

LOOKING AHEAD

By Patti Martin Bartsche

Thoughts on the New Year Ahead

What's in store for 2024? Chances are it will be another year of challenges, surprises, innovations, loss, and hope.

This time, instead of asking funeral directors to offer their predictions for the new year, we're asking them to share their thoughts on what keeps them up at night and what gives them hope for the future.

MANAGING BLACK SWAN EVENTS RELATIVE TO SOCIAL MEDIA AND GRIEF

Dr. Camelia L. Clarke
President

Paradise Memorial Funeral and
Cremation Services, Milwaukee



Black swan events are unpredictable occurrences that have significant consequences. In the context of social media and grief, black swan events can have profound impacts due to the interconnected nature of our online presence and real lives. Going into 2024, the interests that keep me up at night are:

1. Public sharing of private moments. Social media platforms encourage sharing personal moments, including grief. Conversely, this type of sharing may not align with coping mechanisms or desired privacy. A private moment shared without consent may feel like an intrusion into personal space.

2. Data privacy issues. The bereaved may worry about their loved one's online legacy and who controls their digital footprint after death. There is also the potential for unauthorized and unethical uses of AI to generate messages or images of the deceased, which can cause further trauma to the bereaved.

3. Platform instability. A sudden shutdown or change in a social media platform's policy could mean the loss of digital assets and treasured memories.

4. Overexposure to tragic events.

Constant exposure to tragic events related to grief on social media platforms can lead to desensitization or emotional fatigue.

Awareness of these potential black swan concerns can help create safeguards to protect the bereaved in the digital age. Moving into 2024, the following advancements give me hope for the future of our beloved funeral profession:

1. Sensitive content handling. Social media platforms can implement better systems for handling grief-related content; this includes providing tools to report distressing content and ensuring respectful handling of legacy accounts

2. Digital presence guidelines. Funeral providers should establish clear guidelines for managing digital presence. Determine how to navigate social media platforms during high emotional sensitivity while maintaining professionalism.

3. Compassionate policies. As platforms stabilize, there is a hopeful trend toward more compassionate approaches to managing accounts of the deceased and managing data privacy and the emotional well-being of the bereaved.

4. Increased mental-health awareness. There's an increasing awareness of social media's impact on mental health, especially grief. Platforms are implementing features to support users' emotional well-being and encourage positive interactions.

These potential advancements offer hope for a future where social media platforms take proactive steps to prioritize data privacy, platform stability, and mental health resources. This conceivable platform integration signifies a hopeful future where social media becomes a more constructive space for healing and connecting during loss.



PREPARE FOR A HURRICANE, HOPE FOR A RAIN SHOWER

David Lee Hernández Jr.
Founder/CEO
Jersey Memorial Group

As we enter 2024, our profession is still seeing the effects of the pandemic. It is important to note that the pandemic did not officially end until May 11, 2023. Many publicly traded companies have made statements about the decrease in call volume labeled the "pullback" effect, which was inevitable. Although many of the public statements are positive about 2024, I don't believe we are completely out of the woods yet.

Call volume, I believe, will continue to be sporadic, especially in larger populations, with metro areas seeing the most volatility in death rate or call volume, such as New York/New Jersey, Chicago, Los Angeles, Miami, and

Houston, and I also expect softness in rural areas. This prediction, combined with the lasting effects of the pandemic, the uncertainty in a highly contentious presidential election, consumer discretionary spending being down, and the average American household savings being lower than in previous years, we have a recipe for a potentially challenging year because of factors coming from outside the profession.

Within the profession, we all face challenges as employers, managers, and business owners. There are fewer qualified candidates, which, combined with inflation, is driving compensation higher. New prevailing attitudes among the next generation of workers in all professions have created additional demands for greater work-life balance. The recent years of increased volume with fewer professionals can also create compassion fatigue. Meanwhile, the costs of doing business are increasing, and margins are slimming. High interest rates and an inflationary environment have put tremendous pressure on owners and companies.

