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Will Funeral Planning Web Sites Find a Following?

If you were burdened with the task of planning the funeral of a loved one (and perhaps you have been in the past) where would you turn first? Would you call a local funeral home, as Americans have been accustomed to doing since the Civil War? Or would you, as more than a few new web entrepreneurs hope, turn to the Internet?



Globally, over 200,000 people a month search for "funeral arrangements" on Google, according to the search giant's keyword tool. Roughly an additional 100,000 people a month search for some combination of the terms "funeral" and "planning." These numbers aren't overwhelming. But considering that the average funeral costs \$6,560, such a shopper, so to speak, is a prized potential customer, ready to spend as much as someone looking for a used car. As of yet, however, no site has effectively developed the technology to turn what was a pre-Internet industry into one

that uses the richness of e-commerce and web marketplaces to link providers with consumers.

That's not to say there aren't plenty of funeral planning web sites. To that list -- Funeralplan.com, funeralplanning101.com, thefuneralsite.com, mywonderfullife.com and funeralwise.com, to name a few -- add SevenPonds.com, a new Silicon Valley start-up that hopes to break the mold not only of conventional funerals but also of the way people plan funerals.

"The process shouldn't be dark," explains Suzette Sherman, the founder and CEO of Sevenponds, "It's about celebrating a life." To that end, Sherman and her staff of ten, hope to create a site that guides visitors towards alternative methods of conceiving of a funeral as a meaningful ceremony. They launched their site three weeks ago.

However, Sherman doesn't call their approach alternative. "These are new traditions," says Sherman, citing a rising rate in cremation, more personalized ceremonies and the decreasing reliance on religious-based services as proof that a new generation of Americans wants something different from past practices. Americans are ready to think beyond the coffin and beyond the funeral home to create beautiful and poignant death rituals. Sevenponds hopes to offer its users a panoply of services that most funeral homes neglect, such as death doulas, ash scattering, artisanal urns, and Do-it-Yourself funeral kits. The purveyors of the emerging market of non-traditional funerary goods and services might find a useful "social marketplace web site" to sell their trade. If Sevenponds can find a following.

Sure, California's Marin County, (92 percent cremation rate, according to Sherman) sounds like a fertile ground for Sevenponds' aspirations. But what about the rest of the country, where the cremation rate, although growing, is still below 50 percent. Just because 37 percent of Americans are cremated (according to the Cremation Association of North America), doesn't mean 37 percent will want death dulas or anything

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different from a eulogy, a wake and the fundamental solace of friends and family gathered together.

SevenPonds' strategy is to integrate funeral planning into in the larger project of "death care." Death care is a holistic approach that broadens the appeal of thinking about dying. Including end-of-life planning, hospice and grief counseling for survivors into the process of funeral planning will not only ennoble the effort, but also provide a unique business opportunity.

Sherman cites an intriguing figure: The average terminal illness lasts three years and the length that bereaved individuals are typically in "deep grief" can extend as long as two years. Ideally, a Sevenponds customer would have a five-year-long engagement with the site, finding everything from end-of-life health care planning advice to singles cruises for the bereaved. Typically, an "at need" client interfaces with the funeral industry for only few days, making many spending decisions at a time of emotion duress. In web traffic terms, Sevenponds is less about pageviews and more about time on site.

But, as the 17th-century French moralist Francois de La Rochefoucauld wrote, no one can stare for long at death or the sun. Is a five-year engagement a realistic expectation?

FuneralWise.com, a longtime entity in online funeral planning, has a more modest, if traditional, approach: Catch Google searchers and make the process easy and fast. Point to local services and get out of the way.

According to Rick Paskin, a co-founder of the 10-year-old web site, "the consumer is not driving the business," as he or she does for travel or any other industry that has moved online. Paskin and Larry Anspach, a co-founder and funeral director, hope to offer choice and comparison shopping. Funeral directors might go the way of the travel agent, who were necessary before the Internet, but now -- in a world of Kayak.com -- are defunct. Funeralwise offers a quick plan feature that gives a visitor an estimate on a funeral based on a set of choices in less than five minutes, something like a mortgage calculator.

The AARP recommends that its members pre-plan their funerals. One site, MyWonderfulLife.com, tried to be the exuberant boomer player, catering to those who wish to plan their last hurrahs themselves, celebrating their lives with a wonderful, lively goodbye. But the site's path has not been smooth. Despite initial interest and funding, the web site sits essentially dormant, receiving fewer than 500 visits last month, according to compete.com

Despite such grim business portents, new entrepreneurs seem to enter the market daily. On July 25, 2011, planafuneraltodiefor.com was registered by Paulette Lundquist, a St. Paul, Minnesota-based author, who hopes to sell her self-published book of the same name and offer local resources at that URL.

The market for this sort of e-commerce is still evolving. And the type of user experience that a funeral planner might require depends upon the planner's personality. Do you need an innovative social marketplace? Or just someone to hold your hand and help you through a difficult and even expensive time in your life?

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