

SMALL BUSINESS

Funeral homes plug into new ways to enhance services

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Funeral homes have not escaped the sting of the recession, and as the economy starts to rebound, the centuries-old industry is learning to embrace new technology as a way to keep it from, well, dying.

It's not that people are dying less, but some families are looking at more cost-effective ways to send relatives on their final journey.

But there are those who are looking to add more bells and whistles, and funeral homes are

scurrying to keep up with the latest technology to meet that demand.

"By and large, the public is demanding it," said David Tackett, a licensed funeral director and dean of the Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science. "This is a service profession. If the consumer wants it, we're going to give it to them."

Funeral homes are moving away from what Mr. Tackett dubbed the "cookie-cutter funeral" and starting to personalize the services and offer a slew of new features.

Perhaps the most eye-raising technology infiltrating Northeast Ohio's funeral industry is webcasting,

which allows people to virtually attend a funeral.

Mitch Babcock, the owner of Davis-Babcock Funeral Home in Willoughby, said it's a service that's typically geared toward family members who can't attend a funeral for geographic reasons and it comes with a \$165 price tag.

"It's filling a need," said Mr. Babcock, who has done about 10 funeral webcasts over the last year. "Some people are put off by it and think it's unnecessary or laugh at it, and that's fine. It's not going to be right for everybody."

Meeting demand

Although streaming funerals isn't necessarily the norm, online obituaries have become fairly standard, said J. Mark Busch, funeral director and owner of Busch Funerals and Crematory Services, which has six Northeast Ohio locations.

"This is a benefit to the families we serve because it represents a permanent, and not a one-day newspaper, record," Mr. Busch said.

Of course, online obituaries also are a source of revenue for the funeral homes. Busch, for example, partners with Tributes.com, a

nationwide online obituary service started by the entrepreneur who founded Monster.com. A portion of the fees charged to families goes to Tributes.com, while the rest sticks with the funeral home, Mr. Busch said.

Also, forget the huge poster boards with dozens of pictures — funeral homes now are producing DVDs and other multimedia to show during services, which Mr. Busch characterized as the "most significant" area of technological growth.

Mr. Tackett of the Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science agreed that DVDs have become an integral part of many services in that it allows the officiant to connect with the person whose life is being celebrated.

"It makes the person come alive rather than just standing there and reading out of a book," he said.

Because the business is rooted in age-old traditions, some funeral home directors like to keep it simple and are philosophically against introducing new technology, according to several people in the industry. Some, however, simply are hesitant.

"We just have to see how it's going to really work and is this something people will really want," said Mr. Tackett, who encourages his tech-savvy graduates to try new things. "Once we see that they do, we'll embrace it. I think there's always some kind of natural reluctance to try anything new."

Moving forward

As the industry has changed, funeral home directors have had to explore new avenues to attract business. Forget the phone book; funeral homes are using the web as the primary way to market their business.

"With any business, you've got to have a web presence," said Mr. Babcock of Davis-Babcock Funeral Home. "This generation — that's what people are geared to. They're not going to look in the Yellow Pages anymore."

In many ways, some funeral homes' web sites have become one-stop shops to honor the dead. Busch's web site, for example, allows visitors to leave a message on an obituary, send flowers through area florists, pick out a casket, find grief support or preplan a funeral.

Funeral homes still are typically do-it-yourself operations and generally haven't had to hire new employees to handle the new technology. Messrs. Busch and Babcock, for example, monitor obituary comments themselves to ensure nothing hateful is posted. Mr. Babcock added that he handles the webcasting but might have to add an employee to handle it if it booms in popularity.

Stephen Gehlert, executive director of the Ohio Funeral Directors Association, said funeral home directors always have been good service providers but not necessarily the best business people. But as the business climate in the industry has changed, funeral homes have been able to adapt their business models.

"From my standpoint, I think the bottom line is they are just remarkable in the fact in the good times or bad times, their main goal is to provide the service to that family at that time," he said. "No matter how difficult it becomes, they continue to do it. They're biting the bullet on these types of situations and working with families."

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