

# A Deep Dive into the Needs of Deathcare Consumers

*How to Thrive in Changing Times*

courtesy of Foundation Partners Group

**I**F TIMING IS EVERYTHING, then Kent Robertson's arrival as the new COO of Foundation Partners Group at roughly the same time as the COVID-19 lockdown was fortunate for the company and the funeral business. Kent joined the company in March 2020 and was named president and CEO in January 2022. Over the past three short years, he has propelled the privately held funeral service group to the forefront of deathcare. He may have been a newcomer to the funeral business, but his proven track record as a successful entrepreneur and corporate leader was highly transferable. With so much happening during his tenure—within the funeral business and around the world—Kent is sharing his thoughts with ICCFA members on leadership, technology, and what he calls “friendly disruption.”

## What are the most significant changes in the funeral business in the past three years?

It's tempting to point to the pandemic as the driving force and the biggest disrupter we've seen in the funeral business; but consumer expectations about death, dying, and funeral services have been evolving for quite some time. COVID accelerated *how* we deliver care to families—from in-person to online or over the phone—but the more significant question is *why* consumer preferences have changed. And the question that every funeral professional should ask is: *What do we do with this knowledge, and how do we use it to meet consumers where they are?*

## What are the most important trends impacting deathcare today?

Just as transportation has evolved from horse-and-buggy to electric vehicles, funeral services are evolving, too. In the past, there were limited selections and little knowledge about the services and the merchandise available. Consumers bought caskets for burial and had viewings, funerals, and graveside services. The services were highly personal and involved transactions that were almost always at-need, except for cemetery plots, which families would buy in advance so they could share final resting places.

But times, social norms, and economics change. Today, there's new technology, a

global marketplace, instant access to knowledge and an “Amazon” mindset. Do you remember the first time you ordered something online? It was a game-changer. You could comparison shop, ask questions, and sign up for text or email updates. And your order came right to your door. Consumers instantly connected with that immediacy and convenience.

GenX and younger consumers are now a prominent consumer voice; they are intelligent and careful digital natives who are making decisions for aging parents. They're also considerably more secular than their parents and grandparents, and more socially and environmentally conscious. As a result of these changing mindsets, they want to honor and respect their loved ones in a less traditional yet uniquely personal manner.

## What is the voice of the consumer saying?

First, understand that this is not Kent Robertson's opinion or hypothesis. We hired researchers and conducted surveys and focus groups to take a deep dive into evolving consumer preferences. We wanted to know what drove their purchase decisions and the planning and forethought that preceded them. We looked not only at our customers, but at the general population of consumers. We wanted a range of age,

gender, religious affiliation, and whether they preferred burial or cremation. We also wanted to know if they were motivated to plan ahead or find services at-need. Finally, we explored their preferred planning methods: phone, online (virtual), or in-person.

What we learned was remarkable and presented a roadmap for future action. Our research found three distinct consumer segments, each with unique attitudes and behaviors:

- The first segment, unsurprisingly over half of the consumers we studied, was more traditional; they want a high-touch engagement and prefer in-person planning.
- The next group, 30% of respondents, prefer digital transactions, crave simplicity, and tend to be less traditional.
- The last segment, representing 17%, wants a role in planning with guidance from a funeral professional regarding all available options. We call this last segment “empowered planners” and believe that they will make up a larger portion of the population we will serve in the future.

## Did your research identify price as a major factor?

Although price is a consideration, proximity, convenience, and the variety of services available were far more significant to most consumers. Today's deathcare consumers want empathy, transparency, and trustworthy advice. Most of us will plan only a few funerals in our lifetimes. There's nothing to compare it to; not even buying your first house, especially if you're making a purchase immediately after someone you love dies. We deliver information and guidance in a manner that is comforting and supportive because that's how we want to be treated when it's our turn to say goodbye.

Our mission as a funeral home operator is to make a difficult day in someone's life just a little bit easier.

#### What does "meeting consumers where they are" mean to you?

For us, meeting consumers where they are means understanding that deathcare should be a relationship-based experience, not strictly transactional. That relationship includes giving consumers control over when, where, and how they need our help.

