



funeral service **insider**

independent news & guidance for funeral home owners and operators

Funeral Service Leaders Predict What Lies Ahead in 2018 and Beyond

No one could have predicted all that 2017 would bring.

To prove that point, all one needs to do is scan 2017's headlines from Funeral Service Insider, which included stories on:

- Several top executives from StoneMor Partners leaving and/or retiring, including CEO Lawrence Miller.

- Frazer Consultants buying FuneralNet.

- Chris Farmer, owner of The Farmer Firm in Houston, helping to lead a fight against Stericycle, a biomedical waste company, for allegedly defrauding funeral home customers.

- Precoa (the Preneed Company of America) buying its preneed marketing rival, The Outlook Group.

One big change hit close to home for this newsletter, with Whip It Media announcing the acquisition of Kates-Boylston Publications, the parent company of American Funeral

Director and American Cemetery & Cremation magazines, as well as Funeral Service Insider.

The headlines just kept coming and our readers were among the very first to read them.

What will 2018 bring?

No one knows for sure, but continuing our annual tradition, we reached out to funeral professionals and thought leaders throughout the country to get their fearless (and in some cases fearful) predictions.

Bill Forsberg, executive director of the North Carolina Funeral Directors Association, predicts the following:



Bill Forsberg

- A funeral home will agree to a multimillion dollar settlement with an embalmer who will have asserted that his cancer

Edwards Funeral Service Expands

Jeff Edwards, owner of Edwards Funeral Service in Columbus, Ohio, has acquired Hughes-Allen Funeral Home in Marion, Ohio, according to a news release. Terms were not disclosed.

Edwards Funeral Service will assume operations of the funeral home Jan. 1, 2018, as Ken Allen transitions into retirement after 29 years of ownership. The acquisition follows a friendship that began four years ago when Edwards began doing overflow embalming work for the Marion firm.

Edwards has appointed Kelly Cunningham as the firm's managing funeral director. The firm will offer Marion residents "aggressively affordable funeral solutions."

Cunningham is a 2016 graduate of Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science, where Edwards also graduated. She previously served her apprenticeship under Edwards, and she did a fantastic job, Edwards says.

Cunningham is the second apprentice Edwards has trained fresh out of mortuary science college and then hired. Bridget Clark, a 2015 graduate of CCMS, also served her apprenticeship under Edwards and then accepted a full-time role as managing funeral director at his Columbus firm.

Edwards is well-known as the first funeral director to offer alkaline hydrolysis to the public.



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diagnosis was related to continuous exposure to dangerous chemicals in the embalming room. Forsberg predicts the lawsuit will specify the defendant's failure to provide adequate training, protective equipment and updated information on the risks involved for workers.

- We'll see more personnel poaching.

"Owners and managers are desperate to find licensed, qualified staff," Forsberg says. He foresees the situation will become so serious that many operators will have no choice but to steal quality staff members from competitors and colleagues "as relocation and licensing costs of bringing in candidates from out of state are just too high."

- Wages for licensed funeral directors will zoom up 15 percent. Owners will realize that the time has come to pay the right person with the right skill sets a competitive wage compared with other professions, Forsberg says.

- There will be a continued increase in pet death-care services. "Greater numbers of funeral home owners are starting this add-on business and becoming profitable quickly," Forsberg says. "More owners are recognizing that people care more about and will pay more for the final care of Fluffy and Fido than for Uncle Fred."

- SBNR numbers tick up.

"Spiritual but not religious

segments of society tend to want a humanistic gathering using a celebration of life and relaxed approach rather than a traditional funeral service led by clergy," Forsberg says. "This opens up the opportunity for more certified celebrants to be attached to funeral homes."

- "The Funeral Commander" will get his way.

Forsberg thinks this will be the year that Jeff Harbeson, co-host of the Funeral Nation webcast (often known as "The Funeral Commander"), will finally get his fellow host, Ryan Thogmartin, to start smoking a cigar during the airing of the program.

"This will lead to a staff revolt over the unbearable stench in the show's production studio," Forsberg says.

A Marketing Shift

Welton Hong, founder of Ring Ring Marketing, which specializes in death-care marketing, foresees several ways in which funeral homes will need to evolve their marketing efforts in 2018.

- More families will be going online to determine their choices for funeral homes and cremations.

