



Cremation Green

Steve Schaal

The birth of bio-cremation and consumers' thoughts on the new process.

The Annual Checkup

It was that time of year again (some might compare it to the semi-annual visit to the dentist) when we place ourselves humbly in front of consumers, asking them to evaluate our beloved industry. 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!).

Consumer research can be one of the most exhilarating experiences, providing wonderful insight into the mind of a particular audience. Matthews strives to keep its connection fresh 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 them 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 we simply can’t afford.

A Journey Into the Unknown

As we prepared to delve into the mind of consumers, we didn't pull out the dartboard to chance our direction. Instead, 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, one of the areas we decided to focus on was "cremation green practices," or more pointedly, the idea behind this environmentally driven technology called bio-cremation.

We witness 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 stories about how more businesses are featuring products and services intent on addressing environmental concerns.

What I find fascinating about the idea of evaluating this green movement is how important the timing is as it relates to funeral service. What a thought – funeral service in step with what is relevant in today's society! Admittedly, this industry hasn't always been at the forefront of cutting edge or ahead of the curve with revolutionary products and services, especially those that are environmentally supportive. 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 industry is viewed as a commodity with falling profits, fewer services and struggling significance in 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 exploration, wouldn't you agree?

Let the Study Begin

As with all of the company's consumer research, we interviewed and hired an independent consulting company to perform this project. 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 dialog would be free flowing and untainted. It was decided the study would be conducted in Orlando, where we would get a great cross-section of America since it ranks number one in travel and tourism and number two in conferences and expos. Lastly, it's a destination for "snow birds" who will travel to the warm climate each year to escape the cold weather back home. We also knew that when you offer \$100 per hour to participate in these two-hour sessions, that represents roughly a one-day entrance fee for one of the local amusement parks.

We intentionally identified our audience demographics to mirror traditional arrangement settings, using the following requirements:

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

Other interesting tidbits about the audience:

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

Keep in mind that 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 the technology of reducing the body to bone not by using flame but 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 was what to call the process. The technical term, alkali hydrolysis, feels cold and sterile to the consumer. Matthews' partner in the delivery of this technology, Resomation, preferred that we use their compa-

ny name, but the challenge discovered was that 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, joined with the familiar word "cremation," meaning an accelerated "body to bones" process. Certainly educational were the numerous one-word depictions that surfaced when this question was asked – words like biodegradable, greener, composting, acid reduction.

With little upfront education in our study sessions, it was clear, at least initially, that it was tough for consumers to get their mind around the idea of a water solution (as opposed to 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 softened and the choice for flame cremation was much more favorable among family and friends. Many felt that bio-cremation may also take time for the market to embrace, but that it certainly won't be as 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 cremation?* As participants arrived, they were given a questionnaire to fill out prior to the start of the session. This provided 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 percent 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 to the cremation consumer because this would be the audience making a choice about which cremation method reflected their personal choice.

As for answers to the question "Is bio-cremation greener?" many participants were hesitant to rush to judgment be-

cause of a lack of information given during this introduction. The concept of using 95 percent water to reduce the body to bones is rather challenging to comprehend in the first place, but many were eager to learn more, understand the air vs. water emission process and develop an appreciation for the environmental impact. Through the questionnaire, it was discovered that 75 percent of the audience already viewed traditional flame cremation as “greener” than burial. It was interesting to watch as the audience, on its own, tried to quantify the carbon release from fuel, body and casket during a traditional flame cremation and immediately conclude that the bio-cremation 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 on 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. 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.

Is bio-cremation worth more than traditional flame cremation? This was an interesting philosophical debate about the

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market value of green products and services. There was the familiar underlying tone of sarcasm: “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. In other words, if

the charge for a bio-cremation service is higher, the environmental benefits must be clear.

A majority of participants reflected that people (including some of them) already pay more for organic foods, hybrid cars, rechargeable batteries, recycling practices, etc. All agreed that it’s a lifestyle choice, and no one was opposed to environmental-driven practices. Having the option is important. Several people shared this thought: “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.” I believe this is an honest question 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 fact is duly noted, better than 50 percent understood that being green “cost 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 all of the sessions, we heard consistently that the tipping point was up to \$600. Thus, when we shared the idea that for a direct cremation (using flame), the price was approximately \$1,500, the majority would pay \$2,100 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 percent). Again, the value of this service premium would only be relative to the comparable environmental impact of these services. If the impact is 40 percent less on the environment, the consumer can justify a 40 percent 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 that at the beginning of this article, I shared the fact that this was our first attempt at approaching this subject, so we didn’t know what we didn’t know and stumbled into some awkward moments when the discussions started off. What we quickly discovered is that anything that defines the process as “go-



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ing 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 favorably. People quickly got the idea for how this happens, but nobody needed the visual. This is no different than with education for traditional flame cremation or embalming/burial. As an industry, we have become indifferently accustomed to what happens with the embalming, burial or flame cremation process.

What completely caught me by surprise is the lack 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 as 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 as in traditional cremation, where the pulverized bone fragments are returned to the family in an urn, with this option (packaged with an environmental ribbon), all was okay.

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 the “ick” factor. This again 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 of these reactions, do I think bio-cremation will immediately replace the bulk of Matthews

Cremation business in the manufacturing of flame cremators? No. Do I believe 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 an industry continue to listen, reflect and recognize that it’s not about what we would choose but about remaining relevant in the midst of ever-changing consumer preferences? Absolutely. Is it our collective responsibility to be where the consumer wants to go? That must 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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