

## A Funeral Futurist Shares Best Practices to Follow on Social Media

### Robin Heppell Urges Funeral Professionals Not to Get Distracted by ‘Shiny Objects’

Chances are, you got involved in funeral service because you’re passionate about helping families – not because you’re a social media marketing guru.

As a result, you may be farming out your social media efforts to advertising agencies and consultants, but you can do much of this work in house, according to Robin Heppell, a licensed funeral director, marketing and strategy consultant and the owner of FuneralFuturist.com.



Robin Heppell

On a webinar titled “Five Mistakes Funeral Homes Make with Social Media,” Heppell explored how funeral professionals can get proactive about cost effectively using technology to boost market share. Here are some of his tips ...

#### 1. When hiring a social media company or someone to work in house, outline your goals in advance.

“If someone says they will increase your likes or engagement, that is something to worry about because unfortunately, that does not pay the bills,” Heppell says. “If you are investing the money, you want some form of return.”

To improve your chances of picking the right person for the job, ask, “How long will it take for me to realize a positive return on my investment,” Heppell advises.

Be prepared for that return to take some time, Heppell adds.

“Social media is a longer play,” he says. “You will have a better chance of getting preneed leads down the road or over years and years of being connected with people. And when someone is faced with an at-need situation, you become top of mind for them.”

## SUBSCRIBER SERVICES

#### EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR:

Thomas A. Parmalee  
Phone: 301-591-1846  
tparmalee@katesboylston.com  
www.linkedin.com/in/thomasparmalee

#### MANAGING EDITOR:

Patti Martin Bartsche  
Phone: 301-591-1845  
pbartsche@katesboylston.com  
www.linkedin.com/in/pattimartinbartsche

#### ASSOCIATE EDITOR:

Steve Cronin  
Phone: 301-591-1846  
scronin@katesboylston.com  
https://www.linkedin.com/in/steve-cronin-7119751b



**SITE LICENSES AND REPRINTS:** It is against the law to forward this to another person. If you would like to purchase multiple subscriptions for your firm, you can do so at a reduced rate. For information, call Thomas Parmalee at 732-730-2586 or email tparmalee@katesboylston.com.

**COPYRIGHT WARNING:** Copyright violations will be prosecuted. FSI shares 5 percent of the net proceeds of settlements or jury awards with individuals who provide essential evidence of illegal photocopying or electronic redistribution. To report violations, contact attorney Steve McVeary at 301-287-2266 or email at smcveary@ucg.com.

Funeral Service Insider is published weekly 48 times a year by Kates-Boylston Publications  
Two Washingtonian Center  
9737 Washingtonian Blvd., Suite 502  
Gaithersburg, MD 20878-7364

**CUSTOMER SERVICE | SUBSCRIPTIONS:**  
800-500-4585

If someone doesn't answer the return-on-investment question to your satisfaction, you need to walk – especially if they are charging you \$500 per month, Heppell says.

“David Nixon (of Nixon Consulting) says that on average, funeral homes spend \$300 per funeral on advertising,” Heppell says. “If you can get that number in your head, just think if the average is \$300, some calls will be low-cost cremations, some funerals and some higher-end memorial services. If you are going to pay \$500 per month for six months to a social media manager, then that's \$3,000. Can you expect 10 calls out of that time? Those are the things you need to think about. You don't want to do it because other people are doing it – you want to have a goal.”

## **2. Don't autopost on Facebook.**

“It's a waste of time,” according to Heppell. “Facebook shows manual posts before automated posts.” For the 20 seconds or so it takes to manually write a post, it makes more sense to do that, he says.

## **3. Encourage your families to be your ambassadors.**

Perhaps the biggest mistake that funeral homes make when it comes to social media is they do not encourage families to share obituaries online, thus driving traffic to the funeral home's website, Heppell says.

While you may be posting obituaries on your own business page, most of your followers will not know the deceased individual, Heppell notes. But when family members post a link to an obituary on Facebook or elsewhere, most people in their network will know the person. They will want the information and click on the link. “Probably everyone is going to see that obituary in their network because there is going to be lots of reactions to it, and it will also be shared,” Heppell says.

Make it as easy as possible for families to share an obituary on their social networks. Suggest it to them during arrangements, and follow up with an email that includes a link to the obituary, Heppell says.

“When funeral homes practice this strategy, their traffic escalates,” Heppell says. “And these are the exact people who may buy flowers if they are directed to your site. You are going to benefit from this versus them sharing an obituary posted on a newspaper site.”

If you're not doing this, start doing it – and if you use Google Analytics, you'll immediately see that more people will start coming to your site through Facebook, Heppell says.

