

Graduating Your Cemetery to the Next Level

By Matt Benson

Imagine your cemetery as your favorite twenty-something throwing his or her cap in the air last month celebrating graduation. Imagine your cemetery as yourself whenever you last threw your cap in the air celebrating graduation! Can you remember the next question you had? Too many years ago mine was “What’s next?” I was jealous of my friends who knew exactly what they were doing next, who had their first job lined up, who had an exact plan; I had a vague notion of what to do next. If I could give 22-year-old me a few tips, I might start with these; they may be helpful to consider at a cemetery as well.

Get Up! Get Going, (mostly) Every Day

My alarm goes off, I take the dog out, I make the coffee, I read a few news stories, and I get a start on the crossword (mostly) every morning. I’ll sleep in until the dog wakes me up on the weekend. And then do the rest. Whatever twists and turns the day may have for me, starting it by getting prepared helps decrease the stress of those sudden changes. More importantly, when a new opportunity appears, I’m ready to dive in and find out what it offers. Being prepared for our days, for our lives, puts us all in a position to be successful. Opportunity has a way of finding people that are ready to accept it.

Our cemeteries should be ready for each new day as well. We should have our team scheduled appropriately; we should have our equipment maintained and ready to start the day; we should have our gates and

office doors open, ready, and inviting to the world. We should be prepared for both our at-need families and our pre-need families with the materials that they need to make their choices, and we should have coffee, tea, water, or soft drinks ready to offer as well. We need to be more prepared than they were for today; they may need us to be more prepared for today than they were.

Put Your Best Foot Forward

Image may not be everything, but it makes a huge impression. The idealistic kid I was when graduating believed strongly that my appearance did not impact my ability – and that is true; it also ignores everyone else in the world. Keeping ourselves, our homes, our cars, our things well maintained, well dressed, well-groomed is a statement to the world about how much we care about our place in it. The amount of energy and respect we put into our personal representations often reflects the amount of energy and respect we put into our work. As many others have said before: “How you do anything is how you do everything.”

Being presentable and ready for when opportunities knock is a requirement. Have we been keeping up with the landscape well at the cemetery? When people visit, are they impressed with the grounds? Are they going to be proud to choose your cemetery for their final resting place? Does your team present in a professional way? Families and visitors to our cemetery will gather their perceptions from many places. Staying mindful of the factors which can be most easily controlled and keeping those appearances

in line with our standards is a great way to keep that perception positive.

Cultivate Your Community; Remember Old Friends

My father still spends a couple of weekends each year with two friends he made while he was in grade school. Each of the three has moved all around the country after growing up in suburban Chicago. The thing about lifelong friends is that at some point, you can’t make any more of them. The memories made with friends from first, fifth, or tenth grade, or college, or from that summer spent abroad, or from whichever significant era of life only stay alive by reliving them with the other people who were there. Choosing carefully who we spend our time with and with whom we make new memories to share ultimately define who we are.

We should be constantly cultivating our cemetery community. From a practical, business perspective, keeping in touch with the families who have chosen our cemetery in the past is the best way to make sure they continue choosing our cemetery in the future. More importantly, by continuing to share our memories with the families with whom we’ve worked, we help them keep the memory of their loved ones alive. We have the opportunity with our whole community to create a connection that extends beyond a singular event and transcends a simple service relationship. Real connection between people is the secret sauce of life.

We should also be carefully selecting the members of our team to be sure they are going to help cultivate the

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community we want at our cemetery. We should be guarding against behaviors and personalities at odds with our goals. When the vision for our staff is a warm, personable, professional team that wants to connect with the community, we need to be sure that everyone on the team aligns with that goal.

Seek New Experiences

We all have our favorite things – movies and TV shows, singers and bands, dinners and desserts, places to visit, and forever more things. Can you remember the first time you experienced them all? Maybe some of your favorite memories are tied directly to that first experience of some other favorite thing! For all those favorite things there was a moment before your favorite thing shot to the top of the list where something else was your favorite. When pepperoni pizza was your favorite because you had never had sausage and giardiniera pizza; when *Desperate Housewives* was your favorite show because you hadn't seen an episode of *Dexter* yet.

We must try new things! We have to find new ways to engage our community, to stay relevant in their minds. For our cemeteries, there are two areas where we can try new approaches to engaging our community. The easier, faster, and lowest risk area is finding new events to host that will bring the community onto the cemetery. Historical tours, bird watching groups, and auto or motorcycle shows are all events that might make an impact in your community. There is no need to reinvent the wheel; new to you and your community is still new!

Your community and cemetery may

also be ready for new section development, new columbarium or mausoleum, or new cremation garden path. While new developments will have more expense in real dollars, time, and effort, the reward for the investment would also be significantly higher. The scariest part of trying something new is that it may not work. When it comes to an event, not trying something new might be riskier than trying something that doesn't work as well as hoped. For a new development, using the engagement created at your events to gather feedback about what that new development should look like is a way to mitigate the risk.

Be Intentional

Time is slippery. Some minutes, hours, and days seem to crawl by as if they are eternal; the first date I went on with my partner was six years ago lasted for five hours and felt like four seconds because we had such a good time. I still remember that night and her laugh like it was yesterday; I do not remember what I had for lunch yesterday. Planning out our day, week, month, and year can help to guard against some time's illusiveness, but inevitably time passes in odd ways.

Create a plan, an intention, for how you'll be prepared for each day. At home, this might be an alarm and a routine for getting ready for the day. At the cemetery, this might be a schedule for the day, a daily, weekly, and monthly task list to keep the team on track; sales goals for the pre-need family counselors to be sure they are contacting enough people from the community; beautification projects for the grounds team to address when their daily work is done.

Create guidelines for how it looks to present your best and most authentic self. Have a dress code for the different teams at the cemetery that are appropriate for their work and for the community you are serving.

Follow a schedule for keeping in touch with your community. Have goals around hosting events twice per year, quarterly, or monthly. If you've never hosted an event, your goal can be to host one event. Our goals should grow every year, but we should also be realistic when setting them. Do new things often. Know that sometimes it will not work out and that that is ok. Do not invite me golfing. Let's spend time doing (almost) anything else. I've tried. Golf clubs, golf balls, and my coordination abilities do not play nicely together. But I tried!

In our profession, more than many others, our intentional presence with our community matters. Listening with open hearts and minds about how people want to memorialize their own or their loved one's lives is a gift we can offer that will be appreciated and rewarded.

The greatest gift we can offer another person is our presence. Offer it with intention and meaning. It's the best advice I can offer about doing well in the world in any endeavor. 🙌