Despite all the challenges, there are many bright spots. I'm reminded of one of Warren Buffett's most famous quotes, "Be fearful when others are greedy and greedy when others are fearful." I believe with the pullback, acquisition growth is the greatest way to increase value. In 2024, many indications are pointing to a decrease in the interest rate (especially in a presidential election with an incumbent), which means easier access to capital, especially for those transactions that are expensive by today's standards. Transactions completed in Q4 of '23 and Q1 of '24 may be less costly after a refinance. Another positive is funeral directors are more willing than ever to change firms so long as that firm has a purpose that aligns with their values. To me, this means it is time to add some great talent and move on from underperformers who simply hold a "license." When volumes come back, revenue is back, and the boomers wave hits, you'll have a great staff ready to execute and be well positioned to enjoy solid organic growth.

I've told my staff to be prepared for a hurricane, and hopefully, we'll get a small rain shower, but in any event, we'll be ready.



ADAPTING AND GROWING ON THE FLY

Randi Goldstein Casey
Funeral director/Co-owner
Goldsteins' Rosenberg's
Raphael-Sacks Funeral Home,
Philadelphia area

The fear that technology will not work is a big concern. We are so dependent on things we cannot control. One of my biggest fears is that the internet or phones will go down for numerous reasons, and we miss calls or emails from the families we serve or those who need our services. I also lie awake at night worrying about our system getting hacked. We collect a lot of personal information and do whatever we can to protect it, but today's hackers are incredibly apt at breaking through.

What gives me hope for the future of the funeral profession? I am confident that we are in an industry that is learning to adapt and grow on the fly, as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic. I think the use of technology, podcasts, social media, and websites has allowed people to see what a funeral director does and opens the door to take the fear out of discussing death and end-of-life arrangements. Another hope for the future is the growing number of young adults, especially women, showing an interest in entering our profession.



KEEP IT PROFESSIONAL

Madeline Lyles and Dana Taylor Founders, After Life Mortuary, Memphis, Tennessee

Being a mortician ... what an honorable and prestigious call to have on your life and to accept. Fulfilling the needs of others, being a part of people's mental and emotional restoration, and bringing families together at one of the most challenging times that could be presented.

Funeral service is a profession that has always been highly regarded and admired. In current days, though, it's one that's also being questioned and investigated. This is not what professionals who are truly dedicated want or appreciate.

While this profession is rewarding in what we do for others, like anything else it has its ups and downs ... and bad seeds. Serious professionals wonder what will come up next in the news to taint what has been established by those who strive and regard their jobs as ministry. When do the regulatory boards of our states stand up for the licensed professionals and stop non-licensed individuals from opening funeral homes and establishments and operating, only to quickly and carelessly create turmoil and bad news for us through mishandling a grieving family?

Education and the meeting of other requirements for licensure and operation should be enforced more closely and seriously so that any Tom, Dick, or

Harry can't just wake up and decide to own a funeral home with no experience or qualifications; the same goes for transport and mortuaries. We're not allowed to wake up, decide to be doctors, and begin practicing in hospitals or private offices.

Funeral service deserves a better guard than it has for the sake of what it truly is. Infiltration of the profession shouldn't be so easy. Moving forward, funeral service needs better regulation and monitoring of its participants so that it can continue to flourish nationwide and have a positive impact and history.



A HOPEFUL OUTLOOK
Danielle Bicker
Funeral Director
Farley Funeral Homes &
Cremation Services, Venice,
Florida

For me, hope is all about being positive – keeping a positive mindset, knowing there is good in the world, and looking at the big picture. Hope is acknowledging the fact that it's OK to have bad days or days that don't go as planned. My employees give me hope. They provide me with an abundance of optimism through the way they treat the families we are honored to serve. I strive to teach and coach them about the importance of why we got into this business and the real meaning behind their career choice. Seeing and hearing joyful team members reassures me that their passion for our collective purpose remains strong. When families share their appreciation for my team members' acts of love and kindness, I feel proud and accomplished as their leader.



