

DOING BUSINESS ONLINE

DO FUNERAL FIRMS NEED AN ONLINE CUSTOMER SERVICE STRATEGY?

FUNERAL DIRECTING IS A FACE-TO-FACE BUSINESS, DELIVERING A HIGHLY PERSONAL AND INCREASINGLY PERSONALISED SERVICE.

Both the 2016 and 2018 YouGov surveys for the NAFD have confirmed that, while the internet is increasingly useful in helping bereaved people find a funeral director, the choice of which one to use is more likely to be made based on personal experience, reputation or the recommendation of someone they trust.

Given this preference that families still hold for trusting their own instincts, or the experience of others, in the

to their online presence and the service it delivers? Surely just an up-to-date website and the odd social media post will do the job and allow you to focus on your best impression through your people?

Not necessarily.

Prior to the internet, the only way for a customer to contact you was in person, by phone or through the post. Today, as consumers become more tech savvy, not only have businesses also got to keep on top of their email inbox,

tested by customers as they check out your customer service potential.

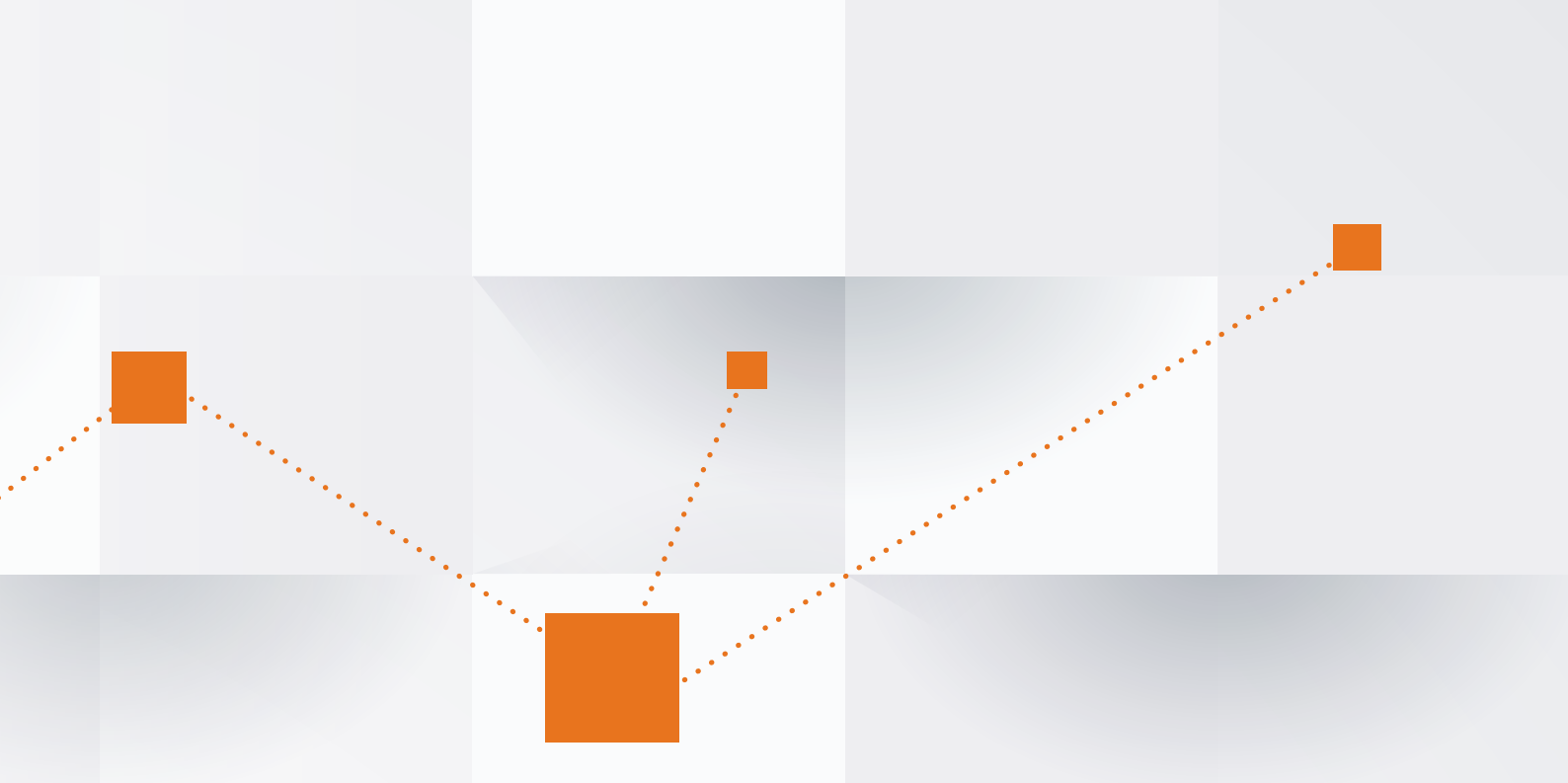
Customers today - even ones searching for something as sensitive as a funeral - demand immediate service, and slow response times of "within 24 hours" are no longer acceptable. Technology has handed customers unprecedented power to dictate the rules in purchasing goods and services. A faster, more tailored and simple experience is what is desired, as consumers use comparison apps when they shop and put as much trust in online reviews as in personal recommendations. Increasingly, customers expect from all players the same kind of immediacy, personalisation, and convenience that they receive from leading practitioners such as Google and Amazon.