"It seems anecdotally obvious that as more people of all ages access the internet 24/7 from smartphones and tablets (and increasingly, even smartwatches), online search will increase as a

factor in choosing a funeral or cremation provider,” Hong says.



Welton Hong

In fact, the team at Ring Ring

Marketing is

seeing much more than just anecdotal evidence. “While most industries typically only show negligible or low single-digit growth over a given year, searches for burials and cremations grew 13 percent in the third quarter of 2017 compared to the same quarter in 2016,” Hong says.

More than half (56 percent) of funerals and bereavement searches in the third quarter of 2017 came from mobile devices, indicating how ubiquitous these items have become in average Americans’ lives, Hong says.

“When we factor in declining church attendance and the increase in transience in American towns and cities, it’s unquestionable that online search will continue to make gains over traditional methods in how families select burial or cremation services,” Hong says.

- Online market share among local funeral homes will become much more competitive.

“I’m using ‘market share’ here as a layperson-friendly term to mean having a dominant position over

local competitors online: superior ranking in online searches, more effective and better-positioned pay-per-click ads, highest quantity and quality of online reviews, and so on,” Hong says.

The battle for dominance in one’s local market in 2018 and beyond will be won online, Hong stresses. “We’ve reached a point where user-friendly technology isn’t just an extravagance for the well-to-do or people in tech-centric cities. It’s now just as pervasive in small-town America. So local funeral homes need to work hard right away to stake out territory over their local competitors,” he says.

The sooner a funeral home invests in establishing the strongest possible position in a local market, the more easily it will be able to hold that position and increase its actual market share locally, Hong says. “In 2018, how strong a business is online will determine how strong it is against area competition overall,” he says. “Death-care businesses must act quickly to take advantage of online opportunities before their competitors do.”

- Having responsive web design will be an absolute necessity.

A website with responsive web design is one that ensures visitors have an optimal experience no matter what type of screen they view it on — be it a desktop monitor, tablet or smartphone, Hong says.

“When you pull up a website on a phone and find yourself scrolling all over to read the text or have trouble viewing images or finding and clicking links, you’re on a site that doesn’t have responsive design,” Hong says. “But that’s the reality for a lot of local funeral home sites today, and it will be a huge problem in 2018.”

For one thing, with more people searching for burial and cremation providers on smartphones and tablets, these devices are becoming more important than desktop computers, Hong says. “It’s absolutely imperative that a funeral home site be easy to read and operate on a phone,” he says.

Additionally, Google (the dominant market leader in search) has rolled out its Google mobile-first index, which essentially means it prioritizes the mobile experience over the desktop one, Hong says.

Funeral home websites that don’t work well on mobile devices will be heavily penalized in Google search engine rankings and in overall SEO, which will be devastating to lead generation, according to Hong. “In 2018, they will need responsive web design if they want to have any hope of competing locally,” he says.

- Remarketing will become a powerful technique for growing preneed contracts.

Remarketing is an online marketing tool that lets a business continue marketing itself to

potential clients even when they're not actively searching for providers, Hong explains.

"For example, they might be in the market for a bicycle, check out a bicycle sales site, and then leave without making a purchase," he says. "Remarketing lets that bicycle seller continue showing ads to the potential buyer (on a variety of unrelated websites) well after the original visit."

Using remarketing to market pre-need services will be a huge growth opportunity in 2018, Hong says. "When friends and family visit a funeral site to view obituaries, remarketing lets that site continue marketing to them afterward," he says.

"There are several thoughtful, nuanced ways to employ this type of advertising, and I expect it to become a major player in growing pre-need contracts in 2018," Hong says.

Telling It Like It Is

We will continue to stand in our own way.

So says Mike Watkins, vice president, operations and compliance of The Signature Group in Houston.

"While I don't consider my prediction for 2018 to be new or innovative, it is important nonetheless and is a message that

needs to be stated," Watkins

says. "My fervent hope for 2018 is that more of us will admit there is a problem and will commit to changing those behaviors that cause us to stand in our own way."

Watkins notes that there is a saying in the world of academic research: Publish or perish.

"This means that you need to be constantly innovating, researching and writing so you can be published in the various professional journals," he says. "Those who refuse to do this are destined to obscurity and eventually perish from the attention of their peers and opportunities for research grants, etc."

