

MANAGEMENT:

SOFTWARE

SERVICES

DIGITAL SUPPORT FOR
FUNERAL DIRECTORS



COMPARISON WEBSITES

THREAT, OPPORTUNITY OR TRIVIALITY?

As NAFD members will be aware, the Association recently announced a review of its position in relation to funeral directors using price or service comparison website to generate business. This review will take place in light of the rapidly changing landscape in respect of the online marketplace. The NAFD has said it is keen to ensure that the guidance it gives to its members is appropriate for the digital age and can safeguard standards rather than prohibit genuine business development.

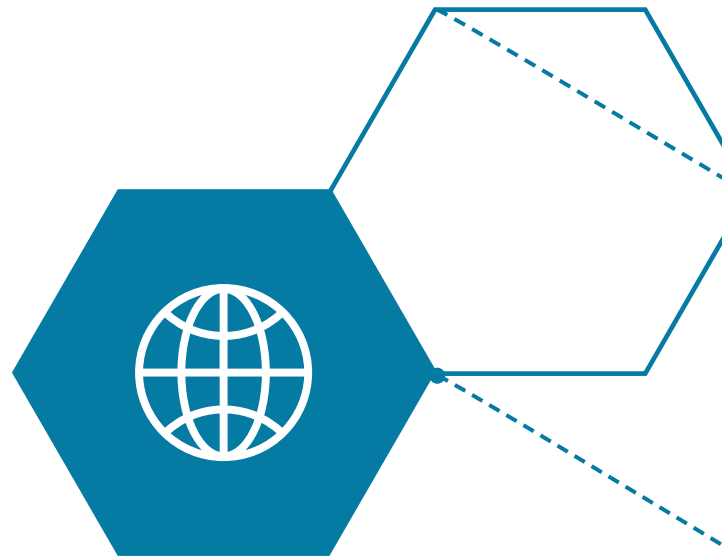
A price or service comparison website aggregates a specific type of information from multiple online sources. Examples of aggregators from other markets include TripAdvisor, Hotels.com, GoCompare and Comparethemarket. Already an established intermediary in other retail sectors, their presence within the funeral market is still relatively new and there are several different business models in operation, from those that are essentially a free listing service, to those where there is a regular, fixed, participation fee - or those which levy a fee if using the service leads to a referral (a click or a call) or to confirmed new business.

There are some early entrants to the market, including NAFD supplier members Funeral Zone and About the Funeral (which counts the founders of GoCompare among the members of its Board), that are achieving levels of success in providing price and/or service comparison services and are attracting interest and participation from across NAFD membership.

However, it is perhaps still too early to see exactly what the long-term picture looks like for compare the market-type services in the funeral profession. Views differ, across the profession, as to whether price comparison websites are a force for good or represent a significant threat to the profession, but comparison website providers feel strongly that funeral directors have nothing to fear and everything to gain from embracing this change in the way people research, compare and buy funerals.

In this article we look at the experience of other markets, the key factors driving change and ask both funeral directors and price comparison website operators how the funeral profession should best engage with aggregator sites.

There are certainly those who feel the presence of comparison websites in the funeral market is long overdue. James Daley, founder of fairerfinance.com, the consumer group and financial ratings website, is one of them.



He says: "What's desperately needed in this market is some way to easily compare prices and options. Like many of the other markets I usually write about – banking and insurance – it shows all the symptoms of a market that's not working well for consumers."

The Association, for its part, would like to see that all comparison sites functioning successfully within the funeral sector act in the best interests of consumers and funeral directors. For those comparison websites that choose to join the NAFD as supplier members, the NAFD is considering putting in place clear rules and guidelines to ensure that the consumer will remain protected in making this most sensitive of purchases.

It's not only the NAFD that is keen to monitor standards in the price comparison market. Whilst the eyes of policymakers and regulators have been firmly on comparison website in other markets, such as the energy industry, the rapid rise of funeral costs on the public agenda and increased focus on transparency means that it is only a matter of time before the funeral sector comes under similar scrutiny.

