

## Thought Leader

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# What Cemetery Operators Can Learn from Farmers

**You've just spent two years of your life investing your time and a small fortune to get a beautiful mausoleum built at your cemetery. Today is the open house and you have invited the community to tour the facility and, hopefully, purchase a crypt. There is a good chance you are asking yourself, "Have I done enough marketing and awareness building? Will they come? Will they buy?"**

**O**bviously, there is no way to guarantee they buy or even show up. However, if you follow a few lessons learned in the Cooperative Extension Service in the 1950s, you can increase the probability of success.

In the '40s, the U.S. government successfully developed new techniques for improving crop yields that could be easily implemented by any farmer. However, it was having little success getting farmers to change from their traditional techniques and adopt the new approach, despite the fact that it would increase the farmers' chances of success and improve their lives. The government published the research, mailed brochures throughout the country and even sent government agents out to speak to farmers about the techniques – with no success.

The government hired a pair of professors at Iowa State University to study the issue and help them help the farmers. What they learned is that people do not engage in behavior change – whether adopting new farming techniques or buying a mausoleum crypt – based on information alone. While they certainly need to know the facts, there is an entire process that an individual must go through to make a decision and take an action.

For example, think about what happens when someone goes to a restaurant for the first time; do they typically sit down, review the menu and immediately place an order? Some do, but most people will look around at the tables nearby and see what other patrons have ordered. Some will ask if there are any specials. Some will wait to see if the waiter has recommendations. Some will ask the friend that brought them, "So, what's good here?" These are all ways that an individual gets influenced by a myriad of informational sources and not just a menu – or a brochure about a mausoleum.

The most important finding in the research was that, at each stage of the decision making process, there are different sources of information and perspective that influence individuals. The following is a summary of the key stages in the process, the priority level of what influences individuals at each stage, and some examples of how you can apply this to your mausoleum.

### Phase I – Awareness

For someone to even think about making a decision, such as buying one of your crypts, he or she has to be aware that there is an opportunity to make a decision. Although very basic,



this stage is very important, and most mausoleum operators do a very good job with it.

### Ranked influences:

**Media** – Advertisements, mailings, church bulletins and blast emails are simple means to communicate, without requiring any commitment from the individual.

**Experts and agencies** – Church leaders and town officials can assist by making announcements that raise awareness without requiring engagement from the individual.

**Friends and neighbors** – Word of mouth is of value, but people are often skeptical of rumors until they know the facts or they see for themselves.

**Salespeople** – Although potentially helpful at each stage, salespeople are often too confronting in this first phase.

### Phase II – Information

To proceed along in the decision making process, most people need to gather additional information; more details are needed to develop an interest and see the possibilities. They may want to find out where the building is, how big it is and if a

quality company built it.

### **Ranked influences:**

**Media** – People typically like to gather facts in an anonymous manner, so newspaper and magazine articles, detailed brochures, informational emails, and websites are all good sources of information.

**Salespeople** – Your staff's influence rises at this stage, as people may be interested in asking some basic questions. This often takes the form of a telephone number or email address that people can use, without committing to the process physically by visiting.

**Experts and agencies** – Your community leaders can help at this stage, but if they do not have the facts, they are of limited value.

**Friends and neighbors** – Word of mouth is of very little value at this stage because people are trying to gain facts and details they rely on.

### **Phase III – Evaluation**

This is the stage where the individual tries the new idea out mentally and weighs the alternatives: cremation/casket, interment/entombment/scattering, indoors/outdoors, individual crypt or tandem.

### **Ranked influences:**

**Friends and neighbors** – Equipped with the facts, people will often seek opinion and perspective from others. Trusted personal relationships have the biggest influence at this stage.

**Salespeople** – Those that do not have knowledgeable personal relationships will turn to your staff for stories, perspectives and feelings about entombment.

**Experts** – Some people will go to church and community leaders to get confirmation of what they have heard and to ensure that there is support of the mausoleum from the powers that be.

**Media** – Anecdotes and stories about happy crypt buyers can be a positive influence.

### **Phase IV – Trial**

This is where people begin to make a mental and physical commitment to the decision and want to see and feel more details about the personal and social acceptability of the decision. They are asking: How much does it cost? What is the process like? How will my family participate?

### **Ranked influences:**

**Salespeople** – People are likely to attend an open house or informational session to get a more intimate understanding of the mausoleum, so your staff becomes the crucial influence.

**Friends and neighbors** – Individuals feel better going through this phase with people they know and trust – for example, the more people they know at the open house, the more comfortable they are with the decision.

**Experts/media** – As with the evaluation stage, supportive community leaders can be comforting, but as this is a personal and emotional stage – impersonal, one-way communication has limited influence.

### **Phase V – Adoption**

This is full scale engagement in the process when the individual commits to buying.

### **Ranked influences:**

**Friends and neighbors** – People are more confident in their decisions when surrounded by others they know and trust.

**Salespeople** – The approach and feeling created by a salesperson can be the crucial factor that makes or breaks the opportunity.

**Experts and agencies** – Continued support from community leaders and experts is vital throughout but is less of

an influence at this stage.

**Media** – Of limited influence in the adoption phase.

### **Phase IV – Reinforcement**

The process doesn't stop when the decision is made, particularly in the case of a mausoleum where the family will often not use the crypt for many years after the purchase. It is vital that individuals get positive reinforcement for the decisions they have made.

### **Ranked influences:**

**Friends and neighbors** – Become the experts; people want to feel good about their decisions and get affirmation from others. One aspect of this that you can benefit from is that people like to share their decision with others who are curious about the mausoleum. You can put your early adopters in the position of "experts" in the community; consider encouraging your families to bring their friends and family and have them give tours of the mausoleum or offer to host a meeting of their Rotary Club, Kiwanis Club, Men's Church Group, etc., and have them assist you in taking their friends and family through the first four phases.

**Media** – Positive news and updates in the form of newspaper and magazine articles or a mausoleum/cemetery newsletter can help reinforce and affirm an individual's decision.

**Salespeople** – Making sure that mausoleum and cemetery staff are available to answer questions, resolve lingering concerns and make the individual feel welcome is vital to making sure he or she will advocate for you to others.

As you build your plan for marketing your mausoleum, remember that each phase of this decision making process is crucial, and you need to engage all of the influencers to encourage people to take action. ❖