

Ask the Undertaker

By Ryan Helfenbein

We live in a society that is all about getting the most accomplished in the least amount of time, don't we? Everywhere you look, there is another example of this "more is better" mentality -- in manufacturing, housing developments and even food production. But what about funeral services? Can't be there too, can it? As a matter of fact, mass production of services is upon us. The good news is that there are funeral homes providing an option to families who want things to be more individualized.

My brother experienced this over-production firsthand when he attended a funeral service recently for the father of a dear friend. As he walked through the front doors of the funeral establishment, he was greeted with a question: "Who are you here for today sir?" Confused, he replied with the name of his friend's father (fortunately he knew it). The employee then said that his visitation was being held down the hallway in the third room on the left. As he cautiously walked down the long hallway he couldn't help but notice that there were multiple visitations and services going on at the same time in other rooms. Nervously, he peeked his head into the room that he'd been instructed to go to and saw his friends standing there and was relieved to be in the right place.

A private funeral has always been common practice with family firms in rural areas and up until now, not so common in the cities. Fortunately, family firms are starting to bring their "one at a time" business models into more populated areas too. It is truly the definition of "helping a family heal," or put in traditional funeral director language providing a "funeral service."

The origin of funeral service can be traced to the family-run funeral home.

Each town would have just one or two firms that the local townspeople would use. The funeral home was where one could hold a final farewell for a loved one and often would be in the undertaker's home. Some services would be held with the guests sitting on the undertaker's family couch and surrounded by his living room furniture. There were no hallways of rooms for multiple families to hold their visitations or services. Many of these firms, then and some even today, would provide home cooking and freshly made refreshments for those visiting. It was the "mom and pop" way of doing business.

Today's undertakers are being reminded that this original method of funeral service provides the intimate, individual, private moment that is important to some families. I recently had a widow share with me that she was thinking of not even holding a service for her late husband due to the risk of seeing other caskets and services taking place during the time set aside for her final farewell. Once she learned that there are firms that do offer "one at a time" service assistance, she was able to accommodate that internal request of being able to privately hold a time for her family to share their feelings together, without distractions.

What some of these family-oriented undertakers today are realizing is that it's not about mass production of service offerings, but the commitment and service of helping that family heal one at a time. It allows families to walk through their time of grief without disruption or having guests become confused by groupings of names and arrows near the front door to provide direction. When a firm can focus on assisting

one family at a time, it can pay more attention to meeting the needs of the grieving family and providing a once-in-a-lifetime experience. For example, these one-at-a-time, family-style funeral homes won't have one gathering playing loud music with friends sharing in laughter and enjoying heavy appetizers during a celebration of life gathering, while another family is experiencing heavy grief due to a tragic loss in the adjacent room.

"Service" is what any undertaker today will tell you is what makes them different from the firm down the street. With "service" being the go-to answer for undertakers, consumers need to delve into learning what that firm truly defines as "service." Undertakers bringing back the "mom and pop" feel and getting away from the mass production of service mindset are truly bringing funeral service back to its roots by defining the term "service" as being there for you, and only you.

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