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Photo Courtesy of Arlington Cemetery, Drexel Hill, Pa.

Action Item: Sales Compensation Plans Too Often Companies Try to Tweak the End Result Without Attacking the Root of the Problem

GLENSIDE, PA. – Few businesses have made it through the past couple of years unscathed by the challenging economic conditions. In today's funeral service landscape, there is a more complex selling environment — competitors are different, they are acting different, there are new products, customers have changed and new regulations are occasionally put forth on what can and can't be done.

For many companies, there is the pressure from within to keep generating revenue that creates cash flow pressure. On the cemetery side endowment funds have dwindled in the past couple years resulting in less money to take care of the cemeteries. Further with less new revenue coming in there are sales people walking around and upset that they are making less money. As a result they are looking for management to change their compensation program.

During a workshop presentation at the International Cemetery, Cremation and Funeral Association's Convention last month in San Antonio, Nevin Mann, founder and chairman of Johnson-Woodford Company, Glenside, Pa., said it couldn't be a much worse time for owners, especially cemetery owners, to be dealing with sales compensation plans. But in good times and bad, the goal remains the same:

- Increase profitability in both the short and long term;
- Optimize allocation of resources;
- Sales team running at peak efficiency.

The question becomes how to get there from here. Many issues need be addressed before addressing pay plan problems such as improving sales and profitability. "Typically, what companies do instead of going back and looking at the basics to figure out how to increase things that enhance sales or remove things that detract from sales, they start with tweaking the compensation plan, which creates more problems than it addresses," Mann said, which is why the session was called "Fire, Aim, Ready!" "It's backwards, it is not the plan that is the problem it is the reduced revenue that is the problem."

Mann said that sales people will discover successful behavior. "In other words, they will find the path of least resistance, just like the rest of us," he said. "Don't fight it — use it."

A business has two choices on where to deal with the problem. "If you have a dollar to spend and you could either give your dollar to your sales people and hope that they increase sales," he said, "or invest it elsewhere and hope that it increases sales. You'd probably be better off spending it in another place knowing that if you do increase sales that you are going to take care of your sales people as a result of the increased revenue. It is further upstream in the process."

Fixing the problem has to be done within a framework. Mann said that the lens an owner should look through to examine everything that the company is doing is what would be

the effect on sales. Regardless of whether it is a cemetery or funeral home, the questions should be, “if I change this, how would it affect my revenue?” Or, “if I stopped doing this, how would it affect my revenue, or if I started doing that, how would it affect my revenue, if I fixed this, would it make a difference, if I didn’t fix it, would it make a difference.”

Mann suggested that using what he called the balanced scorecard methodologies assesses all of a business’s processes to identify and assess all factors affecting sales. Then simply focus that examination on the questions of how would change affect sales. “Those are the things that you have to focus on first,” he said. “And fix the things that need to be fixed, create things that enhance sales and get rid of things that inhibit sales.” Mann added that increasing sales with no additional selling effort is equivalent to increasing commission.

Next, a company needs to look at the salespeople they have on staff. A firm’s definition of “right people” changes over time, as customers change, market conditions change and as strategy changes. The goal here is to make sure you have the right people with the right knowledge and the right behaviors. “Who are the sales people in the market where their behavior matches the same kind of behavior that you are looking for and it matches your success profile for your sales people,” Mann said. “Once you figure out who that group of people is, then base your total compensation, including benefits, on that kind of person because that is the kind of money you are going to have to come up with to attract that kind of person.”

He added that competency required for success differs by market, product line and marketing strategy. “A way to determine your own competency needs is to look at successful companies in the market having an approach and strategy similar to yours,” Mann said. The product and service may be different, but the strategy and customer base should be similar. Determine the profile of their successful performers.

In one area where the economic downturn may help is in the employment pool. It is probably easier to hire better people. However, Mann said that the better sales people are generally happy where they are. Who will be successful in your market? Let’s face it, funeral service is not the easiest market to recruit. Hiring sales people for the cemetery or funeral business is one of the hardest kinds of sales people to hire. Generally, they don’t want to do it, they don’t want to work in cemeteries or funeral homes without even knowing it, they shut down right away.

“The one trick I have in order to get people to at least listen to your story is to go to job fairs, and not use regular advertising,” Mann said. “Stand up at the beginning of the job fair and say, ‘I’m from a cemetery, and you probably never thought you’d ever want to work at a cemetery but let me tell you a little bit about what we do,’” he said. “And I think at a job fair you are getting better people,” he added. “Aggressive candidates don’t passively look for a job by skimming want ads. Someone who is going out to a job fair on a Wednesday night is probably a cut above the pack.”

Once the heavy lifting is finished, then go back and attack the sales equation. When issues are identified and resolved, pay plan design can be simplified and made more effective. By now developing the pay plan should be fairly simple. Also, the pay plan itself should be simple. Mann recalled a situation earlier in his career when he went to listen to a presentation by a communications company introducing its new sales compensation program. The presentation lasted more than 30 minutes — already a bad sign.

The plan, he said, was so complicated that no one was able to understand it. The plan was bogged down by so many factors that in the end the sales people could pretty much decide what they wanted to sell to make money. According to Mann, the company didn’t have an overall marketing strategy for what they wanted their sales people to do, they just wanted to sell everything. Which then goes back to the other point, you start with whatever your sales strategy is.

