

Point/Counterpoint

Tributes.com responds to 'Customer of Tomorrow' presentation

At the ICCFA 2010 Convention & Exposition in San Antonio, keynote speaker Rhonda Harper presented "The Customer of Tomorrow," sharing original market research and advice on how our industry can position itself to meet the needs and expectations of a changing society.

As part of her presentation, Harper discussed the implications for our profession of social media and the Internet. A portion of her comments on that topic spurred the following point/counterpoint.

The presentation

The following is an excerpt from "The Customer of Tomorrow," Rhonda Harper, chief executive officer, Real Truth Marketing & Joy, Atlanta, Georgia.

One of your large industry stakeholders [is] Tributes.com. They focus more on the celebrity profiles, those who have just recently passed, but there is also a section for "Remember a loved one of your own."

This, I believe, has a limited future... and the reason I think it has a limited future is because I think it's bigger than this. I think this is a nice start.

... If I were Tributes.com, I'd be looking at a merger. I would be asking Facebook to buy me out, because [the obituary experience] eventually is going to rest, literally, within the context of a broader organization, because, I believe, customers are not going to want to have an account just for the funeral industry. I think they're going to absorb it into a broader account which represents their lives. Now, it may be Facebook, it may be Classmates, it may be something else. This industry is just being born.... We don't know what's next. But I do believe there is a huge opportunity for this industry to integrate with a broader player.



Elaine Haney

Response from Tributes.com

The following is a response to Harper's presentation from Elaine Haney, president, Tributes.com, Boston, Massachusetts.

For those of you who were not present at ICCFA to see Rhonda Harper's presentation live, there were some negative comments made regarding the Tributes business that I felt were important to address publicly, and the ICCFA leadership has graciously allowed me to do so.

Being that both myself and Jeff Taylor have spent more than half of our professional careers building Internet classified brands (Monster.com and Switchboard.com, respectively) we actually happen to know a fair amount about the Web, past and present, the transition of major classified businesses from print to Web, and about the very current phenomenon of online social networking and social communities, the latter of which was the major theme of Rhonda's presentation.

Online social interaction happens to be a very integral piece of the Tributes.com strategy and has been from the inception of

the company. However, what is also core to our strategy and vision is the intersection of technology and most importantly the funeral director and the funeral home.

Our team, coupled with our esteemed advisory board of luminaries in funeral service, possess a very unique set of experience and focus around what needs to be done to build a strong Internet obituary classifieds platform that not only satisfies the customers of today and tomorrow, but also functions within the industry in a manner that is viable for the funeral director to embrace.

Rhonda presented many statistics about the fast-moving pace of technology and online communications and interactions, and Tributes was indeed born out of what we have clearly also seen as the need to build a new obituary platform which addresses the "perfect storm," if you will, of evolving market dynamics: the ubiquity of the Internet and online information as well as digital assets which tell and preserve the story of a life well-lived; the distress and transition in the newspaper industry; and a strong desire in the funeral service industry for change in this particular area of their business which allows them to embrace technology, provide their families with new offerings that address current needs and at the same time begin to make revenue.

While Tributes is a huge fan of Facebook and the power of Facebook to both communicate and market, we do not believe that Facebook is the obituary platform of the future nor the only Web site that will exist in the next five to ten years. There are many successful Internet brands that satisfy particular customer needs in just about every vertical you can think of and those are not going away... and we believe Tributes is building in Tributes.com what will ultimately become the online obituary classified brand by satisfying customer needs in our vertical and working side-by-side with funeral service – the people who own the customer relationship and disseminate the news.

(As a small anecdote, I heard for years while working on Internet yellow pages that Yahoo and Google were the ones that ultimately would conquer yellow pages, but the funny thing is, they didn't /still don't have the business relationship with the small merchants... the yellow pages providers do, and to this day, the Yellowpages.com and SuperPages.com Web sites are still very viable in that market segment.)

Facebook is a playground for the living. In much the same way you don't send your children to play in the cemetery, Facebook is also not the most appropriate place to memorialize and honor the dead. We think it is a hugely efficient distribution mechanism to communicate about someone's passing to drive people to a proper online memorial at the funeral home Web site or on Tributes.com.

We also are in agreement that people only want to maintain one or two profiles on the Internet – a personal one on Facebook and potentially a professional one on LinkedIn - and we believe people's Facebook profile is an important source for them to be able to reference and use to identify themselves when they leave a memory in an online memory book. As a result, we leverage

Facebook in the Tributes environment extensively for both purposes.