There is little doubt that comparison websites in general are here to stay and that, with proper structures in place, they have proven they can be a positive force for consumers in other markets. By increasing competitive pricing pressure on firms, comparison websites can help ensure the consumer gets the best deal available.

Below, *Funeral Director Monthly* looks at some of the factors which are driving the debate in other sectors and how both funeral directors and cost comparison service providers view future prospects and considerations.

Reach

Comparison websites typically have huge marketing budgets and can put a company's brand in front of far more people than the company might be able to achieve on its own.

Indeed, this powerful reach is one of the most compelling attractions of cost comparison sites for individual businesses and the UK Insurance Aggregators Market Trends 2016: Report indicated that aggregators are building a connection with - and loyalty from - customers through advertising.

The UK Insurance Aggregators Market Trends 2016: Report found that insurance customers are increasingly loyal to their aggregator rather than their insurance provider. It is perhaps unlikely that this situation will ever be mirrored in relation to funerals as, unlike insurance products, funerals are a locally-provided service that the average person only purchases a small number of times in their lifetime. However, it is useful to consider what can be learnt from other markets to help make sure the funeral profession gets comparison sites right for the public.

Ed Gallois from Funeral Zone explains how they market their services:

"We work with over a thousand hospitals, nursing homes and doctors' surgeries to get our literature in front of bereaved people and help them choose the best funeral director in their local area. Funeral Zone also receives over a million views per month across the different parts of its website, so we're able to market our funeral director partners to a lot of people in need of funeral services."

Accuracy

While it is possible that comparison sites may have helped to drive down insurance premiums, concern has been expressed that for those seeking very specific cover, such as travel or medical insurance, where the policyholder may have particular factors which will affect their premium, the results generated by comparison sites are too generic to be of any real guidance.

Travel insurance provider Insurancewith recently cautioned travellers with pre-existing medical conditions that the blanket approach taken by comparison sites could leave them paying exorbitant premiums or, worse, not getting insured at all.

"Official figures show how millions of British adults with a medical condition have experienced difficulty getting travel insurance," said Insurancewith brand manager Sarah Page. "Those who do get cover are often charged prohibitive fees or pigeon-holed into a product that does not cover their individual needs and circumstances."

"Consumers need to be aware that comparison sites don't always represent the entire travel insurance market and may not always be the best solution for those living with and managing a medical condition."

A question worth considering is, how this kind of accuracy issue might affect bereaved consumers trying to compare the services of different funeral firms?

For example, when a search is done on solely based on price, how can the consumer be sure that it reflects all specific and necessary charges - e.g. an out of area charge where a consumer chooses to arrange a funeral in an area other than that in which the person who has died resident? Failing to ensure that all charges are included could reduce transparency and leave the consumer with a nasty surprise at a point where they no longer have time to shop around?



Price

Over the last decade or so, sustained economic uncertainty, coupled with rising prices and a squeeze on wages, have made price comparison websites increasingly popular as consumers look to tighten their purse strings.

This has made comparison sites in general popular with consumers but it has had two competing impacts on the subject of price.

Firstly, it is helping to shrink the criteria for a decision down to one where price is significantly more important.

In 2016, the UK Insurance Aggregators Market Trends 2016: Report found that, of the people using comparison sites that it surveyed, policy price is the key determinant for customers when purchasing through an aggregator site. In the same year, the NAFD's YouGov survey found that price was only the third most important criteria for Britons when choosing a funeral director, behind qualitative considerations around reputation, recommendation and personal choice.

Would a future YouGov survey find that price is now becoming a more dominant factor among funeral consumers now that more Britons are using comparison sites to help search for a funeral director?