“The point is instead of making it complex make it as simple as possible, pick as many as five things to have your sales people focus on,” Mann said. Ideally, he added that the sales staff should be able to recite the entire compensation plan in the amount of time it takes them in the morning to step out of the shower until they are dry. It should just about be that simple.

“The pay plan is crafted to reward sales results and is based on findings relating to the above steps,” he said. “Testing the plan is done by first examining how the plan would have worked, had it been in place for a period of time. After implementation, testing and fine-tuning is done regularly. Studies show that sales people are very risk-averse. That means they want to know that reward will match effort, and not be based on luck. Therefore, it is prudent to provide a safety-net for new plans, to avoid undue concern about and attention to the plan.”

Florida Funeral, Cemetery Associations Set Merger Vote

ORLANDO – The Florida Funeral Directors Association (FFDA) and the Florida, Cemetery, Funeral and Cremation Association (FCFCA) will recommend to their respective memberships to approve a merger of the two associations to form a proposed new entity called the Florida Cemetery, Cremation and Funeral Association (FCCFA). The proposal will be voted on by the memberships of the two associations during a joint convention scheduled for July 29-31.

A video posted on both associations' web sites, which features Keenan Knopke, Curlew Hills Memory Gardens, and Nancy Lohman, Lohman Funeral Homes, Cemeteries & Cremation, outlines the plan.

“This is the strength of two becoming the power of one,” Lohman said.

John Williams, FFDA president, said the plan to create a singular entity has been in the works since the end of last summer when both associations held a joint convention that, according to Williams, was a big success by all accounts.

“Shortly thereafter [September 2009] I appointed a committee to look at a merger, and FCFCA did the same,” Williams said. “There were five members for each association that have met a half-dozen times in person in addition to a number of teleconferences.”

David Daniels, president of FCFCA, agrees that today's business climate lends itself to such a merger. “The two associations have tried this in the past without success,” Daniels said. “The last time they tried it was 17 years ago. I think the time is right and the membership is ready to move forward with this.”

In the video, Knopke said there are many strengths in the concept of this merger. “The newly formed association would represent the largest membership of death care professionals in the state of Florida,” he said. “It would also represent Florida's most diverse group of practitioners and licensees.”

Merged Opportunities

According to the video, the merger would provide a number of opportunities such as:

- Increasing overall membership by appealing to a larger group of licensees and suppliers;
- Consolidate program events, such as the spring meetings – district tour, maintenance rodeo, legislative day in Tallahassee, sales seminar, convention and continuing education seminars;
- Improve economies of scale in association administration; improve leverage with suppliers, legislators and endorsements;
- Strengthen the endorsements and create value for others;
- Establish a legal hotline;
- Establish educational training programs for funeral directors;
- Maintain and grow the most comprehensive, most circulated member publication in Florida;
- Maintain and grow the most comprehensive group of member events available in Florida;
- Strengthen and maintain a firm position as Florida's leading association for legislative and regulatory issues;
- Strengthen the existing member communication and benefits;
- Develop a comprehensive web site.

The video also highlighted the proposed new association's mission, which is to be the “voice of the funeral, cemetery, cremation and memorialization professions in Florida.” The mission further includes:

- Fostering positive consumer relationships by promoting high ethical standards;
- Providing services, products and educational opportunities that members cannot as effectively provide for themselves;
- Presenting proactive leadership on legislative, regulatory and legal issues;
- Encouraging members to promote the celebration of life, remembrance and memorialization;
- Promoting the value of selecting and funding funeral, cemetery, memorial products and services in advance of need;
- Providing members the opportunity for growth and recognition through participation in the association.

The proposed structure would establish five membership categories:

- Florida licensed funeral home, cemetery or crematory
- Supplier – Companies providing primarily wholesale services or products relating to the death care profession
- Individual Professional – A person who is licensed in the state of Florida under Chapter 497
- Individual/Student – Those in an accredited mortuary school
- Individual/Other – A person not qualifying under another membership category

The number of votes a member is entitled to cast is based upon their membership category. Funeral Home/Cemetery/Crematory members will have 5 votes; supplier members, 1 vote; Individual/Professional members, 1 vote; and Individual/Other members, 1 vote. Individual student members would not vote.

The board of directors will consist of 23 members, including an executive committee, which will consist of a president, president-elect, vice president, secretary, treasurer and immediate past president. Members of the board of directors will make up the other 17 slots. All of these will be elected by the membership.

The vote is scheduled to take place on July 29, the first day of the FFDA - FCFCA Joint Convention and Trade Show, which will run through July 31 at the Boca Raton Resort. If approved, each organization will put in seed money to insure the stability of the new organization.