As funeral professionals, we sometimes forget that most people aren't constantly, or willingly, in this area where life and death intersect. We must help them understand what to expect in the days and weeks after a loved one dies. We never want someone leaving a Foundation Partners' website or location feeling lost, confused, or overlooked. We want every interaction with every family to be informative and empathetic.

In 2023, funeral homes cannot survive without offering online services for the significant and growing segment of families who want to make arrangements from home. However, do not confuse online arrangements with unassisted arrangements. Our data shows that 3 out of 5 families still want guidance from a funeral director regardless of how they make their arrangements.

That's why we place such a premium on technology that assists both families and our team members. We lean heavily into technology that allows funeral directors to focus more on families and less on administrative and back-office support. Our interactive preplanning app is a perfect example; we call it our "digital briefcase," and with it, our pre-need family advisors can meet with families in any environment and walk them through video and image-rich content that explains the preplanning experience.

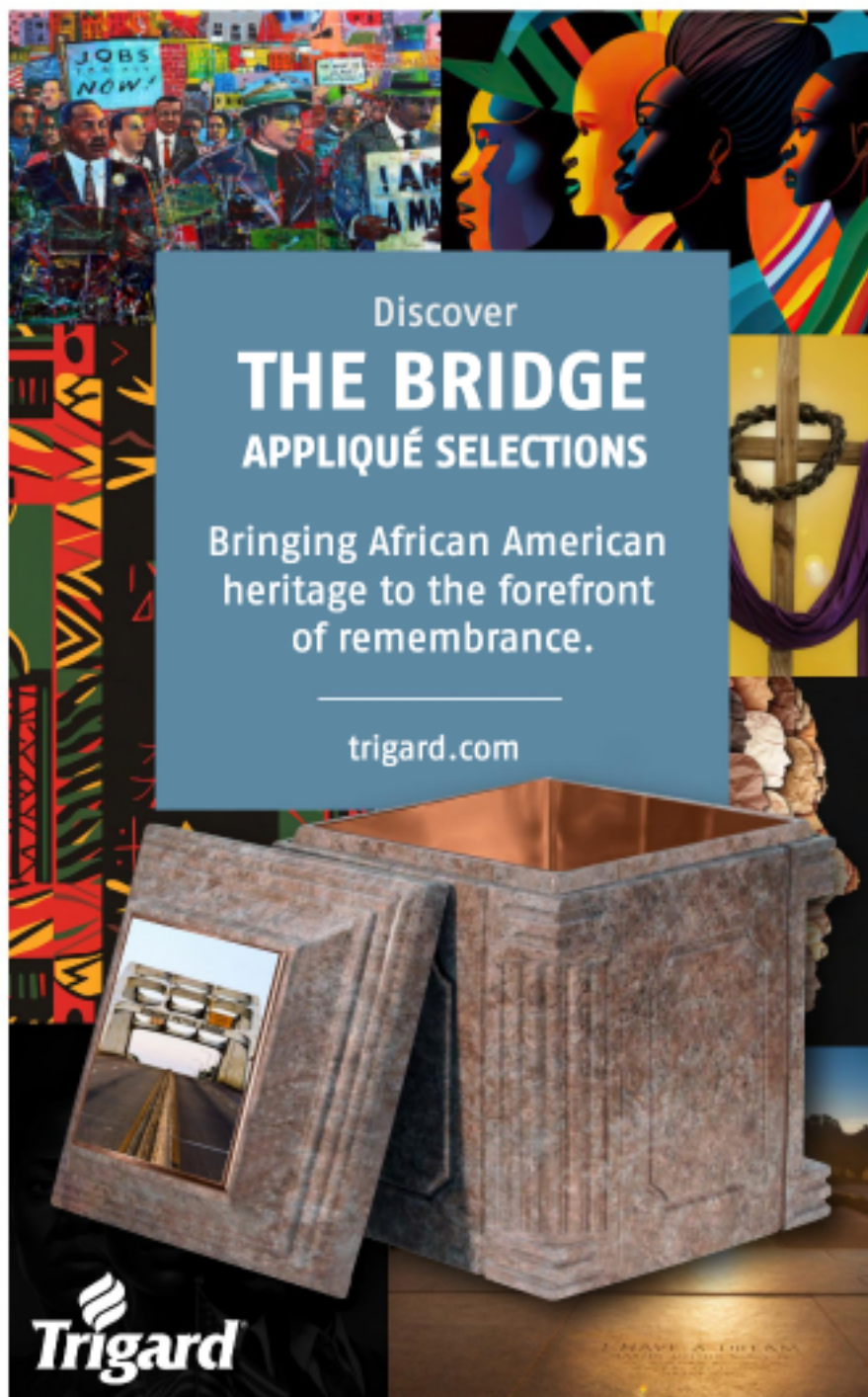
#### What impact has the past three years had on pre-need sales?