Funeral service can take a lesson from this concept and acknowledge that the biggest challenge we will face in 2018 and beyond is ourselves, Watkins says. "I guess our mantra could be, 'Change or die,'" he says. "I feel very strongly that it is about time that we, as a profession, learn to acknowledge that change is inevitable. We need to quit sitting around and talking about it, wishing for the good ole days, and do something about it!"



Mike Watkins

The refusal to keep up with consumers is reflected in numerous ways, Watkins says, including:

- Only presenting traditional offerings for services and merchandise.
- Failing to leverage technological resources that are available to help families honor loved ones.
- Refusing to engage with allied professionals, including hospice and clergy, to help them better understand the value of funeral services.
- Sticking to the same strategy when responding to people seeking information on the phone or in person. "We continue to think they are all just calling looking for the lowest price," Watkins says. "And the list goes on."

Our ability to change is directly proportionate to our ability to admit, "I know I do many wonderful things for my families and community, but I can do better; I can be committed to personal growth and change," Watkins says. "We have to wipe the slate clean, acknowledge what we do well and honestly assess what we need to change in our approach to improve."

Watkins concludes, "I am entering 2018 knowing that we can and will do better individually and as a profession, are you?"

Growing Awareness

Darrell W. Hill, founder and CEO of EternityGardens.com, which is an online directory of service providers and locations where cremated remains may be laid to rest, thinks one thing we'll see in 2018 is more corporate bereavement support.

“The national conversation started by Sheryl Sandberg (chief operating officer of Facebook) in early 2017 will reverberate throughout 2018 and beyond – the need for corporations to make allowances and offer support to an increasing number of employees who are experiencing an increasing number of deaths,” Hill says.



Darrell W. Hill

“Leading corporations will begin to offer bereavement support as an employee benefit (very much akin to, and an extension of, their current health and wellness employee benefits,)” Hill says. “More than a few additional days of paid-time-off, corporate bereavement support will offer resources and support ranging from preneed resources for retiring employees, to connecting grieving employees with at-need resources, to post-need grief counseling services. As all Americans experience the death of a

loved one more frequently, corporations will respond in ways that ease the burden of that experience on employees.”

This will pose an opportunity for death-care professionals to serve as the bereavement expert in their local communities, Hill says. “We can advise on preneed policies for retiring employees; we can serve as a resource for employees experiencing the loss of a loved one; we can offer support services to employees struggling to cope with grief in the weeks and months following a loss,” Hill says.

- End-of-life death and dying consumer education will continue to grow as a trend.

This past year has seen the launch of a number of novel death, dying and end-of-life events, Hill notes.

For instance, Albuquerque, New Mexico, played host to more than 500 people in its inaugural “Before I Die Festival” and Death Salon Seattle was featured on “CBS Sunday Morning,” Hill says.

“Death cafés continue to expand in attendance and in the number of cities where they are offered,” Hill says. “As Americans live longer and as more people are in the position to serve as caregivers, the need to understand end-of-life issues as well as the need to more frequently manage the impending death of a loved one, events like these become increasingly valuable to real people experiencing the very real problems

that attend aging and dying parents, family members, and friends. These events are rarely sponsored by death-care companies – and are decidedly noncorporate in their tone and tenor. They have a very guerilla-like feel to them – neighbors and community members coming together to share their experiences and learnings with each other.”

There is an opportunity for the death-care profession to partner with the organizers of these events, to have a presence at these events, and to contribute real expertise and knowledge to community discussions, Hill says.

- Drones and autonomous vehicles will start to make an impact on funeral service.

“In 2018, the need to deploy more robust technology in our profession is borne less of whim and efficiency and more of sheer necessity – the U.S. death rate is increasing, and the ranks of our profession are decreasing. Where are the bodies to bury the bodies?” Hill asks.

“If Amazon.com can use a drone to deliver 10 pounds of groceries to my doorstep, can a drone be used to deliver eight pounds of cremated remains to my family?” he wonders. “If autonomous vehicles are used to safely transport all types of cargo and freight, can autonomous vehicles be used to safely transport human remains? Can autonomous vehicles be used to safely transport families in a funeral cortège?”

The death-care profession must begin actively considering, investigating and investing in the deployment of game-changing, productivity-enhancing technologies that allow it to continue to serve the growing needs of families, Hill says.

ICCFA Executives Sound Off

Nadira Baddeliyanage, executive director of the International Cemetery, Cremation and Funeral Association, predicts technology will continue to transform funeral service in the year ahead.