Upon adoption by both associations, the new Florida Cemetery, Cremation and Funeral Association will implement transitional governance. Both organizations have selected Keenan Knopke to serve as transitional president in the first year. Knopke was a past chairman on the board of Funeral and Cemetery Services and the Death Care Coalition. His position of transitional president will be eliminated after one year. Other officers in the transitional governance are: president-elect – Lee Longino, FFDA (one-year term); vice president – Deb Gilmore, FCFCA (one-year term); 2nd vice president – Robin Giddens Sheppard, FFDA (position will be eliminated after one year); secretary – Ty Lohman, FCFCA (one-year term. *Note: this position will combine with treasurer at the end of two years*); treasurer – Jim Semesco, FFDA (one-year term. *Note: this position will combine with secretary at the end of two years*); and immediate past president – David Daniels, FCFCA, and John Williams, FFDA (one year-terms)

All assets and liabilities of both associations will be transferred to the new association. Both current management companies will be retained until a new single firm can be selected through an open bidding process.

“The reality of it is that there is a tremendous upside,” Williams said. “I have been on the board of both associations and the two groups, through the years, have grown to be more similar through the changes in the business. You are looking at two groups today that are more similar than they probably have been in years past.”

He noted that FCFCA, traditionally a cemetery group, has seen an increasing number of funeral homes in its membership. The same is true at FFDA where an increasing number of people who own operate or manage cemeteries have joined the association. They are similar in many ways.

In the video, Lohman said, “Although not associated with any national or international association, we will continue to participate on the National Funeral Directors Association Policy Board as long as NFDA makes the position available to the association.”

Arizona Merged Last Year

Both Daniels and Williams are confident their memberships will approve the plan. If the proposal is approved, Florida will become the second state in as many years to merge its funeral director and cemetery associations. Last year, the Arizona Funeral Directors Association and the Arizona Cemetery Association were dissolved and a new entity was created — the Arizona Funeral, Cemetery and Crematory Association. The NFDA House of Delegates approved a resolution to authorize the issuance of a state membership charter to The Arizona Funeral Directors Association, which held a state charter from NFDA.

The legalities of the Florida proposal are still being discussed internally. If Florida follows the Arizona model where both existing entities were dissolved, the new entity would have to go through the process of requesting the issuance of a new state membership charter from NFDA, according to Jessica Koth, NFDA public relations manager. However, if FFDA absorbs FCFCA, then FFDA would survive as a legal entity and a new charter would not be necessary.

Should Florida decide to follow the Arizona model, the association would be able to submit a resolution to the NFDA Policy Board to authorize the issuance of a state member charter, which could be voted on at the board’s meeting prior to the opening of this year’s NFDA Convention in New Orleans. A vote before the House of Delegates would likely take place a few days later.

FTC Opinion Reiterates Requirements for Receiving Third-Party Caskets; Unloading, Packaging Issues Examined

WASHINGTON, D.C. – The Federal Trade Commission this week posted an advisory opinion letter that addresses the procedures funeral homes are required to follow when receiving deliveries of third-party caskets. Specifically, the opinion was in response to a letter from Universal Casket Co., a supplier to Costco that alleged a violation of a number of practices prohibited by the funeral rule that the company encountered when delivering caskets to funeral homes.

The opinion from Craig Tregillus, FTC Funeral Rule Coordinator, reiterated a number of Funeral Rule restrictions that prohibits the following:

- Requiring a consumer's presence at a funeral home at the time of delivery of a third-party casket;
- Refusing to sign an acknowledgment of delivery of a third-party casket in the consumer's absence;
- Charging a fee for storage of a third-party casket delivered in advance of an at-need disposition;
- Charging a fee for disposal of the container or packaging in which a third-party casket is shipped.

T. Scott Gilligan, general counsel for the National Funeral Directors Association, noted the opinion also addresses previously unresolved issues regarding the unloading of delivery trucks shipping third-party caskets and the disposal of packaging materials. Although funeral providers may not charge consumers a fee for disposal of the packaging, nothing in the Funeral Rule prevents a funeral provider from requiring, on a non-discriminatory basis (meaning the policy must be applicable to casket wholesalers as well as third-party suppliers), that all of its casket suppliers take any casket packaging with them and dispose of it themselves after a delivery.

According to David Nixon, Nixon Consulting, Chatham, Ill., the bulk of the letter reinforces what the staff's position from prior opinions. "It was interesting that they pointed out the labor issue for small funeral homes accepting delivery," he said. Tregillus addressed whether a funeral home needs to assist with the unloading or unpackaging of the casket. "While a funeral provider cannot impose restrictions that unreasonably impede a third-party provider's ability to deliver a casket to the funeral home, staff is not prepared to say that the Rule affirmatively requires a funeral provider to pay the labor cost associated with unloading a third-party casket and removing its packaging, particularly when small funeral providers may not have personnel who are physically capable of assisting in unloading a heavy and cumbersome casket."

However, Tregillus said that withholding the use of a funeral provider's standard equipment, such as a utility "church truck" to assist in bringing the casket into the funeral home would impose an unreasonable impediment to the delivery of a third-party casket. "It is an unreasonable burden to deny consumers the benefits of equipment for which they must pay simply because they have exercised their right to purchase a casket from a third party," he wrote.

Tregillus said it continues to be FTC staff's opinion that practices that "unreasonably burden a consumer's choice to purchase an item from a third party" violate section 453.4(b)(1) of the Rule. Restrictions by a funeral provider that unreasonably impede the delivery of a third-party casket create an unreasonable burden on a consumer's right to use such a casket, in violation of section 453.4(b)(1). As a general rule, a funeral provider should avoid acts or practices that treat third-party casket retailers differently from the provider's regular casket supplier.

