

The Delicate Art Of Funeral Home Marketing



Ethics And Best Practices

A walk-through of essential ethical considerations and best practices to guide your marketing strategy today.

BY WELTON HONG

One thing heavy on my mind lately is ethics.

On the brink of the 2024 U.S. presidential election and in an era of new artificial intelligence (AI) technology, I'm reminded that ethics is something people seek and value in almost every facet of life. This is especially true in business – and even more so in a field as sensitive in nature as deathcare.

Every aspect of funeral service requires ethics at the forefront, including digital marketing. Deathcare marketing demands a delicate balance between promoting the business and maintaining the dignity and respect grieving families deserve. As a funeral director, much of the responsibility falls on you to make certain that your marketing efforts are not only effective but also ethical and deeply respectful.

While I suspect you already run your funeral home's marketing strategy with ethical practices – it'd be hard to stay in business otherwise – I find it's important to revisit and relearn what those ethical practices look like today.

From legal compliance to the integration of AI, I'll walk you through the essential ethical considerations to guide your funeral home's marketing strategy.

COMPLIANCE AND TRANSPARENCY

First and foremost, let's talk about compliance. Funeral service is heavily regulated to protect consumers during one of the most vulnerable times in their lives. The Federal Trade Commission's Funeral Rule is at the heart of these regulations, requiring transparency in pricing and prohibiting deceptive practices. This is non-negotiable.

Your marketing materials must clearly and accurately present the services you offer, including itemized pricing and detailed descriptions of what each service entails. To stay on the right side of the law, provide clear, concise information about your services and their costs in all marketing materials, including websites, brochures and advertisements.

Every statement in your marketing must be truthful and avoid over-promising or making exaggerated claims, as these can lead to legal trouble. Regularly review and update your marketing practices to confirm compliance with current regulations.

Ethical marketing is not just a best practice; it is a fundamental responsibility to the families and communities you serve.

Beyond just legal purposes, transparency is also the key to building trust with the families you serve. Being open and honest about your services, pricing and what families can expect prevents misunderstandings and fosters a relationship of trust and respect.

When meeting potential clients face to face, provide thorough explanations of each service offered, including what's included and any additional costs that may arise. Be upfront about any potential limitations or additional costs associated with ser-

vices, never hiding or obscuring important information.

Exercising this level of transparency is what will earn your funeral home a reputation for being trustworthy and reliable.

RESPECTFUL MARKETING

Digital marketing offers many opportunities for reaching families, but it doesn't come without some ethical challenges. I believe in using digital marketing tools responsibly to avoid intruding on the privacy of families and to ensure that your online presence is professional and respectful.

My first piece of advice in this arena is to be mindful of privacy laws and regulations when collecting and using personal data, and using data responsibly and only with consent. Respect is the cornerstone of ethical marketing in funeral service. The messages conveyed through your marketing efforts must honor the emotional and psychological state of grieving families. This means using sensitive language and avoiding any content that could be perceived as exploitative or insensitive.

Use targeted advertising carefully, avoiding overly aggressive or intrusive tactics that could be perceived as insensitive. Maintain a professional and respectful online presence, monitoring and managing online reviews and feedback appropriately.

Because your audience is dealing with loss, your messages should be comforting, supportive and empathetic. Hard-sell techniques are inappropriate; instead, focus on providing helpful information and reassurance.

Be mindful, too, of the diverse cultural and religious practices around mourning and tailor your marketing messages to respect these differences. Marketing strategies should always be inclusive and considerate of the

diverse populations you serve. This involves understanding and respecting the unique needs and preferences of different cultural, religious and ethnic groups.

Educate yourself and your staff about the customs and traditions of the communities you serve and reflect this knowledge in your marketing efforts. Provide materials in multiple languages, if needed, to accommodate non-English-speaking families. Make sure your marketing materials reflect the diversity of your community, using inclusive imagery and language.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND TESTIMONIALS

I'm a big proponent of funeral homes using social media to connect with their communities. However, social media requires extra-careful management. If you've witnessed a social media faux pas, you've likely seen how damaging it can be.

My advice is to share only content that is informative, supportive and appropriate for a grieving audience, avoiding sensationalism or overly promotional posts. Respond to comments and messages with empathy and professionalism, being mindful of the public nature of social media interactions.

Most importantly, protect the privacy of families, never sharing personal information or details of services without explicit consent.

Testimonials are another powerful tool you should use only with consent. When incorporating testimonials into your marketing strategy, it's crucial that they're genuine, respectful and obtained with the consent of the families involved. Always seek explicit permission from families before using their testimonials, respecting their privacy and autonomy.

While this might go without

saying, use only real testimonials from real clients. While it might be tempting, avoid fabrication or alteration to make them more favorable. Also be mindful of the language and context of testimonials so they're respectful and don't exploit the emotions of grieving families.

If you keep your online presence authentic, it will reinforce the authenticity of your funeral home in real life.

USING AI ETHICALLY

AI is revolutionizing marketing across industries, and deathcare is no exception. I've already written many times about how AI can provide powerful tools for personalizing marketing, analyzing customer behavior and automating customer service. However, it also brings significant ethical considerations you must not ignore.

One thing to be mindful of is that AI relies on data to function effectively, so be sure that all data collected is stored securely and used responsibly. Be transpar-

ent about data collection practices and obtain explicit consent from users. While AI can help personalize marketing messages to better meet the needs of families, avoid using personal data in ways that are intrusive or exploitative, respecting the privacy and emotional state of your audience.

AI systems can also inadvertently reinforce biases present in the data on which they're trained, so make sure your AI tools promote fairness and inclusivity. Be open about the use of AI in your marketing practices, making sure families understand how their data are used and the role of AI in your interactions with them.

While AI can automate many aspects of marketing, human oversight is crucial. AI should support, not replace, the compassionate care provided by your staff.

PROFESSIONAL INTEGRITY

Once you've established an ethical marketing strategy consis-

tent with the values and mission of your funeral home, the work isn't done. Most importantly, you need to reflect these ethical practices in day-to-day operations. Collaborate with third-party service providers that share your commitment to ethical practices. Take responsibility for any mistakes or miscommunications and address and rectify any issues promptly and transparently.

Most importantly, protect the privacy of families, never sharing personal information or details of services without explicit consent.

Ethical marketing is not just a best practice; it is a fundamental responsibility to the families and communities you serve. Upholding professional integrity in marketing practices reinforces the trust placed in you by families during their time of need.

Remember, the goal of marketing is not just to attract business but to serve families with compassion and respect. By keeping these ethical considerations at the forefront of your marketing strategy, your efforts can be both effective and honorable. The trust and goodwill you build with families through ethical marketing will not only enhance your reputation but also contribute to the long-term success and integrity of your funeral home. ☰

Welton Hong is founder of Ring Ring Marketing and author of Making Your Phone Ring With Internet Marketing for Funeral Homes (second edition).



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