



# Cremation Green – “The Birth of Bio Cremation™”

## The Annual Checkup

It was that time of year again (some may compare it to the semi-annual visit to the dentist) when we place ourselves humbly in front of the consumer ... asking them to evaluate our beloved profession. Just like the dentist appointment, we tend to psych ourselves up with “happy thoughts,” looking to minimize any belief that deep beneath the surface is a potentially unsettling development (I hate the sound of that drill). As I have shared in past articles, consumer research can be one of the most exhilarating experiences, providing wonderful insight into the mind of our audience. Our role at Matthews is to keep our connection fresh, engaging and unfiltered; acknowledging that in today’s world, the mind and opinion of the consumer is a moving target. Unless we remain current, we can easily miss the mark. Many times these experiences can become personal as I compare it to my own household, where I am often reminded by my three children that what I believe is current, hip and happening is “so yesterday’s news.” I can accept this from my family (I certainly wouldn’t rank news on *Desperate Housewives* as critical) but for funeral service, it’s a much deeper risk that we simply can’t afford.

## A Journey into the Unknown...

As we prepared for this journey into the mind of the consumer, we didn’t pull out the dartboard to chance our

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direction but more thoughtfully we talked with funeral colleagues to determine which topic(s) we would hand over to an independent consulting company to pursue. After much evaluation, it was concluded that we would address three (3) areas of study for which today, we’re going to focus on the subject of “cremation green practices” or more pointedly, the idea behind this environmentally-driven technology titled Bio Cremation™. We’re witnessing, all around us, manufacturers and consumers leading a movement that encourages a lifestyle that focuses on lowering the carbon footprint while addressing greenhouse gases and climate change. Unless you’ve sheltered yourself from the world, it’s not too challenging on a typical day to read, hear or encounter how more businesses are featuring products and services intent on addressing environmental concerns.

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lastly is a destination for the “snowbirds” who will travel to the warm climate each year to escape the cold weather back at their hometown. We also knew that when we offered \$200 to participate in this two-hour session, it represented roughly a one-day entrance fee into one of the local amusement parks.

to funeral service. What a thought ... funeral service in step with what is relevant in today’s society! In a profession that I have fallen in love with over the past 20-plus years, let’s face it, we haven’t always been at the forefront of cutting edge; ahead of the curve with revolutionary products and services ... especially those that are environmentally supportive. What is equally important on this topic is the possibility that we may have discovered a service that justifies a premium. What an opportunity! It personally hurts when the funeral profession is viewed as a commodity with falling profits, less services and struggling significance within our communities. It’s exciting to think that we have an opportunity to connect with today’s consumer. Any glimpse of something that can help improve the significance of our service and potentially provide much-needed revenue is certainly worth the exploration ... wouldn’t you agree? Come join us.

**Let the Study Begin...**

As with all our consumer research projects, we interviewed and hired an independent consulting company. To secure the best compilation of “unfiltered” material for which we can build an understanding (we brace ourselves for the unexpected), Matthews staff needed to remain absent from contact with our audience so that the discussion and dialogue would be free flowing and untainted. It was decided we would conduct our study in Orlando, Florida because we would get a great cross-section of America because it represents the number one travel and tourism destination, is ranked number two in conferences and expos, and



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We intentionally identified our audience under the following requirements:

Demographics (to mirror traditional arrangement settings):

- Majority was over the age of 40 years.
- Study group mix was predominantly women (65%) versus men (35%).
- 40% arranged a funeral in the past two years.
- Educational range was high school up to graduate study.



Steve Schaal

Other interesting “tidbits” about the audience...

- 90% made their decision (burial or cremation) prior to meeting the funeral director.
- #1 reason for picking a funeral home was past experience, followed by referral.
- #1 reason for choosing cremation was personal preference, followed by cost.
- 52% intended to have some type of service/visitation.
- 52% would choose scattering of the ashes once cremation was completed.

Keep in mind this was our first attempt at approaching the subject of “bio cremation” so we prepared ourselves for some awkward unknown moments as we tried to explain this technology of reducing the body to bone (our definition of B2B) but instead of using flame, it would be with water. We broke our discussion into three segments and listened carefully to the feedback.

### 1. What Does the Term “Bio Cremation” Mean to You?

One of the greatest struggles we personally experienced is what to call the process. The technical term is alkali hydrolysis which we felt was too cold and sterile for the consumer. Our partners in the delivery of this technology, Resomation®, wanted us to use their company name but the challenge we discovered was it carried a foreign presence in the mind of the consumer and required too much explanation.

When we derived the term bio cremation, we witnessed an immediate comprehension that bio meant some type of chemical and cremation meant an accelerated “body to bones” process. We heard a lot of one-word depictions when asked, “What does bio cremation mean to you” that was certainly educational. We heard words like biodegradable, greener, composting, acid reduction, etc.

With little upfront education in our study sessions, it was clear – at least initially – that it was tough for the consumer to get their mind around the idea of a water solution (versus flame) as a means of reducing the body to bone. Some reflected on their own upbringing and the fact that traditional

flame cremation was viewed as wrong, but with time their opinions had softened and the choice for flame cremation was much more favourable amongst their family and friends. Many felt that bio cremation (i.e. water-based) may also take time for the market to embrace but it certainly won’t be long because of the environmental advantages. It was mentioned several times by participants: “We are born in water and now we go out in water ... how peaceful is that!”

### 2. Is Bio Cremation Greener than Traditional Flame?

When participants arrived, we provided them with a questionnaire to fill out prior to the session beginning. We wanted a baseline of personal preferences that would be followed by the program moderator who would dig deeper with probing questions that would help us best understand the feedback.