"It is staff's opinion that the following acts or practices would violate [the provisions of the Funeral Rule] if applied exclusively to third-party casket retailers that contact a funeral provider in advance to arrange delivery:

- Refusal to accept delivery of a third-party casket more than a specified number of days in advance of its use;
- Refusal to accept delivery of a third-party casket less than a specified number of days in advance of its use;
- Refusal to accept delivery of a third-party casket during regular business hours except by prior appointment; and
- Refusal to accept delivery of a third-party casket during regular business hours at a particular date and time, unless the provider is unable to receive caskets from any supplier at that date and time (e.g., because the provider will be conducting a funeral)."

Gilligan noted that funeral homes are within their rights to require a family to have a casket delivered in sufficient time to prepare and place the body in the casket prior to a service. "Therefore, if a funeral home wished to impose a requirement on a family that the casket be delivered at least 24 hours prior to a scheduled service, it would be within its rights to do so," Gilligan said. "If the funeral home has this policy and the casket is not delivered at least 24 hours prior to the service, the funeral home should still accept the casket, but could postpone the service if it does not have sufficient time to casket the body and set up the service."

In a footnote, Tregillus acknowledged that there are some small funeral homes that are not open during regular business hours of 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. (e.g., because the sole proprietor is employed elsewhere), and thus may not be able to receive caskets from any supplier during some of those hours except by prior appointment.

Finally, on the topic of disparagement of the quality of a third-party casket, although Tregillus said that the Funeral Rule does not prohibit disparagement of a competitor's product, "Material representations that are false, misleading or deceptive may violate Section 5 of the Federal Trade Commission Act, and expose a funeral provider to an FTC law enforcement action."

Robert Fells, external chief operating officer and general counsel of the International Cemetery, Cremation and Funeral Association, offered a "Big Picture" view of the FTC staff's newest advisory opinion, tying it to discussion of H.R. 3655, the Bereaved Consumers Bill of Act, which is now pending action in the full Energy and Commerce Committee prior to being sent to floor of the House of Representatives for a vote. Passage of H.R. 3655 would require the FTC to establish a Funeral Rule II, covering all sellers of funeral goods or services, including nonprofit, religious and municipal entities.

"Whoever imagined that the provisions of the Funeral Rule could eventually lead to interpretations on how funeral homes must handle deliveries of third-party caskets," Fells said. "Yet today there are funeral organizations actively lobbying in support of H.R. 3655, the Bereaved Consumers Bill of Act, under the delusion that its enactment will not impact their businesses, but only affect their competitors. To confirm the fallacy of that attitude, just look at the 35 interpretations of the Funeral Rule that FTC staff has published since 1994, with 22 of them being issued just since 2004, and you don't have to be clairvoyant to see where H.R. 3655 will bring us if enacted."

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Letter Triggers Discussion on Revisions To Mortuary School Curriculum, Accrediting Policies

TRENTON, N.J. – The executive director of the Funeral Ethics Organization has asked the U.S. Department of Education and the Council on Higher Education to require the American Board of Funeral Service Education (ABFSE) to make "significant improvements to the curriculum content and accrediting policies within the next 12 months."

A letter, which was addressed to Kay Gilcher, a senior policy analyst at the U.S. Department of Education, and Judith S. Eaton, president of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, has made the rounds in funeral service since it was made public on April 8 when it was sent by the author, Lisa Carlson, to Ryan Thogmartin, CEO of ConnectingDirectors.com, who posted the letter on his web site. Carlson also sent a copy of the letter to ABFSE in advance of its annual meeting, which was held April 14-17 in Sacramento.

In her letter, Carlson charges:

- "Mortuary schools have little or no motivation to address in-depth curriculum issues if a critical or major goal for accreditation is how many students pass a certain test.
- "The testers (the International Conference of Funeral Service Examining Boards) are equally impaired by an apparent lack of academic rigor or honesty and transparency or even accountability.
- "In fact, a review of the study guide for the exam shows that it is outdated by about 40 years and generally irrelevant for today's funeral directors, according to various industry practitioners who have been asked to review it.
- "The ABFSE curriculum is itself seriously lacking content in important contemporary funeral issues."

The letter did trigger some mixed reaction within funeral service, as well as some discussion (in one week, there were 44 posts to ConnectingDirectors.com commenting on the letter). "The issue she is raising is not new nor is it confined to mortuary science schools," said Robert Fells, external COO and general counsel of the International Cemetery, Cremation and Funeral Association, who noted that for decades the curricula of law schools has been the subject of criticism for not fully preparing graduates to practice law or to operate a law office practice.

