

# John Smith

CEO, Foundation Partners Group

BY TIMOTHY TOTTEN, PUBLISHER

*I recently sat down with John Smith, the new CEO of Foundation Partners Group to ask him how he's settling into the role, what changes he sees ahead for FPG and other aggregators, and what excites him about the industry as a whole.*

John Smith's bio lists a series of interesting moves between companies in different fields. Just before joining Foundation Partners as their CEO in January 2025, he led Icon Parking, a large New York-based operator of more than 200 locations, that weathered the pandemic and successfully transitioned from in-person payments to an app-based system in a short period under his leadership.

I don't know exactly what to expect when he joins the conversation, perhaps a grizzled veteran of the New York Real Estate world or a techy nerd focused on computers, but I am struck by the easy smile and thoughtful answers of the kind man who joins me.

Having just completed three months of tours of many of the Foundation Partners locations in various markets – the company operates more than 250 locations across 21 states – Smith is eager to share what he's learned and why he embarked on this journey.

"I've done this a number of times," explains Smith. "When I've come into a new industry or new position, it's been important for me to see the company and meet the people who are in place doing the work."

I wonder if that meant that his first few months were really about listening to the company and staff, but he surprises me by saying that process is actually longer.

"For about the first six months, I'm drawing energy from the company, soaking in all the knowledge, asking lots of questions," he shares.

This listening and learning approach seems to fit well with another initiative Smith recently launched: the



company's new Community Advisory Board. The board, composed of former funeral business owners who are influential industry leaders, was formed by Smith to fast track this early learning process, and he's already seeing results.

"It's part of my strategy of shoshin, a Japanese Zen Buddhist concept of 'a beginner's mind,' Smith tells me. "It's about having an unburdened attitude toward learning and that has helped me glean so much from these experts."

Our conversation turns toward the strengths and challenges he's seen so far in his tenure. Smith is quick to praise the leadership team and the location-based staff, while also willing to identify what he sees as challenges for the company.

"I've been impressed visiting our locations and meeting such caring people," he says. "Usually a new leader comes in and there's someone on the leadership team who isn't up to par, but that's not the case here."

In fact, he says, this company has the strongest sense of mission and the clearest "why" among the team member of any company he's worked with. "They really care deeply about serving families," he says, but still acknowledges that recruitment is a concern for many companies in the industry and that FPG is no different.

The other challenge he shares with me is the various brands currently under the FPG umbrella and how to leverage those brand identities and best practices across a national brand that drives growth.

"A lot of us think of the aggregator or consolidator

businesses as being more like a holding company of many small brands, not necessarily a nationwide operating company," I offer.

But he explains that's not the strategy at all. Instead, he sees growth potential in identifying an "FPG" way not just as a means to leverage a company-wide brand strategy, but to attract future acquisition targets.

"When we so look at a potential acquisition, we need to make sure we're the right owner for that business. It means we might not want to buy a large premium funeral home with a large cemetery," he adds before making it clear that that would be determined by factors in the individual market and other concerns.

As we transition into a discussion of what fresh perspective he brings to the industry, he rattles off current and predicted future death rates like a seasoned pro. He and I agree that both the ending lull brought on by excess deaths during COVID and the looming swell in the Boomer death rate are positive signs for the future health of the industry.

Of course, that leads me to question what role innovation will play going forward, considering that he built an even bigger parking empire by employing tech at a time when many parking companies were feeling the pressure of fewer people driving to work and more safety concerns for in-person transactions.

Smith sees some great opportunities for Foundation Partners. "I've already gathered the information, research and data to begin making changes and moves needed to lead this company into the future." He smiles and continues, "It's a good time to get the business

ready to give families a different experience,"

As our time winds down, I ask John why, after selling Icon and retiring to the golf course, he chose to get back into leadership. He takes a few moments to compose his thoughts, and as he leans forward in his chair, I can tell that there is something deeply personal coming.

"I knew I still had more to give," he says earnestly.

And while he hadn't been looking very far, the specs for the Foundation Partnership CEO role were laid in front of him. He says they called for a passion for helping people, energizing frontline issues, and an even leadership style.

"I showed it to my wife and said 'what do you think about this?' So I went out into the market in Columbia, South Carolina just to do a little research and it immediately brought back vivid memories of my mother's passing."

Smith goes on to tell me that he'd gotten a call to come to his mother's apartment in another state. He hadn't even known she was sick. Her death was sudden and there was so much to do in the moment.

"The way the process worked then, I didn't feel like I had time to grieve," he says now. "But as I stood at her casket I realized it was my last chance to see her, to be with my mom and it was overwhelming."

He takes a moment to reflect before continuing.

"I think there are ways to make this process better for families. That's part of my 'why' that led to me deciding to join Foundation Partners Group." FBS