## **4. Facebook advertising can be useful – as long as you know what you want to get out of it.**

### **Two Useful Tools**

Robin Heppell, a licensed funeral director, marketing and strategy consultant and the owner of FuneralFuturist.com, shared numerous tools during a webinar focusing on social media. Here are two of his favorites.

#### **1. Pixabay**

This site offers thousands of photos and clipart that you can use. Most of the images are free to use, and no attribution is required. Visit [www.pixabay.com](http://www.pixabay.com) to learn more.

#### **2. Adobe Spark**

This site lets you select different images and output them in the right format for a Facebook cover, LinkedIn cover and other dimensions. Once you create an image, which can include text, you can resize it for various headers. You can even upload your own images.

“It gives you images you are allowed to use, so you don't get a threatening letter from Getty Images demanding \$750,” Heppell says. “This is a great resource.” Visit [www.spark.adobe.com](http://www.spark.adobe.com) to learn more.

It only makes sense to advertise on Facebook if you know you're getting a positive return on investment, Heppell says.

For instance, if you're conducting an estate planning seminar that you advertise on Facebook and 10 people end up preplanning with your funeral home, you'd do that all day long – even if you spent \$2,500 on Facebook advertising, Heppell says.

When advertising on Facebook, offering a free estate planning guide or inviting people to an event to generate business leads often works best, Heppell says.

### **5. Don't give up on direct mail.**

Even if it's more expensive than advertising on Facebook, you will be reaching a different audience. As long as you are generating a positive return on investment, keep doing it, Heppell says.

### **6. Don't forget about Google.**

Social media can be great for many things, but when it comes to serving families in an at-need situation, ranking high on Google is still king, Heppell says. He notes that he's created websites for cremation-oriented companies and built a thriving business without spending any money on social media – all because he paid attention to how the website ranked on Google with certain keyword searches.

### **7. Focus on your community to drive engagement.**

You might see a beautiful sunrise or sunset in town and snap a picture. If it's something you'd be interested in seeing as a member of your community, it's something your funeral home followers would want to see, too – so start sharing, Heppell says. “We all walk around with cameras in our pockets, so if you see a neat opportunity to take a photo in your hometown, take that and share it,” he says.

For your individual Facebook account – assuming you use it to help generate interest in your funeral home – you also want to be sure to engage with others by liking their posts, wishing them happy birthday, etc.

### **8. Create a social media schedule, and stick to it.**

Heppell spends a few hours per week creating content he can share on social media, and 30 minutes per day posting and managing his plan, but it can be different depending on your goals and objectives, he says. If you can't spend at least a few hours per week on social media, you probably want to explore finding someone who can help you, he says.

It's important to not get overwhelmed by all the social networks. Focus on creating and finding content that people will be interested in – and then choose where to share it. Maybe one day you share it on Twitter, the next day on Facebook, etc.

“Instead of thinking of these as various independent networks, I like to think of them as using social media channels to get my message out,” he says. “So instead of having a Facebook strategy, a YouTube strategy and a Twitter strategy, it's like here is my content marketing strategy – and those are the channels I'm going to use to get my information out to various people.”

One of the easiest things funeral homes can do is answer a few frequently asked questions in a video, Heppell says. You can chop that video into smaller segments and then share them throughout the week on social media. “People ask funeral homes questions all the time – just look in your inbox or your ‘Ask the Director’ forms.”

Ultimately, your final goal should be to drive people to your website and get them to opt into your own email marketing system so you can keep those leads in your own database, Heppell says. “Ten thousand likes on Facebook probably wouldn’t be worth 1,000 email addresses that people have opted to give you to get information from you,” Heppell says. “But you need to value that relationship – you can’t spam them because then they will unsubscribe.”

### **9. Don’t be too promotional on Facebook.**

If you’re struggling with this, try what Heppell calls the “four quarters formula.” Spend 25 percent of your time on personal updates, 25 percent commenting and liking updates from others, 25 percent sharing useful information and 25 percent on indirect business promotions, such as a post about a holiday event you’re holding at your funeral home.

By sharing useful information from others, you’re also encouraging them to share your posts, Heppell says. “You are doing them a favor, and they might in turn share something of yours, too,” he says.

---

### **Note from Robin Heppell:**

If you haven't watched the replay of the Social Media Webinar, you can access it for free at:  
<http://www.FuneralGurus.com/social-media-funeral-homes/>

### **Save the Date for the Cremation Innovations Summit in Baltimore**

Some of the top funeral home operators and consultants in funeral service will be speaking at the Cremation Innovations Summit, May 5, at the Hilton Baltimore. Be sure to save the date. Stay tuned to [www.katesboylston.com/events](http://www.katesboylston.com/events) for details.