Donna Collard, director of funeral service education at John A. Gupton College, Nashville, Tenn., offered a point-by-point rebuttal to Carlson's letter. "The premise for the complaints made by Ms. Carlson is based on the information in the National Board Exam Study Guide, which is produced by the International Conference of Funeral Service Examining Boards, and not the ABFSE," Collard said. "The study guide for the National Board Examination is simply a guide, and is not a comprehensive review of the ABFSE curriculum that is taught by Mortuary Colleges." (*Editor's Note: Collard's letter appears in full on the www.memorialbusinessjournal.com web site.*)

Robert G. Mayer, author of "Embalming: History, Theory & Practice," the text book used in mortuary science schools, said that if the letter serves as a wake up call, so be it. "Absolutely portions of the mortuary school curriculum need to be," Mayer said. "While each subject of the curriculum is reviewed and revised every few years sometimes we have a tendency to hold onto too many remnants from the past."

Mortuary schools began as embalming schools with many of the early educators were associated in some respect with medicine. "The curriculum as it developed placed a great emphasis on the sciences," Mayer added. "Slowly the sciences have been reduced and there has been a greater emphasis on the social sciences and funeral management. There are still areas of the curriculum such as content in the chemistry division that needs to be re-evaluated."

Mayer, a full-time instructor and clinical instructor at the Pittsburgh Institute of Mortuary Science from 1967 to 1982, and an adjunct professor from 1982 to the present, said that he has often felt at the curriculum meetings that, in addition to mortuary educators, there needs to be representatives who perform the day to days tasks in funeral service. "There needs to be association representatives, chemical company representatives," he said. "The curriculum review committees also need more working time than just a long weekend."

David Nixon, Nixon Consulting, Chatham, Ill., said he can understand that the mortuary schools teach to the boards, but when cremation is not covered, when the Funeral Rule or pricing are not examined for meaning and understanding, and when the arrangement conference is not a major focus, the curriculum must be questioned. "Let's not even get into funeral home management challenges," he said.

Curriculum is only part of the problem, according to Carlson. "ABFSE bases its accreditation approval on the requirement that at least 60 percent of a school's students pass the national board exam, which is published by the International Conference of Funeral Service Examining Boards," Carlson said. "ABFSE has no control over the exam and it is 40 years out of date. That is a serious error when you have schools that say they teach to the exam. ABFSE could have the most wonderful curriculum in the world but if accreditation hinges on a 60 percent pass rate, what do you think the mortuary schools are going to focus on?"

Carlson delved into the subject of mortuary college education five years ago in the Funeral Ethics Organization's Spring 2005 newsletter, "Lighting a Fire Under Mortuary Education." In this issue, Carlson surveyed the 55 accredited mortuary science programs asking how mortuary science schools cover cremation in their curricula. Recalling her findings, Carlson said she had learned that the schools were teaching to the study guide. "If that is what they are doing, teaching to the study guide, they are ignoring the ABFSE curriculum," she said.

Carlson added that most of the states require for licensing a 75 percent score on the National Board Exam. "We can't do away with the exam, that is not realistic," she said. "What I'd like to see is ABFSE divorce itself from using that exam for accreditation. If you need a special course in your program on how to pass this exam then cram your kids into that course and focus the rest of your curriculum on decent stuff — it should not be part of the accreditation."

Other Issues

Mayer noted that the problems facing funeral service educators and for those who license funeral directors are far more complex and need to be addressed. "What is the ABFSE going to do concerning individuals who only wish to be licensed as a funeral director or an embalmer?" he asked. "Is there a way to devise a curriculum for individuals who wish to study for the single license? We still have the problem of licensing. Single license or dual licensing? This is a problem for the states. In addition we do not have universal licensing so a licensee can move to another location and practice."

Distance learning has entered the field of mortuary education. Mayer added that this method of education must be evaluated or measured in some way to find out if this is producing a good foundation for entry-level practitioners. "Internship time can be the most important part of mortuary education," Mayer said. "I know this is a state matter, but it needs to be quality time with quality involvement and supervised by quality preceptors. This is not always the situation." At the same time mortuary education is being evaluated, so should continuing education. Just having many hours is certainly not the answer. Hours need to be "reasonable" and the time well spent.

Carlson agrees. "I think all states should have continuing education," she said. "Having said that, I think most states require too much. If you have to have 10 credits every two years, there simply is not likely going to be good material, 10 credits worth of good material, every two years."

She suggested that the required number of continuing education credits be lowered and raise the standards for what counts.

“They should raise the bar on what is acceptable,” Carlson said. “I am not talking about making more money, I am talking about improving your embalming skills with new nonformaldehyde embalming fluids, how to deal with MRSA infections, what type of drugs affect the embalming process, more diversity in cultural education, more on the FTC Funeral Rule.”

As an aside, Carlson said part of the problem she sees with the Funeral Rule is that the General Price List is called what it is, and not the General Services List. “If it were called the General Services List, with prices on it, funeral directors could think of it as the menu the customers need before they order, maybe they would get it out quicker,” she said. “I know some funeral directors say ‘I am afraid people will think I am doing it for the money if I talk about prices too soon.’ And I understand that, I can be sensitive to that. If they could get their head around the word ‘menu,’ that is not insulting to a family at all.”

Carlson stopped short of agreeing that perhaps the discussion on a mandatory four-year bachelor’s degree should restart. “I can tell you clearly the people with a good liberal arts education are ahead of the game,” she said. “When you figure what a diverse clientele they are likely to be dealing with, you’re going to be more facile dealing with a diverse public if you’ve got a good, broad education.