It is important to note that 85 per cent of the attendees chose cremation as their personal form of disposition. I know what you’re thinking ... “Aha ... the deck was stacked in this study.” This is not quite the direction we were going. Our intent was to identify a personal preference for cremation because the purpose of the research wasn’t to sway consumers from burial to cremation. We wanted to talk specifically with the cremation consumer because it would be this audience making a choice about which cremation method reflected their personal choice. If you’re a burial consumer, why would you care?

On the subject of “Is Bio Cremation Greener?” many were hesitant to rush to judgment because of the lack of information during this introduction. The whole concept of using 95 per cent water to reduce the body to bones was rather challenging to comprehend in the first place. Many were eager to learn more, understand the air versus water emission process and develop an appreciation for the environmental impact. We discovered through the questionnaire that 75 per cent of the audience already viewed traditional flame cremation as “greener” than burial. It was interesting to watch our audience on their own, try to quantify the carbon release from fuel, body and casket during a traditional flame cremation and immediately conclude that the bio process had to be greener. The tipping point was how much greener! We also learned that because a casket can’t be combusted in the bio cremation process, it was looked upon as environmentally positive. It was amazing to hear how many didn’t know that a casket (or container) was used with traditional flame cremation even though they had arranged a cremation for a loved one who had passed away. Many felt that because water is more natural this would easily translate into a greener alternative and because the end result is the same (body to bones), it became a likely choice.

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### 3. Is Bio Cremation Worth More than Traditional Flame?

This was an interesting philosophical debate about the market value of green products and services. There was an underlying tone of sarcasm because: “It’s green, of course it will cost more. Isn’t that the general trend?” Within our research, it was voiced by many that it would be essential to communicate a numerical value for the environmental impact of bio cremation to justify any thought about a premium in service. If the charge for a bio cremation service is going to be more, the environmental benefits must be clear.

The majority of our participants reflected that people (including some of them) already pay more for organic foods, hybrid cars, rechargeable batteries, recycling practices, etc. Everyone agreed that it’s a lifestyle choice and no one was opposed to environmental-driven practices. Having the option is important. One person shared: “If I don’t recycle now, why would I think about the value of an environmental funeral? Only if the service was cheaper would I consider it.” Even though this was voiced by several participants, I believe it was honest and reflective of a portion of our society.

Regardless of the environmental impact, some people will simply not pay more for the service if there is a cheaper alternative. While this is duly noted, better than 50 per cent understood that being green “costs more” and were able to share their own personal tipping point in paying for these services. While we heard some claim they would pay a premium up to \$2,000 more for the service, we didn’t feel this was reflective of the majority. When we factored out the highs and lows from the entire four (4) sessions, we heard consistently that the tipping point was up to \$600. When we shared the idea that for a direct cremation (using flame) the price was approximately \$1,500, the majority would pay \$2,100 (+\$600) for a more environmentally beneficial alternative. We wanted to use the most modest of cremation services as our benchmark because it would represent the greatest percentage of cost increase (40%). Again, the value of this service premium would only be relative to the comparable environmental impact of these services. If the impact is 40 per cent less on the environment, the consumer can justify a 40 per cent premium.

### Some “AHA” Moments

While there were numerous epiphanies during our sessions, there were a couple of defining moments in our research. You may recall at the beginning of this article, I shared the fact that this was our first attempt at approaching the subject so we didn’t know what we didn’t know. We stumbled into some awkward moments when we started these discussions. What we quickly discovered is anything that defines the process as “going down the drain” was an immediate negative. Even though in the vast majority of embalming rooms, volumes of body fluid go down the drain daily, this was something that didn’t need to be highlighted. When we softened the education to focus more on going to

water recycling, return to the ecosystem, etc., this quickly altered the impressions more favourably. People quickly got the idea for how this happens but nobody needed the visual. This is no different than with the education for traditional flame cremation or embalming/burial; we understand what happens with the body-to-bones process but nobody needs to drive home the sobering realities of what happens in detail.

We’re a profession that has become indifferently accustomed to what happens with embalming, burial or the flame cremation process. What completely caught me by surprise is the anticipation of the “ick” factor. I’m not a betting person but prior to the start of this research, I was expecting to hear from the majority that our baby was ugly. I was bracing myself to hear a negative reaction when describing the process (even in our awkward initial attempt). What we discovered was quite the contrary. People viewed the process as more peaceful; a less destructive procedure even though we’re talking about an accelerated decomposition of the body to bones. People related the process to a gentle dishwasher with a wash, rinse and dry. Since it was crystal clear to the research group that the end result is bones, just like traditional cremation where the pulverized bone fragments are returned to the family in an urn, with traditional memorial option (all packaged with an environmental ribbon), all was OK.

What I continue to find most interesting is that when I am asked to speak at funeral conferences, I watch the majority of professionals express “ick.” Again, this reminds me of how far out in front the consumer is when it comes to the adoption of meaningful and relevant services. It’s challenging to understand funeral professionals who express “ick.” Is it because they’ve grown numb to burial or flame procedures or they are simply threatened by the thought of change with a new technology? While I am respectful to these reactions, do I think that bio cremation will immediately replace the bulk of Matthews Cremation business in the manufacturing of flame cremators? No. Do I believe that there are markets around the world where environmental regulations and consumer preferences are going to demand this type of alternative service? Without question! Is it important that we as a profession continue to listen, reflect and recognize that it’s not about what we would choose, but the ever-changing consumer preferences where we must remain relevant? Absolutely! Is it our collective responsibility to be where the consumer wants to go? That has to remain our calling.

None of us can predict the future but we can recognize the signs of a changing market and be cognizant of the continual nudge to position ourselves for continued success. If you are ready to embrace the opportunity, there’s plenty of room for you to climb aboard. ❖

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