

Marketing

By Welton Hong

The More Things Change

... the More They Stay the Same

If you've read several of my previous articles for American Funeral Director – and in the hope of starting off the new year on a good note, I'll just presume you have – you know I frequently write about *change*:

- The funeral industry is changing.
- Online marketing is constantly changing.
- The very ways we interact with the world, thanks to fresh new consumer-friendly technological advances, are *completely changing*.

And to a substantial degree, that's all true. Ironically, the one constant funeral homes can rely upon as we enter 2019 is that everything will change.

You can't just sit back and coast on what you did last year, because virtually every facet of business in America will evolve every time you toss out an old calendar and put up a new one. (Personally, we like the cal-

endars showcasing dogs and cats who form lifelong friendships, but to each their own.)

You can credit technology – or more likely, blame it – for this rapid change. I realize that things used to be much simpler. An independent retail store could focus on selling its wares. A watch repair shop could focus on repairing watches.

And a funeral home owner could focus on serving families. While some time still had to be budgeted for advertising and other marketing efforts, it typically was fairly minimal.

Of course, that's not where we are as we enter 2019. Competition is fierce, at least in most areas. Direct cremation – well, I won't go on about that, because I don't want you to stop reading in a fit of rage. The way people choose funeral homes has also changed substantially.

But if I'm being completely honest, it's not as if the world has flipped upside down over the past year. We saw some changes in 2018, but most were more evolutionary than revolutionary.

Yes, your website's user experience on mobile devices is now confirmed to be more important than its desktop user experience. Yes, voice search has surged in popularity over the past year, and it's something that will demand your attention in the coming year. Yes, online reviews have become much more powerful, as have mobile-centric techniques such as hyper-geotargeting.

But in 2019, those are not so much the new kids on the block as ... well, the New Kids on the Block. OK, they're not *that* old. (Donnie Wahlberg turns 50 this year. Seriously.) They're just somewhat established now.

So instead of saying you need to change everything around in 2019 to make the most of your online marketing, let's go back to the basics. Let's address the absolutely foundational aspects of an online marketing campaign and address where they are in their evolution as we take on the new year.

I'd usually kick off by talking about local search optimization or the importance of having a high-converting website, but this time we're going straight to online reputation.

Here's why: Although having a whole lot of online reviews is one of the very best ways to attract families to your business, the vast majority of independent funeral homes don't take it seriously – at all. They put essentially no time or effort into it. They're like, "If it happens, it happens. Whatever."

I can hardly express what an enormous mistake that is. What's more important to a funeral home than its reputation?

It's way past the time that funeral home owners stopped thinking of reputation as purely word of mouth in the community, or at church, or at the local chamber of commerce.

Those all remain very important, of course, but with people now researching death-care providers in droves on the internet, why wouldn't you focus on burnishing your reputation there?

I certainly understand why many funeral directors are reluctant to overtly ask families for online reviews. Unfortunately, that reluctance is undermining their efforts to market their firms online.

And if you have a local competitor who's less reluctant to ask for reviews, watch out. Imagine searching for providers in your area and seeing one with six reviews (you) and another with 60 (your competitor). The decision is over before it started.

Frankly, it doesn't even matter if your competitor has a few subpar ratings – three or even two stars –

and your handful of reviews are all five stars.

Your sample size isn't large enough to make a dent with potential clientele. And when ranking funeral homes in your area and determining whether to include them in the Local 3-pack – which is the three local businesses that appear when potential customers search for a product or service – Google focuses far more on *quantity* of reviews than *quality*.

Make a commitment in 2019 to generate more reviews for your funeral home. It will get your website much more visibility on search engines, deliver more people to your site, and help your site convert better. It's absolutely worth getting past a little bit of discomfort.

Search Engine Optimization

The funeral industry is doing a little better here, at least as compared to online reputation. The concepts behind search engine marketing and search engine optimization have been around

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for a while. But there's still a lot of room for improvement.

It's especially critical for local businesses to appear in the Google Local 3-pack. Google is by far the leader among search engines, with over 90 percent of the search market share. And for local businesses, there's no better real estate than being in the Local 3-pack. The three companies listed there receive close to 65 percent of all clicks in search results.

There's no one element that ensures you'll be included in the 3-pack, but you greatly improve your chances by focusing on the usual chief SEO techniques: ranking highly for keywords relevant to your business, having lots of great relevant content on your website, getting plenty of positive reviews and completely filling out your Google My Business page. (The last one is really easy, so please be sure you do it.)

Even if you're not in the 3-pack, the higher you are on the search engine results page, the better. That's not news to anyone, but I wanted to assure you that it hasn't changed substantially over the past year. People trust organic results and click on them.

Of course, search isn't limited to organic (unpaid) results. You also can get excellent visibility in search very quickly by doling out some dough for pay-per-click ads. If you need to bolster your at-need calls right away, a

PPC campaign often will do the trick.

Mobile marketing keeps growing in influence as we enter 2019. We've reached a point where smartphones and tablets are ubiquitous among Americans of all generations.

This makes it critical that you focus on the mobile experience and take advantage of all the techniques mobile has to offer, such as click-to-call technology, mobile PPC and hyper-geotargeting. Mobile lets you surgically target potential clientele, particularly for at-need cases.

When you get visitors to your website, of course, it's time to get conversions. That's still a sticking point for a lot of funeral homes. Your website can't exist simply to provide an online presence. It must actively convert visitors into clients.

Every element of the site has to be focused on that goal. Chief among them: Develop a clear, persuasive, easy-to-understand call to action and prominently display it on every page.

Social Media

Finally, let's take a minute to cover social media, because that's one area where I have seen more potential for funeral homes as we kick off a new calendar year.

To be clear, if you're purely focused on at-need calls, you don't need to

focus on social media. And if you can't give social media the time and effort required to post regularly, you frankly shouldn't do social media at all. There's nothing worse than a half-hearted social media campaign. Posting irregularly is worse than not posting at all.

However, if a large portion of your business comes from preneed arrangements – or if you simply want to make preneed a much larger focus in 2019 – it's time to embrace social media.

The key to marketing your funeral home on social media is not to simply post about death-care issues but to post about all sorts of topics that would interest your target demographic.

For preneeds, of course, that demographic is mostly over 60, but it can include 50-somethings as well. And while both women and men contract for preneeds, women do tend to purchase slightly more. So it's critical to focus your social media on women over 60 and branch out from there.

Of course, it takes a lot of time and effort to do social media in-house, especially for an independent funeral home. With rare exception, you'll want to contract with a great marketing firm to both produce social media content and publish it for you. •