“Some of the best people in funeral service may not have a four-year degree,” she said. “Let them accumulate liberal arts for continuing education. I would love to see more liberal arts.”

As for the letter, Tim Willard, a spokesman for the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, said, “We have urged that they [FEO] work with the American Board of Funeral Services Education to resolve the issues raised and communicate to us the outcome of their discussions.”

The National Funeral Directors Association said that it supports the ABFSE continuing to do all it can to provide students with an outstanding mortuary science education so that graduates are best prepared to meet the evolving needs of families. According to a state issued by the association, “NFDA Treasurer Randy Earl currently serves as the NFDA representative to the ABFSE Curriculum Committee. Earl, who just returned from the ABFSE Annual meeting in Sacramento, noted, ‘I don’t believe it is widely understood that the ABFSE conducts, as a matter of course, an ongoing review of its curriculum to assure that appropriate educational content is included.’”

In May, the Hilgenfeld Foundation is again supporting the Hilgenfeld Curriculum Workshop, an annual review of the ABFSE curriculum. This year the workshop will be held in Cypress, California and a group of educators, funeral directors and regulators will critically examine and update the ABFSE curriculum.

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Essay: Concerning the Funeral Ethics Organization Letter to the U.S. Department of Education

BY TODD W. VAN BECK

This is always a difficult and politically sensitive subject – the subject of mortuary education. Recent events, particularly a letter written to the U.S. Department of Education from the Funeral Ethics Organization, once again is potentially creating a confrontation to both the systems of accreditation and the examination given to funeral director students. The letter appears to be trying to capture the attention of the power brokers in the governmental education world.

If it is possible for any human being to eliminate their own sidebar agenda’s, (such as the promotions of new books, protections of territories, publicity-seeking opportunities, letting sleeping dogs lie and the like) if that is humanly possible, which I doubt greatly, this letter, taken for just what is written exposes and points out many issues that have been known deficiencies in mortuary education for years. The mortuary education system is not perfect, but what system is?

I wrote a blog (published on the ICCFA.com Cafe web page) concerning my hopes and dreams of requiring a minimum of a Bachelor’s degree for entry-level requirements in our beloved profession. However only two states have done so, and they did so NOT because of the blog I wrote. When the blog was posted I received no comments about this controversial position.

This letter from the Funeral Ethics Organization is well written, but I wondered aloud with many associates what had happened to stimulate this group to write such a letter? Anybody who knows anything about mortuary education knows

very well that the points raised in this letter have been a long simmering, just on the surface issue for some time. Possibly the U.S. Department of Education will find these complaints interesting enough to take action, who knows?

For me, today an outsider in the inner world of mortuary education, but as a human being who dearly loves funeral service, this letter made me sad. I just sat at my desk and sighed and thought, "Here we go again."

For a long, long time I have thought that it was really sad that the American Board of Funeral Service Education and the International Conference of Funeral Service Examining Boards did not get along very well together. Sometimes they moved closer together, and then other times they distanced themselves. Also the history of the cooperation between the private schools and the public schools has not been collegial, at times.

I feel in my heart that mortuary science needs to declare that funeral service is a bond fide profession, and hence like other professions make continual proven results-oriented success in ever expanding the curriculum, the time spent in the program and push ahead for more education, more training, longer internships, and get a useable transferable degree (a BA or BS minimum). Or simply and publicly declare that funeral service is a trade, a good trade to be sure, but a trade, and that a minimum educational, vocational-technical training level educational effort is more than sufficient, or just give up the ghost and follow the path of the funeral people in England and here at home in Colorado and eliminate all mortuary science education, all internships, all examinations, no license, no state boards and conclude that undertaking is a good trade but that anybody can put up their shingle, and let the buyer beware. Some of the finest funeral people I have ever encountered, some of the finest funeral homes I have ever visited are located in Colorado and in England – and particularly in England not many of these great people have ever set foot in a mortuary college let alone graduated.

When I read the letter from the Funeral Ethics Organization I had to process many suspicions and bad experiences. My suspicions arise from experiencing the ambushing that the outside funeral critics have set up in my past and I walked into them. My experience has been they seem to be able to dish it out, but if anybody fires back they cry foul play and bout. These experiences with the outside funeral critics have left a permanent mark on my psyche and I am wisely fearful of them, and with good reason.

I have to say that the ABFSE and the ICFSEB are not as bad as the Funeral Ethics Organization has painted them. However the letter has been written and sent. I have encountered many, not all to be sure, but many of the members of the ABFSE and they are, I have discovered, genuinely nice people who genuinely want to do a progressive good job, but as with all bureaucracies when a meeting is held the momentum just slows down, egos and tempers emerge, territories and agenda's are protected, analysis is upon more analysis.

What I do know of the Funeral Ethics Organization is that they are eloquent critics of funeral service. I believe all professions need critics – to a degree – but we cannot and I will not be controlled by the critics, for when they get control we have then identified with the aggressor. When this happens it is the critics who are going to run things. Remember Toscanini's famous quote about music critics: "Music critics are the people who talk and write about music but can't play the music." Toscanini was fearful and cautious of critics also. Good thought.

