelihood of conversions.

Reviews & Reputation Management

Every sort of business is now subject to consumer reviews online, and this includes deathcare service providers. Obviously, it's particularly crucial for a business such as a funeral home to have an impeccable reputation online, because trust is such a critical aspect of the client-provider relationship.

Ensuring excellent online reviews isn't as simple as just doing a great job, although that's certainly the foundation. Be sure someone on your team is monitoring your firm's reputation on sites such as Google, Yelp, and Facebook, mitigating the damage of negative reviews, and encouraging positive reviews.

With so many more people choosing service providers online, it's absolutely essential that you have a *large quantity* and *high quality* of online reviews.



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Welton is a leading expert in helping funeral homes convert leads from online directly to the phone line. He's the author of the book *Making Your Phone Ring with Internet Marketing for Funeral Homes*. Learn more at FuneralHomeProfits.com.

Social Media

Earlier, I noted that Google = at-needs, whereas social media = preneeds. Let's dig a bit deeper into that.

If you want your ice cream sundae to taste great, you put hot fudge on it. If you want your car engine to run properly, you ensure there's sufficient motor oil in it.

Hot fudge and motor oil are both highly effective for their purposes, but imagine the consequences if you mixed them up. Hot fudge in your engine would kill it. Motor oil on your sundae could kill *you*.

The same is true of search and social media. If you want to generate at-need calls, the tool you need is search. If you're focusing on preneeds, the tool for *that* is social media.

If you mix them up, it's like motor oil on your sundae or hot fudge in your engine. Search isn't an especially effective tool for preneeds. Social media doesn't do much at all for at-needs.

But that doesn't mean you should ignore social media. It helps brand your funeral home as the "go-to" option in your area, if you use it correctly, and it's amazing for educating local families on the benefits of prearrangement.

One big key to social media that surprises many funeral home owners is that most of your organic posts shouldn't reference death at all. Instead, you should be cultivating relationships with the deathcare demographic by posting about wellness, travel, lifestyle themes, and so on.