Unlike Facebook, and a major differentiator in our ultimate viability in this space vs. theirs, is that we are highly focused on building a platform and tools that work for funeral service, as ultimately the funeral directors are the ones who help their families build a beautiful memorial for a loved one and efficiently communicate its presence along with service information to family and friends.

Tributes delivers all of those things while also providing an online environment that supports social interaction and online grieving and that enables funeral homes (which at the end of the day are indeed businesses) to make money and market their brands. Contrary to Rhonda's suggestions, we are not looking to be acquired or give up on our vision before it's fulfilled. We are very much here to stay to build the best online obituary platform that satisfies consumer needs and funeral industry needs today and in the future.

Reply from Rhonda Harper

The following is Harper's reply to Heald's response:

I would like to thank Elaine Haney of Tributes.com for proving my point of view. Last year when I began researching the industry, and again just before the March event, there wasn't any readily available evidence that they were doing anything but delivering a standalone



Rhonda Harper

service. While development efforts may have been going on "behind the scenes," today they state they are integrated with social sites and building a platform back into the funeral service providers. Excellent!

If you had been at the ICCFA conference and heard my keynote speech personally, which was not read from a script, you would understand that my very minor references to Facebook and Tributes were simply tactical hyperbole examples of a more strategic point: The industry shouldn't be focused on funerals, tributes, funeral directors and so forth. Success isn't about doing what's always been done through technology. It's about fundamentally shifting the way the industry conducts business. As James Carville might say, "It the customer, stupid!" In other words, the industry must become customer-centric vs. industry-centric.

Having been an officer and the head of marketing and strategy for Walmart/Sam's Club, I understood that the company's dominance in the market set us up as the example for both good and bad. My philosophy was to suck it up and continue focusing on the customer through my work.

ICCFA summary and conclusion

The ICCFA is grateful to Elaine Haney and Rhonda Harper for this taking this opportunity to continue this discussion and to express their views.

A DVD of Harper's presentation is now available for purchase from the ICCFA. Currently the DVD is available only to those who attended the convention; it will be made available to non-attendees this fall. (For details on ordering this presentation and others, see below.)

Newly released 2010 ICCFA Convention DVDs, CDs now available

Recordings of educational sessions from the ICCFA 2010 Convention & Exposition are now available for purchase by those who attended the convention in San Antonio. Disks include the taping of the presentation as well as a copy of the speaker's PowerPoint when applicable.

The following **audio CDs** are available at a cost of \$17 each for members and \$37 each for non-members:

- **Just added: Embalming: Bacteria and Staph** *Shun Newburn*
- **Just added: Embalming Difficult Cases: Secrets of the Embalming Masters** *Shun Newburn*
- **Just added: Marketing to the Latino Community: Sociology of the Latino Family** *Yvonne Lozano*
- **Tearing Down the "Slowly Going Out of Business" Sign** *Michael Schoedinger, CFSP*
- **Pet Cremation: Legal Liability** *Poul Lemasters, Esq.*

- **Your Perpetual Care Fund: How Much is Enough?** *Hayden Burrus*
- **Sales Pay Plan Designs** *Nevin Mann, CCFE*
- **Financial Statements: A Window to Your Future** *Frank Rosenacker*
- **ABCs of Social Networking** *Chuck Gallagher*
- **\$10,000 Cremation: Your True Costs** *Poul Lemasters, Esq.*
- **Trust: The Cornerstone of the Arrangement Conference** *Mike Kubasak*
- **Your Questions: Power-Full or Power-Less?** *Mike Kubasak*
- **Ethical Thinking in Today's World** *Chris Kuhn*
- **Pet Services: Best Practices II** *Nancy Lohman*
- **Fabulous Food** *Justin Zabor*

The following **video DVDs** are available at a cost of \$25 each for members and \$45 each for non-members:

- **Just added: The Customer of Tomorrow** *Rhonda Harper*
- **Facebook May Not Be the Answer** *Ze Frank*
- **How to Profit from the Demographic Storm** *Ken Gronbach*

In addition, the following **video DVD and book package** is available at a cost of \$39 for members and \$59 for non-members:

- **How to Profit from the Demographic Storm and The Age Curve** (published by the American Management Association, 2008) *Ken Gronbach*

Currently the recordings are available exclusively to those who attended the convention. Select presentations will be made available to non-attendees this fall.

Additional presentations are being added each week. Call 1.800.645.7700 to place your order by phone or to request a current order form. □