Are funerals exceptional purchases?

Insights from the Death, Dying and Disposal Conference keynote address

Opinion

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Is the funeral sector an exceptional sector? That was the key question shaping Dignity Funerals' Head of Insight Simon Cox's keynote paper at the fourteenth bi-annual International Conference on the Social Context of Death, Dying and Disposal (DDD) as it returned to the University of Bath in September 2019. Taking place on day three of the conference, there had already been plenary sessions on forensics and breathlessness, and session papers on end-of-life care, vertical burial and the politics of suicide verdicts, to name but a few. As the principal sponsor of the event, the opportunity within the keynote for Simon was to look at what the future holds for the UK funeral industry and the extent to which the sector is incomparable.

At the outset, Simon set out the key factors shaping the future of funerals - digitisation, improved transparency, regulation driving more consistent standards and greater product innovation.

A key argument made was that the pace of change has been too slow. The world has changed around us. We need to find a new approach to innovation and service. One that involves customers and opens up new choices for them, rather than simply serving up tradition. The industry needs to adopt a fresh approach founded on reliable insight into what real people, whose tastes and preferences are changing at a faster rate than ever before, really want. It needs to focus on value and outcomes defined by consumers, not dictated by funeral directors (Cox, 2019).

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I was told afterwards by a colleague from Australia that his "jaw dropped" when he heard that only around 3% of all cremations were a direct cremation. With direct cremation widely available for A$999 (or nine hundred and ninety-nine bucks, he remarked), it is a well-established practice down under, with many individuals choosing to separate the disposal of the body from the ritualised activities of commemoration - with around 40% of all cremations taking place in this way.

Funeral practice in the UK was certainly a significant topic of conversation throughout the conference, with papers on the role of celebrants and the purpose of the funeral, the reasons for choosing direct cremation and memorialising practices being discussed and debated at length. What is clear to me, as an outsider to the funeral industry, is that this moment in time is one of profound change - as the state works out its role as a regulator (or not), businesses grow, close, or change their working practices, trade sectors consider their purpose and the role of education, and those focussed on the ritual components of the funeral and bereavement support for the family debate their role.

There will be readers of this magazine who are much more 'in the know' than I, at this point in time, but what I can say from my vantage point, and from the discussion at DDD, is that there is much opportunity for the funeral sector to provide a wide range of services and ritual practices to the population. It is also, in my opinion, really important to acknowledge that different individuals want different things - some will want and need more input into creating meaning around a death, others will be satisfied with handing over responsibility for the funeral arrangements to a service provider.

Importantly, as Simon argued in his keynote, the question is how much funeral clients are starting to behave as typical consumers - aware of their options, rights, more demanding and exacting of the services they have purchased.

Given this, the immediate challenge ahead is how much the UK funeral industry will adapt and evolve to meet these changing practices and expectations, whether the state will get (heavily) involved in the establishment and enforcement of behaviours and standards and, most radically, the extent to which funeral directors will be needed in the future. As the collapse of travel company Thomas Cook has just shown, it is necessary for all sectors and individual organisations to stay on top of, and respond to, the evolution of commerce, customer expectations and purchasing practices.

To ignore or hope that major market forces will simply disappear is to ignore at one's peril.