David Ronayne, former Teaching Fellow and PhD Candidate in Economics, University of Warwick, and now Post-Doc at the University of Oxford, noted in an article on *The Conversation*: "Price comparison websites impose two opposing forces on the markets in which they operate. On one hand, they increase competition between firms, which pushes prices down. But on the other, comparison websites make substantial profits, which they glean in a large part from fees charged to firms for referring customers to them... This has a knock-on effect on firms. It adds to their costs and therefore affects their pricing decisions, so can lead to them upping their prices."

For Kim Bird, founder of About the Funeral, firms increasing their prices can be because firms are viewing the fee wrongly as part of their business model. "The subscription fee, or fixed cost, is NOT a sales cost, it's a marketing cost and must be viewed in that light. I'm not sure where else a funeral director would get the same value marketing service? About the Funeral is an advertising platform, we can't make a consumer choose a particular funeral director, but we can make sure they are seen."

However, if funeral directors do choose to swallow the costs of participation, there may a further unintended consequence. Kevin Kelly, from K-Squared Consultancy, notes. "Faced with a lead that is not going to deliver the income to their business, rather than deliver a sub-standard service, funeral directors may well try to keep their service at the same level to make sure they client gets the funeral they want. We have already seen this in the pre-paid funeral plan market, where it's discovered that a plan won't cover, say, the flowers, or the extra vehicle that the family want – often the funeral director will deliver the additional service, without charge to the family – leaving them earning less from the plan payment."

Ironically though, whilst price definitely becomes a more dominant deciding factor in markets where comparison sites are operating, a lowering of prices isn't always what consumers are seeking. According to GoCompare, it was found that confidence was a key criteria for people when considering cost and consumers often wanted assurance that they could afford the insurance premium of the car they aspired to own. They weren't necessarily simply looking for the lowest cost insurance.

Comparability

Comparing the products from rival energy suppliers is much easier than comparing funeral providers. Gas and electricity are identical no matter which supplier you choose, you get the same gas and electricity through the same pipes and cables. Although energy suppliers deliver varying levels of customer service, which provides some comparison criteria, price naturally becomes a more significant differentiator in the absence of any difference in the product supplied.

Nigel Lymn Rose, CEO of AW Lymn – the Family Funeral Service, feels this issue of comparability is key: "The biggest challenge is to make sure families using comparison sites are able to compare apples with apples. It's all very well comparing simply on price, but you have to ask 'are the funerals and services, in each case, the same?' Just as in many other consumer markets, such as hotels, there are massive differences in the range of products, the standards of service, fleets, the quality of the funeral home itself.

"These differences can manifest themselves in ways that are hard to accurately list on a website – for example, differences in how staff are employed and trained – and what this can mean for the standards of care they are able to offer families. For me, that's why comparing genuine and independently gathered reviews is key. Reading the experience of others is the better way to make an informed judgement than solely comparing on price and any good funeral director will have their prices available online so, if you like the reviews, you can check how much their services will cost."

The challenge for funeral comparison websites, therefore, is create a set of search results which accurately compares like with like – and this will often come down to the quality and detail of information supplied by participating funeral firm.



Communication

The customer relationship between a funeral firm and its community is traditionally a strong one. It's understandable that there's concern in some quarters of the profession that cost comparison sites reduce the ability of funeral firms to control and develop the kind of direct connection with their communities that they are used to and that this could, over time, reduce the selection of a funeral director to a numbers game, rather than something that is the product of a service-based conversation between the funeral director and the bereaved consumer.

How can a website accurately replace an in-person conversation with a funeral director? Kim Bird is clear that they have no wish to step in between that important funeral director-family relationship.

"A comparison site can never replace a face-to-face conversation with a funeral director and we would not wish to interfere with this valuable service. We do sometimes speak with consumers, because they can't get what they currently need online from funeral directors. The advantage of About the Funeral is, is that because I have a background in funeral arranging and bereavement support, all staff are inducted appropriately."

"My vision for About the Funeral has always been to help the bereaved find the funeral they want at a price they can afford from a funeral provider that's right for them, and to help funeral directors connect."