“Single-entry technology solutions and funeral service apps will continue to grow at a rapid pace in 2018,” she says. “As the baby boomer generation ages, we will continue to see an increase in the number of millennials planning funerals for their parents and grandparents. This well-informed, tech-savvy generation demands information at their fingertips. Their decisions are most often based on online research, and they expect the same level of service from their funeral care provider that they get from their local Starbucks. This expectation will drive the popularity of mobile apps and the importance of implementing the latest technology to all aspects of funeral planning and



Nadira Baddeliyanage

death care.”

Bob Fells, the ICCFA’s general counsel, has some predictions of his own.



Bob Fells

“The nontransplant body parts industry will receive national media attention, and the role played by funeral homes in this business will be especially highlighted as a conflict of interest,” Fells says.

Fells also predicts that the profession will emphasize the term “memorialization” to distinguish between “temporary memorialization,” such as scattering of cremated remains without a dedicated gravesite, and “permanent memorialization,” which involves a formal service, a dedicated gravesite and a durable marker or headstone.

“Funeral service will figure out how to reduce the ‘tyranny of the deceased’ who leave instructions for no services and no form of interment to the dismay of the family,” Fells says. “The alternative will be summed up with the term ‘funerals are for the living’ to cope with the loss and grief, and to help family members move forward with their lives. Decedents leaving instructions for no funeral will be understood to deny their kin a healthful means to process the loss.”

Families Get More Involved

Danny Jefferson, manager at Pierce-Jefferson Funeral Services in Kernersville, North Carolina, who was recently named American Funeral Director magazine’s “Funeral Director of the Year,” expects technology to have a continuing impact on the profession.

He notes, “2018 will bring an abundance of new, improved and innovative ways for funeral directors to assist the



Danny Jefferson

families they serve. Be on the lookout for the creative availability to allow families to write their own obituaries for loved ones. Families want to be more involved in the processes. Funeral directors have tried to do all things so the family may grieve and that is hindering the need to participate. Participation will allow the funeral director to assist with the technology, the process involved and the manpower to get all activities taken care of that are associated with coordinating the event.”

Insights from ‘The Commander’

Jeff Harbeson, director of marketing at The Foresight Companies, who is often known by the name he blogs under, “The

Funeral Commander,” offered several predications for the year ahead.

“All the funeral industry prognosticators, pundits and soothsayers see 2018 from different viewpoints yet visualize the same direction; the wheat continues to separate from the chaff,” Harbeson says.



Jeff Harbeson,
“The Funeral Commander”

In the year ahead, funeral professionals who take a pragmatic approach to their business and focus on creating profit and providing services/products consumers demand will see positive results, he says.

“For the others who fall into the ‘we’ve always done it this way’ crowd, the outlook is bleak,” Harbeson says.

Funeral home owners must do a better job in managing their most important asset: employees, Harbeson says. “Training can fix the operating and marketing failures we face and create customer satisfaction, which leads to profit,” he says.

Owners who understand the correlation between their General Price List and profit-and-loss statement will continue to increase the financial health of their firm,

Harbeson says.

“My advice for 2018: a vision is only a dream without execution; quit daydreaming about the days of yore and make a positive change every day ... the results will be *astounding*,” Harbeson says.

Insights on Cremation and More

Barbara Kemmis, executive director of the Cremation Association of North America, rightly focused on cremation when making predictions for 2018.

- Expect more regulations.

“Whether it is certifying or licensing crematories and crematory operators, or legalizing alkaline hydrolysis, regulatory focus on



Barbara Kemmis

cremation will grow,” Kemmis says. “In response to this trend, CANA has updated its Model Cremation Law to serve as a resource for legislators, regulators and practitioners alike.”

- The rate of cremation growth will slow.

That’s because the national cremation rate has exceeded 50 percent, and CANA research shows that the annual growth rate, hovering near 2 percent, will decline to 1.5 percent and continue

to decrease over time. “Cremation is the new tradition in the USA, so now is the time to revisit and work your cremation business plan,” Kemmis says.

- Marketing efforts will increasingly be targeted to different cremation segments in order to be successful.

“CANA’s demographic research shows that key census demographics correlate to high acceptance of cremation,” Kemmis says. “Roaming populations are transient, less affiliated with religion, have higher education levels and income. They seek personalization along with their cremation. Rooted populations live where they grew up and are tied to manufacturing economies. They have a strong affiliation with Christianity and may have lower incomes and education levels. They seek tradition with their cremation. Are you prepared to serve these populations? How can you get to ‘yes’ to serve their needs?”