We've seen an uptick in our pre-paid arrangements. COVID opened many eyes regarding end-of-life issues and accelerated

our progress toward meeting the evolving needs of consumers, particularly digital ones. We're investing in content marketing, advertising, and sales outreach to help consumers understand that buying funeral arrangements is like any other thoughtful purchase.

#### Have in-person memorial services made a comeback?

As people feel more comfortable gathering together, we are seeing signs of a return to in-person memorials. There's so much research on the importance of holding a funeral or life celebration as part of the



Discover  
**THE BRIDGE**  
APPLIQUÉ SELECTIONS

Bringing African American heritage to the forefront of remembrance.

[trigard.com](http://trigard.com)



grieving process. Thousands of our families couldn't have that interaction, at least not in person, during COVID. However, we also know that families are having celebrations of life outside the funeral home, and the inherent nature of cremation allows for a more flexible timeline for a memorial.

At Foundation Partners, approximately 90% of our families choose cremation and many of them opt to celebrate the lives of their loved ones with less traditional celebrations. With this shift, we are constantly thinking of ways to remain relevant and helpful to these families. Regardless of where or when the memorial occurs, families still need trusted guidance on everything from event planning to purchasing memorial cards, books and other remembrance items. We want to be the ones to help them.

#### How has Foundation Partners changed in light of evolving consumer trends?

I like to say we are "friendly disrupters"; we genuinely value the sacred calling of funeral service but understand that how we deliver that care should be proactive, not reactive, to meet the changing needs of consumers. This means building relationships with families throughout their deathcare journey—from the time they buy sympathy flowers in honor of lost loved ones to preplanning and assisting with their at-need arrangements.

Foundation Partners is not your typical funeral home group. We don't buy independent funeral homes and reset them to factory settings. We partner with successful operators who know their local markets and have built lasting legacies. Most funeral directors I know would prefer to spend time with families rather than corporate affairs (accounting, HR, marketing, etc.). We try

to take some of that pressure off by streamlining their back-office operations so they can serve. We have a sustainable, thoughtful playbook and we are excited about the future. ☑



**Kent Robertson** is president and CEO of Foundation Partners Group, a national leader in innovative funeral and cremation services with some 270 locations serving more than 125,000 families each year. Under Kent's leadership, the company has nearly doubled in size since he joined as Chief Operating Officer in March 2020. Before joining Foundation Partners, Kent was founder and CEO of Fenix Parts, a leading recycler and reseller of OEM automotive products, and spent more than 20 years with Stericycle, the nation's leading provider of compliance-based solutions.

#### MARK KRAUSE

KRAUSE FUNERAL HOMES AND  
CREMATION SERVICES

"OUR TEAM  
IS LIKE  
FAMILY.  
NOW IT'S  
A BIGGER  
FAMILY."



It was important to me that a successor would preserve our legacy of exceptional service. I also wanted our team to continue feeling appreciated, with plenty of opportunity for growth. The leadership at Foundation Partners Group was genuinely interested in what we were doing as one of the largest funeral providers in Wisconsin. I knew it was the right time to join Foundation Partners Group. Maybe it's the right time for you, too.

Get in Touch with Foundation Partners Group  
1-888-788-7526 • [FoundationPartners.com](http://FoundationPartners.com)