Giving consumers a voice

Review sites which offer consumers a chance to leave online reviews provide participating funeral firms with the opportunity for free advertising of their business and independent testimonials. This is already well established within the funeral profession, through Facebook pages, Google reviews and already-established review sites.



Embrace or resist? How should the funeral profession engage with aggregator sites?

Evidence from other markets suggests that, once they've ironed out the kinks and are representing the market more accurately, price comparison websites are likely to be here to stay and they will challenge the way funeral firms have operated in their local markets for decades – even centuries in some cases.

Given the increasing presence of comparison sites in the funeral sector and the forces at play that we can see in other markets, it is imperative that funeral firms engage in the discussion and help to shape the future of how people choose a funeral and funeral director – rather than simply finding themselves subject to a market that has moved on without them.

Kim Bird acknowledges that some funeral directors are resistant to change, but has a word of caution for them. "Those that have opted to use About The Funeral, or are considering to use us, tend to be the larger organisations and those independents owned by the younger generation who understand the importance of online marketing. And what's more, they are not necessarily the least expensive. They stand by their brand and understand the consumer's need to research their choice of provider, which is based on either cost and or value. As Charles Darwin said: "It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is most adaptable to change."

"As far as funeral comparison sites are concerned, the genie is out of the bottle and comparison sites will remain as part of the sector landscape regardless of the profession's views."

FUNERAL DIRECTOR REVIEWS ON GOOGLE - A SIMPLE FIVE-STEP GUIDE



ONLINE REVIEWS CAN NOW REPRESENT A MORE VALUABLE PR ASSET THAN A TESTIMONIALS PAGE ON A WEBSITE OR "THANK YOU" CARDS FROM FAMILIES.

They have become a part of everyday life and are an important aspect of online reputation management for any funeral business. Here, NAFD member Funeral Director Websites looks at the value of reviews on Google and explains how, with a few simple steps, you can make them work for your business.

Favourable reviews on Google can also have a positive impact on a business achieving a first page presence on a Google Maps results. This will also depend upon your nearby competitors - for example how many reviews they have and the quality of those reviews. If you don't take advantage of Google reviews you will lose out in terms of ranking to competitors who do have done so.

Step One - Take ownership of your Google "My Business" listing

If you haven't already claimed your Google business listing, the first step will be to verify your business on Google. This simple task takes very little time, so be sure to claim your listing and to follow up by confirming the information Google sends out by postcard or phone.

"People trust Google ratings - if your business is positioned at the top of search results and has good ratings you will cement your reputation with the online version of 'word of mouth'"



Step Two - Get the link

Promote your Google reviews page by creating a link on your website enabling customers to reach the page, encourage them to write reviews and rate your business.

To create a link, you'll need to get the "Place ID" for your business. To get your "Place ID":-

- 1 search on Google for "Place ID Lookup Tool";
- 2 enter your business name in the "Enter a location" field at the top of the map;
- 3 click your business name in the list that appears;
- 4 your "Place ID" will appear on the map, beneath your business name;
- 5 add your "Place ID" to the provided URL to create your link.

Step Three - Ask your customers

Once you have ownership of your listing and the reviews link you can start to take positive steps towards getting reviews. Tell your customers that their opinion is not only important verbally

and through the traditional "thank you" card, but ask them to also share their experience online. Don't be afraid to ask; let them know the importance of Google reviews to your business.

People trust Google ratings - if your business is positioned at the top of search results and has good ratings you will cement your reputation with the online version of 'word of mouth'.

Step Four - Provide a link and review request on your website

Reach out to people who visit your company website with a "call-to-action button" in a prominent spot on every page of your site, and encourage people to visit your website specifically to conveniently share their positive experience.

Step Five - Promote your Google page on Social Media

Make use of Facebook and Twitter by regularly posting information about your review page, including a convenient link.