A NEW GENERATION, NEW IDEAS
Aspen Donohue
Funeral Director
Sun City Center Funeral Home,
Sun City Center, Florida

Going into 2024, my main concern for our industry is that the public does not see value in funeral home services when it comes to cremation. During the pandemic, consumers learned to be self-reliant, and as inflation rates went up, so did the cost of services. We as an industry need to show families the value of services again. If we fail, I fear we are going to see more families moving away from funeral homes and toward direct disposition. We need to show families that services are crucial in the healing process and acknowledging the passing of their loved ones.

The thing that gives me hope personally is seeing how I can help families say goodbye and start the healing process.

For me, this is very rewarding. As an industry, what gives me hope is seeing how we have begun to embrace change in both technology and service offerings. A new generation of funeral directors has entered the workforce; we are overflowing with new ideas and ways to connect with families and commemorate lives lived. As we embrace new options, we will demonstrate our value to families once again.



CHANGES AHEAD
Bruce Fuller
Funeral Director
Crown Cremation Services,
Portland, Oregon

I'd like to think I've learned from and adapted to the many twists and turns in my 20-year journey in this industry. If I were to express any concern, it would be the seeming lack of the number of younger folks expressing an interest in the field of funeral directing and mortuary services in general. In a world where much of social media has been monetized, where online seminars/classes are given on how to be a YouTuber or TikTok sensation, it's a tough sell to interest someone in the death-care industry unless they were born into it or simply like to wear a lot of black and get paid for it.

We've seen great changes in our industry over the past three years, and I see even greater changes ahead. What gives me hope is our ability to build empathy and compassion throughout these new processes. For example, the future of the funeral industry will most likely include AI in some way, for better or worse. I'd like to take a "glass half full" approach, which would encourage

programmers to emphasize coding empathy into their progeny.

Even prior to COVID-19, online arranging was becoming available. Now, it's mainstream. Smartphones and social media have changed the equation and resulted in more informed consumers. Whether viewed as good, bad, or indifferent – how the industry grapples with the pros and cons of this new reality of expanding choices will decide how this will play out. I believe these seemingly conflicting models (online versus

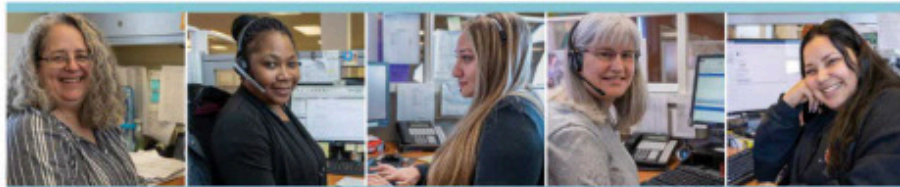
in-person arrangements) can complement each other by offering more choices to an increasingly educated public.

Sometime soon, I can imagine an individual saying, "Alexa, check on dinner's progress, send a Lyft to pick up the dry cleaning, cremate Uncle Lowell, oh, and order another gallon of 2% milk, please." I want to be a positive part of these impending changes as long as I'm still allowed to do what I do best: be of service to families in their most dire times of need. •

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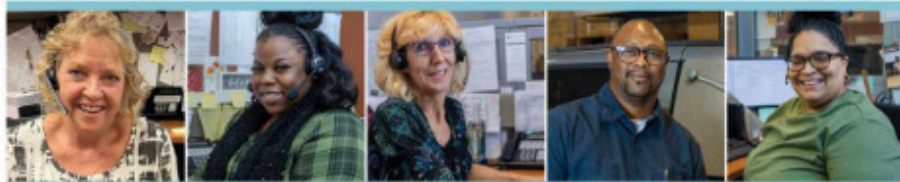
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