For this old undertaker I wish mortuary education had grown into a position of credibility where such a letter would never have been deemed necessary to write. I can attest that when I went to mortuary college it was not easy, it was not absolutely relevant to every aspect of funeral service, but I did graduate, I finished the course. However when I went to

Dr. Michael Smith to Step Down as ABFSE Executive Director

ST. LOUIS – Dr. Michael Smith has announced his intention to retire as executive director of the American Board of Funeral Service Education.

Smith will leave his position no later than July 2011. A national search will begin and the position will be advertised in the Chronicle of Higher Education. The ABFSE will encourage various publications to provide short public service announcements directing interested individuals to the ABFSE web page where a more detailed position announcement will be published.

Smith succeeded Dr. George Connick as executive director on March 1, 2006.

MBJ

seminary it was not easy, it was not absolutely relevant to every aspect of theology and the church, but I did graduate, I finished the course. When I did my undergraduate work it was not easy, it was not absolutely relevant to every aspect of my entire life, but I did graduate, and I finished the course.

No educational endeavor can be all things to all people. Yes reformation time might well be thrust upon the entire mortuary science education and licensing system because of this letter – but I personally doubt it, but there are no guarantees. As I see it the only guarantee is for the members of this great profession to stand up and push hard, and push long for an expanded curriculum along with an expanded degree granting vision, following the states of Ohio and Minnesota.

In the end I am sad such a letter was felt necessary to write in the first place.

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Todd W. Van Beck is the former president of two mortuary science schools. He is currently a consultant to A.S. Turner & Sons, Decatur, Ga.

Casket Company Seeks to Bury the Bad Rap on Plastic

GREENVILLE, MICH. – For years products made from plastic were perceived as inferior quality, easily breakable and very disposable. When the automobile manufacturers first started putting plastic bumpers on cars the cries could be heard from Detroit to Tokyo, “I’m not buying a car with a plastic bumper.” As technology improved, more parts of the car were made with plastic and eventually a car with plastic side panels rolled off assembly lines.

Whether Commemorative Casket USA’s plan to manufacturer plastic caskets encounters that same kind of prejudice is unknown. But after spending several days on the exhibit floor at the recent International Cemetery, Cremation and Funeral Association Convention in San Antonio, W. Craig Dolby, vice president of marketing and sales for Commemorative Casket found an audience of prospective customers not only ready to listen, but also ready to embrace the product line.

“Plastic has a connotation of being cheap,” Dolby said. “When we were first doing our market research, older people who remember cheap plastic toys still have that in the back of their mind.” However, he said that visitors who came into their booth at ICCFA and looked at the prototypes liked the concept. Dolby said he expected to receive more resistance from funeral directors, but it didn’t happen. “It’s just a matter of getting these products out into the customer’s hands and give them a chance to touch and feel,” he said.

“They have an attractive product that’s taking full advantage of demands for personalization,” said Mark Allen, executive director of the Casket & Funeral Supply Association. “They’ve done a lot of homework to understand how the industry works and how they might fit into it with something that’s different.” Allen admits that it may take time to convince funeral directors that injection molded caskets are as durable as steel or hardwoods or will be accepted by families. “If they’re able to offer competitive pricing, I think they have a shot at becoming a viable casket company,” he added.

Thermoplastic materials have been widely used in many other industries for years due to their inherently low cost, weight savings and durability. “During the injection molding process, the product will be made in pieces, which is unlike a compression molded product where one large piece is manufactured, and the pieces are then fitted together,” Dolby said. “Fitted pieces requires you to make individual tools which allows you to build in structural integrity into the product. This process allows the plastic casket to have the strength of a wood or metal casket.”

Commemorative Casket USA will launch its sealed line of injection molded thermoplastic caskets this June. The line will feature a wide variety of interior fabric and color options, which have been developed and supplied in collaboration with Tiedemann-Bevs Industries of Richmond, Ind. Further about 35 percent of the casket will be made with environmentally friendly recycled material.

The exterior casket color options include traditional painted versions, and a variety of graphic finishes including wood, marble, granite, and camouflage using a hydrographic process. Additional exterior graphic options will be available in the future to allow customers to specify their own unique exterior image. The graphics option, Dolby said, will be one of the product’s big selling points. “We can make the product look like marble, others can’t do that right now,” he said.

Without getting into pricing specifics, Dolby said that the company is still developing its distribution channels and pricing, the nature of the product should allow for a retail price below current wood and metal offering. “We’re going through the launch phase right now, and distribution agreements, product offerings, pricing, volume discounting,” Dolby said. “We think that we can very competitive on pricing with the domestic manufacturers, and can be compete price-wise with the imports with a product made in the united States.”

One avenue that Dolby is not interested in pursuing is online sales.

The Commemorative Casket line will weigh in at about 130-135 pounds, which is about 30-35 percent less than a metal casket that weighs 180 to 185 pounds. Shipping costs will be considerably less.

It is the pricing that might sway consumers who always planned on burial and have looked into cremation because of the perceived lower cost, to reconsider the casket. Certainly in the aftermath of the ICCFA convention, the concept of plastic caskets received its share of attention in the consumer media, as both newspapers and TV looked into a new trend in funeral service.