Funeral Director Websites adds links to Google Reviews as part of its specialist service for funeral directors. If you need help please contact **www.funeraldirectorwebsites.co.uk**

CLOUDBERRY SMASHES THROUGH THE MILLION MARK

"These figures continue to support our assertion that funeral directors need a donation management platform that allows them to manage traditional and online giving together in one system."

Independent funeral directors using Cloudberry's "InMemory" cloud-based donations management system transacted 21,096 individual donation entries in the year to 31 December 2017. Overall, the donations raised a total of £1,028,283 for charities and groups across the UK.

The platform saw a massive 89% increase in online transactions to 7,242 in the year, which accounted for 40.4% of the total value processed. Online donations overtook traditional donating for the first time (cheques dropping to 31.7% and cash increasing slightly to 27.9%) as donors increasingly get used to donating online via funeral directors' websites.

The power of online credit and debit card donations to attract Gift Aid continues to shine, thus boosting the total raised by 25%. In the year, just over 78% (2016 80%) of donors made the single click to add Gift Aid to their card donation, while the equivalent Gift Aid attachment for cash and cheques dropped slightly to just 4.1%

The average donation, including Gift Aid, during the year increased slightly above the rate of inflation at 2.1% to £48.74, whilst online card donations averaged £55.92 compared to cheques at £37.92

Now entering its fifth year of operation, "InMemory" has now in total processed over 73,000 donations via its funeral director customers which, with Gift Aid added, has resulted in donations totalling over £3.25 million being transacted.

The figures continue to show the importance of cash and cheque donations though. The most successful funeral director using InMemory still only sees 57% of donations transacted online, leaving them to still deal manually with 43% via cash and cheques. On average, just over a third (35%) of the volume of transactions were online, with 65% of the transactions by cash or cheque.

Analysis of online donors' postcodes continue to show that circa 60% of donors live within the typical trading area of the funeral director and are, therefore, potential future customers.

Cloudberry Director, Mark Robinson, commented: "These figures continue to support our assertion that funeral directors need a donation management platform that allows them to manage traditional and online giving together in one system. Whilst online will continue to grow, it will be some time before the vast majority are managed this way, which remains our objective.

"Having said that, we are delighted with the almost doubling of online transactions, resulting in ever more donations going via our customers' websites. The single fact that consistently eight out of ten online donors add Gift Aid makes this form of donation ever more compelling.

"We remain totally committed to deducting nothing from any donation and confirm that our charge of £6 per "InMemory" page to the funeral director remains fixed for the coming year."

For more information please visit

www.funeralmanagement.net or contact Mark Robinson at Cloudberry at **mark.robinson@funeralmanagement.net** or **01803 229467/ 07966 323786.**

CLOUDBERRY FMS
COMPLETE DONATIONS MANAGEMENT

LONG LIVE MOBILE!