Jonathan Davies, founder of the online tribute charity MuchLoved, says: "We communicate almost exclusively by email and find that speed of response is crucial. People like the convenience of instant messaging and are always hugely appreciative when they get an almost immediate response, which makes a massive difference in achieving high user satisfaction. In terms of easy-to-introduce steps to improve your online customer service, we'd recommend first ensuring that all your staff have been trained on your

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customer service delivered in person by the employees of each funeral home, how much attention should business funeral firms really be paying

they also have to make sure they are responding to the other digital channels they have open - because the online channels are often the first ones to be



own website. This will highlight what information and image of your business you provide to prospective new clients and we often find that staff have had no more than a cursory glance.”

Here are our top five simple tips to help busy funeral firms deliver outstanding customer service online.

1. STAY CURRENT

Not only should your information be up-to-date on your website, it should be obvious that it is too - and that means including information on your website that's clearly dated, whether it's your current price list, guidance to help families looking for help, recent news stories or a feed from your social media page.

This allows families to feel comfortable that the information they are looking at is accurate. It does mean regularly tending to your website - but, really, you should be doing that anyway!

2. IT'S GOOD TO TALK

We know that people find it hard to talk about funerals. So make it as easy as possible for families to get the information they want. Prefer to talk to people rather than have every last detail of your pricing and services online? Give them a number to call, an email address to use, a call-back service and, perhaps, a live chat option so they can ask a few questions of you before coming in to meet you and your team. This allows you to extend your firm's interpersonal customer service skills into the digital world a little.

Whatever channels you open up, make sure you keep an eye on them. A recent survey by CRM solutions firm Super Office of 1,000 websites that offered live chat services found that 21% of live chat support requests are not answered and the average wait time for live chat support requests is 2 minutes and 40 seconds - that's far too long to keep someone waiting to speak to you, particularly a bereaved family. You wouldn't leave a phone ringing that long - or ignore it in the first place!

3. BUT DON'T FORCE THEM TO TALK

Some people just don't want to have to ask you for service or price information. They aren't ready to, either because they are still in their research stage or they simply aren't up to direct contact yet. Don't lose the opportunity to start building a relationship ... give them as much information as you can online and don't force them to have to speak to you to get it.

Giving a comprehensive, reassuring and positive experience online is much more likely to translate into a positive real life interaction.

4. PUT YOURSELF IN YOUR CUSTOMERS' SHOES

Visit your website as a bereaved person might and see whether it is easy for them to navigate. Better still, ask someone independent of the business to visit the site and sit quietly near them, watching what they do and how easy they find it to move around the site and find the information they are looking for.

You can also get plenty of tips and hints on the effectiveness of your website by studying how long people visit and which pages they use, or information they download, using your website's analytics package.

If you get feedback saying your website isn't easy to use, take it seriously. It's an important window into your business and, if it isn't attracting people to want to engage further with you, then it's doing more harm than good.

5. CONNECT YOUR SOCIAL AND CUSTOMER SERVICE TEAMS

Does the person who answers your telephones and emails each day also have direct access to your website and social media profiles? That is one of the reasons customer questions online often go unanswered, because the person with the keys to the website or social media feed is busy doing other things.

It also ensures that there is a consistent experience for customers across all forms of communication.

Above all, treat your online interactions with customers the same as you would your in-person ones. Train and support your employees to feel confident in how to assist customers with the likely range of enquiries you may receive, and the tone of voice to strike.

Just because the dialogue is typed on a keyboard rather than spoken, it doesn't mean it can't be as compassionate, caring and friendly as it would be if someone walked through the doors of your funeral home.