

THE FUTURE OF FUNERALS

As businesses begin to assess what the post-COVID, post-Brexit world might look like, *Funeral Director Monthly* has spoken to suppliers and funeral firms to look at some of the key lessons learned, and what practices adopted during the pandemic have worked well and might remain.

In part one of this two-part feature, we hear from suppliers of fleets, coffins and digital software.

Fleet developments

Like many suppliers of goods, funeral vehicle specialist Coleman Milne was not immune to the pandemic, despite funeral directors being busier than ever.

Graham Clow, the National Sales Manager, said the company closed down main production for periods as sales of new vehicles fell sharply, not just due to COVID, but also the “perfect storm” of that plus the potential of a No-Deal Brexit and stringent lockdowns.

“2020 was a very strange and challenging year for all of us,” he said. “These factors had a detrimental effect on all businesses allied to the motor trade. Many, I believe, may not manage to ride out the storm.

“We continued to complete vehicles in build and deliver them nationwide throughout the year,

following stringent guidelines imposed by our health and safety team, and we were always able to keep a small team in the factory essentially to assist in keeping our funeral director customers on the road and provide spare parts and service.”

Coleman Milne developed a “simple, cost effective” COVID Screen ready for when limousines came back into use, and Graham said that he expected funeral directors who have been “busier than normal” to be looking to “upgrade their hard worked fleets as opposed to handing their hard-earned cash straight to HMRC”, adding: “I would advise funeral directors to speak to their accountant in good time as a new hearse is capital equipment.”

The global slowdown will, however, have a knock-on effect on the launch and development of new models, Graham said.

That was a view echoed by Amy Picton at Wilcox Limousines, which noticed a rise in hearse requirements but less demand for limousines due to restrictions, which “put a strain on the coachbuilding industry”.

She said that, while there are more electric and hybrid vehicles available on the market, most of them remain unsuitable for conversion.

She continued that Wilcox expected funeral directors “will have to decide to base their fleet on smaller electric vehicles (EVs) that cost similar to current fleets - or pay more for EVs

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▲ The signing of the first UK order (by Matt Turner of the Southern Co-op) for the zero emission Wisper from Coleman Milne.



▲ Wilcox Limousines Vehicle Hygiene Screen.

and hybrids that are of a similar size and style as their current fleets". She added: "Those that do not buy initially will discover that the cost of acquiring electric or hybrid vehicles will increase, so the situation will not become easier for those who delay."

In January, Wilcox had its best month for used vehicle sales, supplied with free vehicle hygiene screens, as demand continued to grow.

Going digital

The business model for funeral arranging and buying has shifted forever during the pandemic to going online, according to Anthony Hill, Director at coffin maker Somerset Willow.

"We believe demand from funeral professionals for online ordering capabilities and digital solutions will significantly rise due to the increasing need for flexibility and efficiency," he said.

"COVID-19 has resulted in many staff working from home and clients unable to visit funeral homes in person, prompting funeral professionals to find alternative solutions and adapt to a new way of working.

"The need for online communication between funeral provider and families, funeral video streaming services and remote working solutions has come to the forefront this year."

Anthony said he expected many capabilities adopted and learned during COVID will remain, including funeral video streaming for family members who may be abroad and remote working capabilities for more flexible working.

He added: "We believe that, as a result of this 'digital switchover', many funeral professionals will call for more online solutions for everyday tasks, such as online ordering, now that the benefits of which have been realised. Funeral directors will expect quicker and easier ways of ordering what they need, when they need it."

Howard Rawlings, Lead Developer for funeral home software provider Funeral Manager, said that as funeral directors and consumers get more used to digital and online capabilities, arranging software must evolve rapidly to keep up with the "new normal" of working from home and doing more online, especially around the new regulatory frameworks.

He said: "The instruction to 'work from home if you can' is easy to follow for many, but funeral administration presents unique challenges. An 'always on' business, combined with the limited availability of applications that can manage the entire process from first call to committal, means that a lot of administration, which could be done remotely with the right software, has had to be done in the office.

"Arranging software needs to offer innovation to make remote working both practical and straightforward for staff whose role doesn't bring them into direct contact with the deceased."

He said another consequence of the pandemic is the growth in volume of cremated remains held awaiting further instructions, which need to be a crucial feature of any software.

He added: "Most current systems provide users with a digital equivalent of the procedures funeral directors have managed - using paper - for decades, focusing on the arrangement as opposed to managing the entire removal to committal process.

"A good example is record-keeping regarding the deceased - both the Funeral Service Consumer Standards Review and Scottish codes of practice require detailed records be kept of every movement, viewing and procedure from first call until the deceased leaves the funeral director's care. Software, therefore, needs to simplify record keeping and reporting and be flexible so that it can adapt quickly to evolving regulation."

Said Howard, the company's NexGen product - a "true cloud application managing the entire process from first call to management of cremated remains" - helps funeral directors assess their business processes as more and more aspects of funeral arranging, from death registration digital signatures to donation collecting, move away from manual.

He added: "COVID has brought the shortcomings of running a business using paper-based processes into focus and, as online purchasing grows exponentially, an increasing number of consumers will expect to be able to do everything much more."