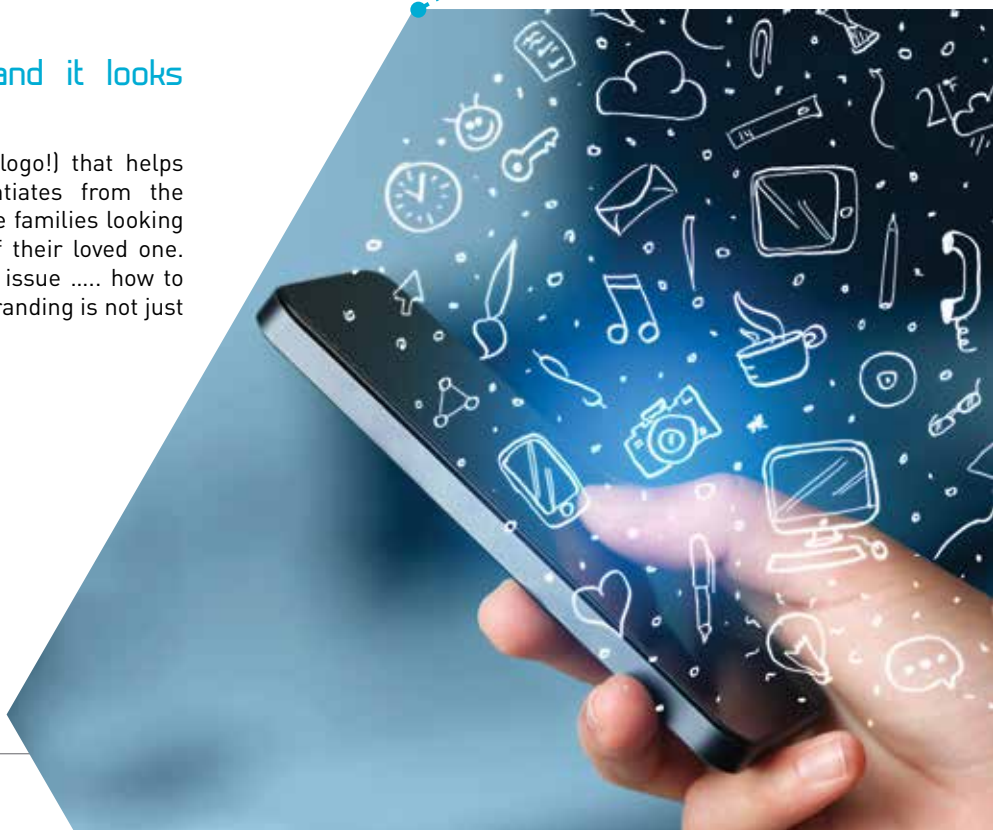
So, what can funeral directors do to compensate for that, and also grow, should they so wish to? The view of NAFD supplier member, 39steps, is that the opportunity lies online.

78%+ OF ALL WEB TRAFFIC IS NOW CONDUCTED ON MOBILE DEVICES (PHONES AND TABLETS).

Julie says: "Open 24/7, like many funeral directors' phone lines, your website is your shop window to the world. But Google downranks sites that are not responsive – meaning they won't dynamically scale to suit a mobile device. So if anyone is searching for your services online, it is much harder to find you."

"Our logo isn't really a logo and it looks different everywhere"

39steps



"We've had our website for 10 years and we don't get any business from it - how will that change?"

A new site lets you share more of your story and engage new people.

There are other positives too - many firms report having a renewed vigour within their teams, as staff see the management investing in marketing and new technology.

"What services DO we actually offer (that are still commercially viable)?"

Being clear on the core services and being helpful in signposting the rest can result in better enquiries based on the quality and breadth of services, and not just on price.

"How do we best help our customers?"

Your web visitors are split into three types: at-need, pre-need and (an oft-forgotten group!) the mourners.

This last group needs details for when and where to pay their respects. Given how many mourners can be at the average funeral, this can amount to quite a number of people being made aware of your firm - potential ambassadors for you in the future.

"Insurance companies stepping into the growing pre-need market is a major reason for funeral site overhauls. Many firms want the communities they serve to know that they too offer a pre-need service. The website is an ideal place for local prospective clients to find out more, giving them confidence to book an appointment with you," says Julie.

"Insurance companies stepping into the growing pre-need market is a major reason for funeral site overhauls."

Some dos and don'ts

1. Do give a clear phone number for your at-need group.
2. Don't fill your site with lots of fleet photos.
3. Do include testimonials - third party endorsement is the best form of marketing!
4. Don't overdo it
5. Do include photos of your people, and it IS ok to smile - people respond to a friendly face.

GDPR and Privacy policy

It's critical that your site is GDPR compliant by 25 May 2018. Make sure you have an up-to-date privacy policy, a security certificate and a clear opt-in process for anyone choosing to sign up to more information.

Adds Julie: "With a little training, your newly designed, well-built site can be managed by you or a team member easily. Coupled with a sensitive marketing strategy, it can be the jewel in your marketing toolkit."

For further information or to look at examples of its work, visit www.39steps.co.uk.

