

Friendly Funerals

In a bid to pre-sell more of their services to baby boomers, funeral homes are trying to make death a user-friendly experience

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Shakespeare in the Park plays, gospel concerts, bird watching, tree hugging, historical walking tours, jogging and picnics are not the first things that spring to mind when you think of cemeteries and funerals. But for Mount Royal Commemorative Services, on Montreal's Mount Royal, it's all part of bringing life to an industry long known for its deadly dull marketing.

Armed with research by Pollara, which found the single biggest thing consumers want from the funeral/cemetery industry is information, "we decided to (use) our marketing efforts to say we're committed to educating Montrealers and consumers about the funeral and cemetery profession," says Tim Thompson, director of marketing for the non-profit cemetery and funeral complex. "We took the approach of trying to demystify the business."

Thompson, who worked in sales in the Montreal radio business for 17 years and had a brief stint in 1996 as vice-president, sales and marketing of the Montreal Alouettes, came to Mount Royal to set up its sales and marketing division.

To be sure, the cemetery has a lot going for it. Located on the mountain in the middle of the city, it's designated a national historic site by the Canadian government. The cemetery is home to everyone from former prime ministers to Habs greats and Titanic victims.

Soon after Thompson arrived, he came up with the idea of providing people with information in the form of free information kits with no obligations. Using that call to action is a savvy move, Thompson notes. He cites research that 87% of those who ask for literature expect to eventually purchase.

To advertise the information kits, radio was the medium of choice for the ex-radio man, who backs up that notion with Comquest research showing radio and TV top the list at 37% each on the average daily share of time spent with media. Radio's ability to provide frequency at an affordable price was also a plus. "I have a belief that to get results in advertising, you need to have a solid amount of frequency and a good creative message with some form of call to action," he says. "When you put those two things together, you generally get results."

Mount Royal started advertising on radio in 1999 and now advertises on six Montreal radio stations in French and in English, with Thompson starring as the on-air voice in the English ads. Each 60-second ad, which Thompson writes, starts with a "did you know that" question (for example, did you know that 50% of Canadians prefer cremation?), provides some answers to the question and ends with the call to action ("For your free information kit with no obligation call today."). The ads appear on each station an average of 35 times weekly, with the goal of reaching 50% of the station's audience at least three times monthly.

Thompson also bought easy-to-remember toll-free numbers (1-800-FUNERAL, 800-CREMATATION, 800-PREPLAN) for the 514 area code from Los Angeles-based 1-800-DIAL800, which sells toll-free numbers. A different telephone number is provided for each radio station, which provides easy tracking of queries. Branding and awareness are "great for Coca-Cola and the big guys, but I need response in my advertising," he notes.

Mount Royal also runs TV ads early in the year, when costs are lower. Even so, the TV ads, eat up about 75% of Mount Royal's marketing budget, which Thompson won't disclose but says represents 5% of revenues. With a target of women 55-plus, this year's six week TV campaign aired during such shows as *Oprah* and *Dr. Phil*.

Thompson decided to go with a testimonial approach to the TV ads, which focus on pre-planning. "I never wanted to think about the inevitable," says a woman in one spot. "But relieving the burden from my children was a benefit I just couldn't resist." Radio and TV ads generate more than 1,000 inquiries a year. People who call for an information kit, get a regular newsletter called *Communicator* a few times a year and counsellors follow up.

Thompson says funeral pre-planning, also known as prearrangement, has grown dramatically in recent years, with about 50% of funeral services now pre-planned. It "opens you up to many possibilities," since death is "ultimately the only thing you know you're going to use."

While the radio and TV ads may not be the stuff of creative awards, they're a step above the usual funeral and cemetery industry approach of "our family serving your family in the time of need." And Mount Royal's marketing tactics have caught the cemetery and funeral industry's attention. Thompson was the keynote speaker on innovative marketing strategies for the industry at the International Cemetery and Funeral Association annual convention in Las Vegas in March.

Thompson notes a new industry trend is one-stop shopping for visitations, memorial services, burials and receptions. "I wish there was a better word for it, because I can't use it in any of my marketing, but it really is the essence of what we're doing," he says. "People want to come to meet one person, make all their decisions and do everything in one place. In 2006, people want simplicity and convenience."

Baby boomers in particular are also looking to personalize funerals with touches that celebrate the person's life. That can include everything from DVD tributes, which combine 50 family photos and a few favourite pieces of music at \$395, to bringing in personal items (from Harley-Davidsons to fishing rods) to funeral services or visitation rooms and having children or grandchildren colour a casket.

As part of its "growing through grief" program, Mount Royal also provides several bereavement support groups, including a "good grief" workshop for children four to 15 who have had someone special die. It also holds well over 40 seminars a year with lawyers explaining wills or estate planners talking about taxes. Given that Quebec's Consumer Protection Law forbids the cemetery/funeral industry from cold-calling or knocking on doors, "you're a little bit handcuffed at the get-go, which is why we do seminars and advertising."

As for activities like picnics and Shakespeare in the Park theatre performances, "we wanted to say that the cemetery is a place for the living." This summer, walking tours with actors in period costumes are planned.

Mount Royal is far from alone in the Quebec funeral/cemetery industry in the way it's marketing its wares:

+ The Alfred Dallaire/Memoria funeral home chain now offers a geneology service in addition to funeral services. A TV ad showing the branches of a tree explains the service has been set up

because we believe “chaque vie est une histoire” (every life is a story), which also serves as the company’s tag line.

It also runs the slick-looking Salon B bibliocafé on trendy St. Laurent Blvd. in Montreal, a café/library/art gallery which gives monthly workshops on grieving, as part of its grief counselling service. A recent meeting included art therapy. Borough meetings, concerts and even baptisms have taken place in the renovated old building, which used to be a Bank of Montreal. Salon B was opened by Alfred Dallaire’s granddaughter as a way of combining death with life.

+ Urgel Bourgie, which some years back won advertising awards for its “1902- ” campaign, is now advertising its Foresight Guide to pre-planning.

+ The Dignité/Dignity network of funeral homes in Quebec offers safety sessions to schools, senior citizens’ clubs and other organizations as part of the Escape School and Smart & Safe Seniors programs.

+ And Serenia, a new funeral brokerage service that negotiates funeral costs, has recently begun marketing its services. Its radio ads note that negotiating is something people don’t exactly have the heart to do after a loved one has died. “Today, I’d prefer looking at photos of him rather than negotiating the price of sandwiches,” notes one ad, in the campaign created by Arthur & Merlin.

Not all of this is met with pleasure by Bridget Fetterly, president of the independent Montreal funeral home Kane & Fetterly, who feels some of the industry’s marketing is far too aggressive.

“I find that there’s a lot of advertising out there that’s not very tactful. If the others weren’t advertising so much, then I wouldn’t really be advertising,” says Fetterly, noting much of her business comes from reputation and word of mouth.

Fetterly runs English and French radio spots advertising the howmuchdoesafuneralcost.com and lecoutdesfunerailles.com websites. Typing in those easy-to-remember domain names sends surfers to the Kane & Fetterly site where there’s an online tool to calculate funeral costs.

“If we put our actual website (on the radio), people wouldn’t catch it,” she explains. “We needed something catchier that people could grab onto. Everyone knows how to spell ‘how much does a funeral cost.’”

And while catchy marketing may not be the traditional way the industry has marketed itself, Fetterly cites the recently-ended TV show *Six Feet Under* for bringing funeral homes out of hiding and making it no longer taboo for people to get information. “It’s much more open now.”