- The importance of membership in professional associations and the resulting education and networking will position funeral professionals to weather uncertain times.

“Failure to attend, learn and network is a failure to innovate and perpetuates stale thinking,” Kemmis says. “Join and participate!”

Don’t Expect 2018 to Be Easy

David Nixon, owner of Nixon

Consulting in Chatham, Illinois, and a partner of Heartland Funeral Solutions in Springfield, Illinois, doesn't think things will be easy in the year ahead.



David Nixon

"Some firms – already operating in the red – will fail," he says. "There will be more stories about preneed fraud and operational suicide."

The firms in rust-belt-like communities will be hardest hit as a result of baby boomers who failed to save for retirement and for funerals, Nixon says.

Nixon also believes that some casket companies will *continue* to raise prices faster than funeral homes can pass along costs to client families, which will cause serious problems.

"Higher numbers of funeral homes will discover that their investment in real estate represents a better yield than their funeral business itself," Nixon says.

Consolidation will occur at a

faster pace as baby boomer owners exit funeral service, Nixon says. "Some communities will no longer have a hometown funeral home, forcing them to go out of town," he says.

And make no mistake about it – the profession will face other challenges as well, including a staffing crisis, Nixon says. "The growing shortage of quality, qualified licensed funeral directors will continue," he says. "Even more challenging will be finding true funeral home managers."

But the news isn't all bad, Nixon says. "Considerable opportunities will exist for financially sound funeral home owners to grow call volume through attrition of smaller funeral business," he says.

A Divided House

Rich Darby, chief operating officer of Trigard and Sunset Funeral Homes, envisions 2018 as a year in which funeral service will continue to divide itself between those that do business as usual and those who choose to innovate.

"Those who choose to do funeral service as they have for decades will continue to see their volume

levels and revenues drop," he says. "Funeral homes and cemeteries will

continue to search for new service and product offerings. Many will let go of age-old rules and regulations and adapt to product offerings and services that better meet today's consumer. They will continue to reinvent their brand and their new identity."

Darby thinks funeral service finds itself in a "betweener" era where firms can do well focusing on traditional services as well as cremations and direct burials.

"Cremation with memorial services will continue to rise in my opinion, as I believe that folks are finally realizing that an individual needs to be honored," he says. "It may not always be the type of memorial service we are accustomed to. Preplanning and prefunding funerals will become more important than ever as any funeral preplanned and prepaid today will ensure market share growth and good cash flow in the future."



Rich Darby

Save the Date for Our Next Cremation Innovations Summit

Join some of the profession's top cremation experts at the Cremation Innovations Summit, May 4, in Charlotte, North Carolina. Visit www.katesboylston.com/SummitNC to learn more.

Funeral Professionals Network, Discover and Profit at Nashville Events

Dozens of funeral professionals gathered in Nashville, Tennessee, earlier this month to hear top funeral home operators and consultants speak at the Cremation Strategies Conference and Funeral Service Business Plan Conference, both hosted by Kates-Boylston Publications.

Clockwise: Tim Bridgers, general manager of Live Oak Bank, spoke about keeping your business financially healthy; Erin Whitaker, vice president of business development at Foundation Partners Group, spoke about offering food at receptions; Jay Dodds, president and chief operating officer of The Signature Group, spoke about succession planning; attendees enjoyed a tour and reception at Hendersonville Memory Gardens Funeral Home & Cremation Center; Dan Isard with The Foresight Companies spoke at both events.

The events were sponsored by Implant Recycling, Precoa, Live Oak Bank, Ring Ring Marketing, Everdays and Bio-Response Solutions. (Photos by Kates-Boylston Publications)



Networking in Nashville

Clockwise: There was plenty of class participation at the Cremation Strategies Conference and Funeral Service Business Plan Conference in Nashville; Robert D'Anjolell of D'Anjolell Memorial Homes, Nick Padlo of Live Oak Bank and Jeff Harbeson (aka "The Funeral Commander") of The Foresight Companies, enjoy networking at the Funeral Service Business Plan Conference's cocktail hour; Welton Hong, founder of Ring Ring Marketing, shared insights on how funeral professionals can enhance their marketing efforts.



Sincerely,

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