

MARKETING

By Rick Gershman

Five Ways to Ruin Your Funeral Home's

Online Reputation



Business owners can always benefit from constructive advice.

On the other hand, where's the fun in that?

In the information age, constructive tips can be found virtually everywhere. Everyone has a take on how to ride out a weak economy, how to generate more revenue as cremation rates keep rising, etc.

So instead of looking at what your funeral home could do *better*, let's try a different tack this month. Let's consider what it could do much *worse*.

For example, your firm's online

reputation is more critical than ever, especially in this post-pandemic landscape. Pandemic lockdowns pushed older Americans to do their research online in massively accelerated numbers.

That's why your funeral home's reviews, testimonials and other reputation markers matter far more than ever before. It doesn't matter whether you're in an urban, suburban or rural environment. It doesn't matter if you have 30 local competitors or three.

Unless your funeral home is *literally* the only option in the area – meaning you're not even competing with a direct cremation firm – you need a strong focus on your online reputation.

Having a great reputation isn't just about getting the call; it's about getting the *high-revenue* call. You know who *doesn't* call the firm with a 3.2 average rating on Google? The at-need family with money to spend. That family calls the firm with the 4.8 rating.

You know who calls the firm with the 3.2 rating? The price shopper. (That is, if anyone calls at all. Who wants to entrust the care of their loved one to a funeral home with a rocky reputation?)

So, this month, let's try something a little different. Let's review five of the very best ways to ruin your firm's reputation. If you recognize your funeral home in this list, it's time to change things up.

NO. 5: NEVER REQUEST REVIEWS FROM SATISFIED CLIENTELE

Do you think it's classless to ask a family – even an extremely satisfied one – for a Google or Facebook review? Do you feel it's far too insensitive?

If so, congratulations! You're doing an exceptional job of undermining your firm's reputation.

Of course, soliciting reviews from families requires respect and nuance – two things you undoubtedly employ every day in your work. You're not going to ask for a review from a grieving family the same way a pizza place would solicit a review of its triple pepperoni super-special. But you can still ask for a review!

Here's the thing: You can view it as "taking the high road" to not ask for reviews, but if you don't, your competitors will. At least some of them will be more than happy to ask every satisfied family for a review.

Also, having a bad (or simply weak) online reputation doesn't just ward off potential at-need and preneed clientele. It also can affect how well your funeral home ranks in Google search results.

Google's algorithms rank businesses better when they have a large quantity of reviews, regardless of whether those reviews are positive or negative.

In other words, if your firm has 50 reviews with an average 4.4 rating, Google typically will rank it better than a competitor with only seven reviews and a perfect 5.0 rating. That's why you *must* get in the habit of soliciting reviews from happy families.

Meanwhile, here's the next thing to do if you really want to destroy your reputation:

NO. 4: NEVER RESPOND TO REVIEWS OF YOUR FUNERAL HOME

Pandemic lockdowns pushed older Americans to do their research online in massively accelerated numbers.

When people take time from their day to leave a review for your firm, whether that review is positive or negative, they just want to be *heard*. They have some thoughts to communicate.

Hopefully, they were thrilled with the services you provided and want you to know. They likely also want other people in your community to know; they're effectively recommending you to their neighbors.

On the other hand, maybe they weren't happy. The review might be negative, noting some specific or general concerns. Maybe the negative feedback is fair, but maybe not. Either way, it merits a response from you.

Failing to monitor and respond to these online reviews is a great way to turn off potential clientele. You're passing up a great opportunity to provide your side of the story (particularly for negative reviews) or to simply thank a family for a positive review.

How would you feel if you complimented someone, and that person responded with dead silence? Or if you respectfully pointed out a valid concern and were met with dead air?

That's what it feels like to families when you don't respond publicly to their reviews. It also turns off some potential clients who are looking through those reviews.

Which brings us to the next big reputational mistake:

NO. 3: ONLY RESPOND PUBLICLY TO NEGATIVE REVIEWS

This obviously follows from the previous section, but it's sufficiently important to be highlighted here. Many

businesses ignore all their positive reviews, but the second someone slams them with a one-star review, the business owner is firing off a reply.

Unless you really want to wreck your rep, don't do this. It actually looks worse than when a business never replies at all. It tells families that you don't care when people laud your services; you can only be bothered when someone criticizes you.

The effect is that you look thin-skinned and possibly even insecure. It's safe to say no one wants that in a funeral director.

Whether you like it or not, people will review your firm on Google and Facebook. There's no way around that. So be proactive about the process in soliciting reviews from satisfied families and responding – even if it's just a brief note – to every review you receive.

However, if you really hate the idea of having a great reputation, you should:

NO. 2: REPLY TO EVERY POSITIVE REVIEW WITH A COOKIE-CUTTER RESPONSE

OK, I know I said building a great reputation requires replying to every review, and that's true. But that doesn't mean you should reply with two generic, boilerplate sentences to every positive review you get.

Nothing could come off as more impersonal – yet many small businesses, including some funeral homes, actually do this!

Granted, it takes a little more time to create an original response to each review, but we're only talking about a couple of minutes. It's worth it. While you obviously won't reveal any personal details about the decedent in a public

review, you can still individualize your reply a bit.

Thank the reviewer by name. If there's some specific aspect of the services you can point out without revealing anything too personal, consider doing that.

At the risk of stating the obvious, that's what you do every time you assist a family. You honor their loved one by providing an experience that's fully individualized. Your response to a positive review should be no different. Consider it one of the final steps in helping a family.

With that said, there is one last opportunity to shatter your funeral home's reputation, and this one's truly devastating:

NO. 1: REPLY TO NEGATIVE REVIEWS ANGRILY AND ARGUMENTATIVELY

To be fair, this doesn't happen very often with funeral homes. The vast majority of funeral directors know how to handle a negative review without flying off the handle.

However, you will see it occur with many other businesses, and funeral homes aren't entirely immune. Occasionally, a funeral home owner takes a scathing review too personally, and it gets ugly *fast*.

Look, not every review your firm receives will be fair. That's just how it



goes. Once you've generated 100-plus reviews, a few will likely be entirely unfair.

A typical example is when you get a scathing review from a family member you never worked with – and possibly never even met. Let's call her Aunt Karen.

Maybe Aunt Karen was left out of the planning process and has been steaming

ever since. So even through the family representative was entirely satisfied with everything you did, Aunt Karen is upset. And she's taking it out on *you*.

It's not easy to take the high road in this situation, but it's imperative.

Remember, you're not really responding to the *reviewer* in this situation. Instead, you're actually communicating to potential clientele who are reading the review and your response. You're talking to *them*. And how you handle this will make all the difference in whether they trust Aunt Karen or you.

You actually *can* push back lightly in a review of this sort, just as long as you do so carefully and respectfully. (This can be a very thin line to walk, so tread lightly.)

You don't want to give reviewers *carte blanche* to lie about your firm and specific services, but you do want to show potential clientele that you care more about the people you serve than about yourself.

There are a few other ways you can demolish your online reputation if you really want to, but those are the big ones. So, if building up and maintaining a good online reputation is important to you, take note of the aforementioned landmines and act accordingly. •

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