

Ask The Expert

[Industry leader]

Offering Online Training for Today's Funeral Professionals

Lee Barringer easily recalls the first funeral he attended. It was 30 years ago, and the then 18-year-old was attending the funeral of a friend. The service was impersonal and did not reflect the unique qualities of his friend. The experience, Barringer says, was what led him to a career in funeral service. A licensed funeral director and embalmer, celebrant speaker, instructor, consultant and American Funeral Director contributor, Barringer is adding another credit to his bio: founder of funeral-smart.com. Launching this month, the online resource center will provide funeral staff training through seminars, workshops and online courses. Barringer discusses his venture, the need to think “inside the box” and the future of funeral service. *Patti Martin Bartsche reports*

Where did the idea for funeral-smart come from?

I've always had a keen interest in learning as much about my profession as I can. From my early apprenticeship days to now, I'm always learning new material that can help me better serve client families and care for the deceased. So after years of writing articles and developing curriculum, I want to share the best of that knowledge with others.

Funeral-smart's philosophy is “we like to think inside the box.” Can you explain this?

One of my past articles with American Funeral Director was titled “Thinking Inside the Box.” In the article, I challenged readers, ‘If we are all so busy thinking outside the box, does this not presume that we are doing everything to the best of our abilities within the box?’

We often think that good solutions need to be complicated. But often we simply have to go back to where we started and check our founding principles and then make them relevant for today's market. For me, these are all ‘inside-the-box’ jobs.



Lee Barringer

Some may say that today's families want “out-of-the-box” services, not cookie-cutter services. How does that fit with what funeral-smart is trying to do?

‘Out-of-the-box’ services are great, and we have seen many good examples of this ritualistic shift happening over the past decade. The training at funeral-smart supports this forward momentum. A direction in which we are consistently creating personalized tributes that reflect the beliefs and values of both the client family and the deceased.

At the core of funeral-smart is reacquainting funeral professionals with the founding principles of what they do – and why they do it. What are those founding principles?

Our founding principles are to care for the deceased in a dignified manner because this is the very foundation of what we do. Without them, we have nothing. Secondly, we have grieving families that are often in a crisis situation that are reaching out and seeking the trust and confidence of a stranger. Lastly, we need to effectively communicate the value of our services to this client family, so that our services can comfort them through the emotional stages of grief and loss.

What have been the biggest shifts in funeral service? Have they been for the better?

I think the biggest shift our profession has experienced is the increased number of families opting for cremation.

These rising numbers have tested many funeral professionals' perception of ‘tradition’ and their ability to embrace change. Another significant shift that started many years

ago was when funeral homes began 'owning' the service, because in days gone by, this was always the domain of the church.

In those early days, the parameters had already been set, and the need and expectation to have a service and viewing was essentially cast in stone. The undertaker simply prepared the deceased, sold the family a casket, and came to church well dressed in a clean, new car.

All that has changed. What funeral professionals did not do, was look down the road far enough to see how 'owning the service' would affect the business model that they were so used to working in.

At funeral-smart, we help management and staff work better by re-evaluating our business models so that we can accommodate this growing nondenominational and secular demographic.

Why is now the right time to launch funeral-smart?

I think we are at a tipping point in funeral service. We need to start educating and showing the client family the value of the services that we offer. If we do not, then many of us could become district registrars and crematory transfer companies in the future, or worse yet, in another career entirely.

To survive, we must adopt a new language that clearly defines the importance of what we do, and how it benefits the bereaved.

Funeral-smart will be that voice.

Are mortuary schools adequately preparing students for the families they will serve?

Today's schools are doing an excellent job, because the development of relevant curriculum is both challenging and time consuming work.

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Where did the name funeral-smart come from?

I've always been passionate about education and finding creative solutions in the workplace. The name funeral-smart seemed the most logical choice for my intended outcome, which is to be a leading resource center for managers, funeral directors, embalmers and all funeral home staff.

Funeral-smart will be offering online courses, seminars, workshops and in-house training ... what topics will you be offering?

Our topics will be categorized in four pillars of funeral service: 1) business identity 2) communications 3) services and 4) products.

Our first six courses will address our business identities and the values that managers, funeral directors and embalmers choose to work by. Professionally handling the telephone inquiries of the shopper, the development of better internal communications and the development of new habits that will produce more consistent results in our arrangement rooms as well as our embalming rooms.

There are many opportunities for funeral professionals to attend seminars and workshops. How will funeral-smart set itself apart?

Funeral-smart sets itself apart by its content, and we will be offering new criteria for problem solving. In stoicism, we learn in life that the only way out is in. Thinking inside the box is like doing the work of grief. We need to acknowledge the crisis situation that funeral service is in, and then strategically develop new rituals and habits that start confronting this elephant that is in the room.

Our profession is becoming increasingly product reliant. To change our trajectory however, we must start becoming self-reliant.

Why was it also important to offer online courses?

As managers, funeral directors and embalmers we all have busy lives, and having access to important information on our own time is vital with today's lifestyles.

Funeral-smart will be that place to go when industry-specific training is needed.

How did you find your way into funeral service?

Thirty years ago I had attended the funeral of a friend. I was 18 years old, and it was my first time attending a funeral.

Regretfully, it felt impersonal and did not reflect the unique qualities of my friend. Then when I exited past the casket to view him, he appeared unnatural and no longer familiar. It was that funeral that led me to a career in funeral service.

You often use humor to communicate and implement change. Why is humor such an important tool?

Humor allows us to confront difficult or uncomfortable situations. If we can laugh at ourselves and the predicaments we often find ourselves in, then we open ourselves up to trying something new.

You talk about the bereaved often seeking permission to mourn. Is that something that is often overlooked by funeral professionals?

I think it is often overlooked, not intentionally of course. We just all fall victim to the routine duties we perform day to day. It is easy in this business to take for granted the value of the services that we provide. But

we must always remember that the grieving family does not.

What is the most common mistake funeral professionals make?

They often do not speak up and share the value in what they do and why they do it. The bottom line is if we do not educate others in the value of the funeral, then we may not have the privilege of directing one.

But if we start asking the family thoughtful questions, then we will get thoughtful answers and therefore create meaningful conversations. Meaningful conversations always lead to better decision making.

What are they doing right?

They show up every day with their hearts in the right place. Most of the funeral directors I have had the privilege of working with throughout the years genuinely care about the families that they serve. I think many are just wanting new methods in doing so.

Is there one question every funeral

professional should be asking the families he or she serves?

Depending upon the age of the deceased, I always think we should ask about the children in the family. With the elderly dying, it could be the grandchildren or even great grandchildren. I ask how they are responding to the death. Then I demonstrate a concern for their well-being by illustrating the usefulness of ritual and the benefits of including children in that process. Adults that did or did not have healthy experiences with loss when growing up will recognize the validity of your concern and interest.

Because the fact is, there are many adults who do not cope well with stress and loss in their lives, and much of this has stemmed from their childhood. Death-denying individuals create death-denying families and societies, and I don't think that helps any of us.

Have you planned your own funeral? If you have, what will it look like?

Ha ha, I have not! I laugh because of the times people have advocated in doing so if you are in the business.

What I should say is I have not planned it in detail, nor will I, because I believe that although the service should reflect the values of the deceased, it is an act primarily for the living. It is a way for them to come together and find a way to say thank you and farewell that is meaningful to them.

If we prevent them from doing this creative work, the service becomes a product and holds far less value. Families need to own this process, or else we rob them from the therapeutic experience of doing so. •

Editor's note: funeral-smart.com is not associated with the funeralsmart.com website.

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