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ASSOCIATION OF  
**WOMEN**  
FUNERAL DIRECTORS

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*Strengthening the Presence of Women in Funeral Service*

## **Reaching for Excellence**

**By**  
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This article was written in December, of 2008. However, I believe its message is valuable any time of the year. “Excellence in service” is a commonly used phrase, found on many funeral home Web sites. Reaching for that level of quality can be daunting; maintaining that level of service, exhausting. But, the fact remains – you’ve got to do it.

So, in the spirit of “no compromise,” here’s a reprise of an article published last December, on [FuneralWire](#).



I’ve got to tell you, I get *really* excited during this last month of the year. Not because of Christmas, not because I’m hosting a grand New Year’s Eve party. What else is there, you ask?

I get excited because the New Year is coming! I just love the *potential* of it all: wiping the slate clean, learning from my experiences of the previous year, and having the wonderful opportunity to “do more” in the coming 12 months.

I love planning, preparing, and executing my updated business plan. I adore the expectation of greater success, and the increased income that will come with that success.

The feeling is *akin* to the delightful expectation of childhood holidays – the surprises which waited under the Christmas tree, the delicious food, perhaps the new dress for Christmas Eve. But, it’s really oh, *so much better!* Why? Because this time, I have an active role in the creation of prosperity and abundance – I’m

not *waiting* for someone to *bring* it to me. There's power in inspired action, and I relish that feeling.

How about you? Are you looking forward to the New Year, with all its possibilities? I'd like to think so!

### **Taking Your Business to the Next Level**

So many independent funeral directors I've spoken to during the past year are struggling to find their way, embrace the new, honor the traditions of an increasingly diverse population – *and* make a profit. Sound familiar? I bet it does.

In my opinion, the basis for success is a strong marketing plan, one where your *strengths* are highlighted, and *relationships* with client families are nurtured, and lovingly maintained. Your marketing plan should incorporate means to reach out to new clients, perhaps through live educational programs, or more traditional radio and television advertising. But, it should also focus on this client families served in the recent past. Offering aftercare services, maintaining contact with them through on-going remembrance services, or personal greeting cards sent on major holidays – all serve to keep your firm memorable.

### **Half of the Work is Internal**

I can't stress that enough. By 'internal' I mean within your *self* – shifting the way you think about your business. After all, it's from this foundation that all else grows!

When I work with clients to create their marketing plans, I'm often stunned at the limits they put on their success. Somehow, independent funeral home owners have internalized the perception that they cannot be the complete success they envision. Why not create a *promise plan*, in addition to your strategic marketing plan? The promise plan is a more personal document – and it's useful to turn your *thinking* around, while the marketing plan is a *strategic* outgrowth of the promise plan. Ask and answer these questions:

**WHAT: What is your objective?**

**WHEN: By what date?**

**WHO: Whose help do you need?**

**WHY: Why will you sustain this effort?**

**HOW: What steps are necessary?**

The promise plan can also look like a list of general company goals for the New Year. In that case, your questions would look like:

- a. What are the goals of our company? Be sure to break that down by product/service, and be specific. Is it your goal to promote your pet cremation/memorialization services, or perhaps you've hired an event planner to help you stage more engaging memorial events, and wish to focus on the promotion of that service? Whatever it is, make note of your expectations.
- b. Are the goals attainable within the expected timeframe?
- c. How might marketing efforts contribute to reaching these goals?

### **The Other Half is External**

Marketing is, by its very nature, an *externalized* activity, with roots deep into your expectations of success. (That's why the internal work comes first.) It's about getting the word out about your business, establishing and maintaining your brand, developing, and nurturing on-going relationships within both your commercial and your client network. Five thoughts about marketing, in a generalized sense of the word, come to mind:

*Contrary to what you may have been told, funeral home marketing is not sleazy or coercive.* You are bringing goods and services to people who need them to make their lives better, or easier.

*Marketing is not done to the consumer, but for the consumer.* You are educating them about the quality of your products and services, and examining (in a tasteful way) the compelling reasons for turning to your firm, either at-need or pre-need...or both!

*Helping your customer make the best decision means that you have to offer the best for the customer. You have to know that your products and service are, indeed, the best available – and speak about them enthusiastically.*

*Honest marketing is the only way to gain market advantage over the “long run.” Remember, we’re going for long-term relationships, and everyone who has been in one (whether personal or professional) knows that honesty is the bedrock of such a connection.*

*Believe that the right people will want to buy your product. Don’t come from a “place of desperation,” where you work to convince people of value; rather see your offering as an “undeniable opportunity” for your client families.*

### **Plan Integrated Marketing Activities**

Get ready to answer a few challenging questions in preparation for setting your marketing plan for the next 12 months. Questions like:

1. Exactly what are the products and services you offer? Which are the most profitable, and which deserve a particular focus?
2. Are there products or services you should consider to stop offering because of little or no profit potential?
3. Which products or services do you truly want to *grow*?

And then there are the old “stand-by” questions you should ask each and every year:

4. Who are your customers? Review your client list from this year, and look for patterns. This will help you define your current target market - and then choose to renew that focus, or shift it slightly to include other groups. Examine your community for those subtle demographic changes in education, economic status, or ethnic diversity, and plan to respond to those shifts.
5. Historically, what kinds of marketing efforts have been done? Which were successful - and which brought less than stellar results? (And...why?)
6. What are your current marketing efforts?

7. What is your marketing budget?
8. What three marketing initiatives, if properly planned and executed, do you think would produce the biggest results?
9. What do you know - or suspect - your key competition is doing to promote their business?
10. Who, within your company, should be involved in the strategic marketing decision-making process during the coming year?

Whether your fiscal year ends on December 31, or somewhere in the middle of the year, the emotional and psychological momentum offered by the turning of the calendar is a force you shouldn't ignore.

Take some time to reflect on your successes, and celebrate them. Consider those areas where your firm's marketing strategy was weak or (perhaps) non-existent. And set your marketing plan for the coming year. You've got 52 weeks, 365 days; a total of 8,760 hours to plan and implement the promotion your business. What are you going to do with them?