

The problem of creating meaningful funeral and memorial services for client families is a much-discussed topic in the death care industry. The solution to the problem is simple and eloquent; it is, in fact, an established and fundamental part of the arrangements conference. In my future in the funeral service, I will create extraordinary experiences for my client families by actively listening and responding directly to their preferences.

The people who require the services of a funeral director are in an unenviable position. The potentially explosive range of emotions these people experience can range from extremes of anger to extremes of sadness, from outright shock to a certain guilty *Schadenfreude*. The common denominator in these diverse expressed and unexpressed feelings is that they exist. Client families have opinions about funeral service—but for whatever reason they may be reserved in expressing these opinions. Often, when this reticence manifests during the arrangements conference, the funeral director trots out the cookie cutter 2:00 p.m. service, and the family, seeing a path of least resistance in a difficult time, acquiesces.

Where other directors have defaulted, I will politely and empathetically pursue. One effective means of letting a client reveal her or his ideas about service is to ask open-ended questions, specifically questions that do not directly pertain to the funeral at hand. I will ask the family about their deceased loved one. The easiest way to begin a helpful conversation is by saying something along the lines of, "Could you tell me something special about [the loved one]?" Often the initial response will have little pertinence to funerary decisions, but a dialogue will have begun which will eventually lead itself to the matters of the arrangement conference. Funeral directors must have a skill set similar to that of counselors and therapists; this means of conversation starting is a staple of that branch of the mental health profession.

Once the personality of the deceased and his or her family has been teased out, I will take that information and devise a personalized service. For some families, this service will be very traditional in nature. A devoutly religious person may be best served with the services prescribed by his or her faith. For many in the Baby Boomer generation, however, this will not do. The Boomers are, as a group, more interested in individualized life experiences—their reactions towards death experiences will no doubt be similar. The pitfall here is to avoid outright novelty for its own sake. Just because we *can* do something doesn't mean we necessarily *should* do something. The extraordinary funeral service will merge the personality of the deceased with the dignity of the profession.

Making the distinction between a unique service and an undignified service is a task that many funeral directors don't want to undertake (pun intended). There are funeral professionals that believe that the standard two-day visitation funeral is the best (or only) option. Often this dogmatic interpretation is borne of familial tradition: this is how we've directed funerals since my grandparents' days. I am new to the industry; I come with an outsider's perspective on the process. It is this "out-of-the-box" thinking (again, pun intended) which will ensure that I am able to deliver on my promise of a meaningful experience to a client family.

The secret to creating an exceptional funeral is to listen to the client and be open-minded enough to respect his or her wishes. As I enter the funeral industry, I will adhere to these principles to provide the best possible experience for those who have entrusted their loved ones to my care.