Down the road, funeral home customers may be able to realize even further savings. “Eventually there will be a value add,” Dolby said. “We can ship funeral homes a kit, it will be about the size of a very large suitcase, and the funeral home staff can put it together themselves. It takes 2 people about 35 minutes to put one of these caskets together.”

Dolby said that if the public buys into the concept that composites are going to be a better, lighter, cheaper, a more environmentally friendly way to go, then the company will look at other opportunities to develop other funeral industry products.

“Right now, we think we need to have a broader product line than just caskets,” he said, adding that the company may look to broaden its product line with the possible development of cremation products and/or burial vaults. The company may go it alone or might look for strategic partners.

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The Notebook

Batesville Casket Company has launched an exclusive online ordering and personalization system, providing its licensed funeral home customers with 24-hour access to the company’s line of burial and cremation products. The centerpiece of the system is its real-time personalization functionality that allows funeral directors to design, view and approve personalized products online at the time of the order. The new system provides a convenient alternative to the current process of placing orders through Batesville’s Funeral Directors Assistance Center. Batesville has taken traditional online ordering one step further, building a system that allows funeral professionals to more easily accommodate a family’s need for burial or cremation products. Batesville’s system produces online product renderings that allow the funeral director to design, edit and approve personalized urns in real time. Developed in conjunction with CDI (www.cdiconsulting.com), a provider of IT solutions, Batesville’s online ordering system encompasses burial and cremation products. Customers can place online orders for any product available through their local customer service center or urn warehouse, including caskets, urns and personalization elements such as LifeSymbols corners and the new LifeStories medallions. Accessed through the Batesville.com website, the system features full-color, high-resolution images and detailed product information for each item. Drop-down menus and user-friendly search capabilities make it easy for funeral directors to quickly find the products they need. Personalized urns can be designed and approved in real time through the online ordering system. Once a product has been selected, users can add personalized text or images and view accurate photographic renderings to see exactly what the finished product will look like before placing the order. All elements are approved online before the order is finalized, eliminating the need for faxed proofs and approvals. For those who prefer a less hands-on approach, there is a “Design by Batesville” option that allows customers to leave the design work to Batesville’s engraving professionals. Online ordering is available free of charge to all Batesville customers. The system is linked directly to Batesville’s automated fulfillment system, so even orders placed after normal business hours are processed immediately. Email confirmations are generated when an order is placed and when it leaves the warehouse for delivery. Normal delivery schedules are pre-loaded in the system, but special delivery requests can also be accommodated. Online order tracking helps funeral professionals improve their business operations and keep things running smoothly. Customers can view their complete order history and perform inquiries on all previous Batesville orders – not just those placed online.

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Two Letters

In the past few weeks two letters have been circulated throughout funeral service and, accordingly, have generated a wide range of reaction.

The first letter was posted by the Federal Trade Commission this week and it covered prohibited practices by funeral providers who are recipients of caskets from third-party suppliers. The genesis of this letter was in response to a letter submitted to the FTC from Universal Casket Company, which supplies caskets to entities such as Costco. "You have requested staff's views on whether the Funeral Rule prohibits a number of practices by funeral providers that you allege Universal Casket has encountered when attempting deliveries of third-party caskets purchased by consumers from Costco."

Granted the Funeral Rule has been around for more than 25 years, while some aspects of the Rule have been set in stone and should be very familiar with practitioners, other areas are in need of occasional clarification. Indeed, according to Scott Gilligan, NFDA's general counsel, this letter "is important in that it addresses previously unresolved issues regarding unloading trucks, shipping third-party caskets and the disposal of packing material." Learning, understanding and practicing the various nuances of the Funeral Rule is a never-ending process.

While much of the material in the letter reiterates previously stated positions on the Funeral Rule, at least these opinions from the FTC keeps the conversation going.

Which brings me to the second letter. A couple weeks ago Lisa Carlson, executive director of the Funeral Ethics Organization, sent a letter to the U.S. Department of Education and the Council on Higher Education that was critical of the American Board of Funeral Service Education's curriculum for mortuary science programs as well as the method and requirements the ABFSE imposes on mortuary science programs for accreditation. A copy of the letter made its way to the ConnectingDirectors.com web site and it triggered quite a response from within funeral service circles.

"The issue she is raising is not new nor is it confined to mortuary science schools," Robert Fells, external chief operating officer of ICCFA told us. True enough. In fact, earlier this year Mortuary Management published the findings of its funeral service education probe. This particular issue of the magazine also featured an article titled "The Need to Update Funeral Service Education." Five years ago, Carlson's organization's newsletter also broached the topic.

There are many sides of this issue, but one thing is clear, this is a subject that is inviting conversation because not only is education the arrow that points everyone in a better direction, it is an evolving process. In the word of Bob Mayer, who literally wrote the (embalming text) book for mortuary science students, "Absolutely portions of the mortuary school curriculum need to be revised. While each subject of the curriculum is reviewed and revised every few years sometimes we have a tendency to hold onto too many remnants from the past."

Whether you agree with the findings of Mortuary Management's survey or whether you agree with any or every bullet point in Lisa Carlson's letter is really beside the point. Much like the FTC's opinion letter on a subject that should be familiar to all, it is important to keep the conversation going to get the best ideas and best practices on the table.

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