



The Work Behind the Work

A peek into the underappreciated operational side of funeral service.

BY SPENCER HAIK



On the day of the funeral service, family members see a scene that feels calm and carefully prepared. The doors are open. Music plays softly. Chairs are arranged. The memorial video quietly loops as friends and relatives gather to remember the person they loved. Everything appears seamless.

What family members rarely see is the work that begins days earlier, the moment the first call is answered. Behind every service is a complex series of decisions, phone calls, confirmations and preparations, all of which must happen quickly and accurately. For funeral directors, this unseen work is simply part of the profession.

“It really begins at the first call,” said Brian Kester of Kester Funeral Home in Stilwell, Oklahoma. “We begin coordinating with the hospital, hospice, police. We take custody of the deceased, and we begin a journey with the family.”

From that moment forward, directors guide the family members through one of life's most difficult experiences while managing a long list of responsibilities. The death certificate must be completed. The obituary must be written and submitted. Service details must be coordinated with clergy, musicians and cemetery staff. Photos and music must be gathered for the tribute video. Memorial folders, prayer cards and other printed materials must be designed and ordered. Even on the day of the visitation or funeral, the checklist continues.

"We're making sure the seating is adequate, the sound is good, the livestream works; setting up live music, guitars and everything needed for the service," Kester said. "All these things happen as we walk hand in hand with the family through this valley."

To family members, these details blend into a meaningful, compassionate experience. To funeral directors, they represent a carefully coordinated process that must unfold smoothly within a very short time frame.

Every arrangement conference triggers a series of operational tasks behind the scenes. Product availability must be confirmed. Deliveries must be scheduled. Cemeteries must be contacted regarding burial requirements. Documentation must be prepared and filed. Many of these steps occur as family members are making decisions in the arrangement room. The logistics are sometimes straightforward. Other times, they require additional coordination.

"For a typical service, confirming product availability usually takes about 10 to 15 minutes, as long as someone answers the phone," Kester explained. "If they're busy helping others, it could be much longer."

Those minutes can add up quickly, especially during those times when a funeral home is managing several services at once. Directors often find themselves coordinating with multiple suppliers in a single day, all while meeting with families, preparing services and managing staff. A funeral home might work with several third-party vendors to complete a service. Jason Diemer of Green Lawn Funeral Home in Springfield, Missouri, said the number of partners involved varies depending on the structure of the funeral home.

"Our situation is unique in that we manufacture our own vaults and monuments," Diemer said. The outside vendors his firm uses include the casket company, stationery company, grave-opening service, embalming-chemical company and cremation-container company.

Even when some products are produced internally, coordination with outside suppliers remains a regular daily operation. During busy periods especially, vendor communication is part of the daily rhythm.

"I'm on the phone multiple times a day checking casket availability, scheduling outer containers and coordinating with suppliers," Kester said. Because the service often takes place within just a few days of the first call, even small delays can create pressure.

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Funeral service is built on strong relationships. Most directors know exactly who to call when they need a product quickly or when an unexpected issue arises. Long-standing partnerships with manufacturers, distributors, cemeteries and service providers help ensure families receive what they need when they need it.

For some funeral homes, the number of vendors involved in a typical service is actually quite small. Logan Sowers of Williams Funeral Chapel in Holden, Missouri, said his funeral home normally works with only a couple key suppliers: the casket company and the vault company. And most ordering still happens through direct communication.

"Most of our orders are still done through phone calls," Sowers said. These relationships allow funeral homes to operate efficiently, even under tight deadlines. Familiarity with vendors, product lines and ordering processes helps directors move quickly when making arrangements. At the same time, many of the systems required to confirm availability and place orders are manual. Phone calls are typically the fastest way to confirm inventory. Emails and text messages help coordinate deliveries. Catalogs, price sheets and sales representatives provide the information on which directors rely during arrangements.

Few professions operate on timelines as compressed as funeral service does. A service might take place within two or three days of the first call. Because of this, uncertainty about product availability can create difficult situations during arrangements. Kester encountered one such moment when meeting with a family recently.

"Just a few weeks ago, I had a family choose two different caskets because we couldn't confirm with the plant regarding the availability of one of them,"

he said. Rather than risk betting on a product that might not arrive in time, the family selected a backup option.

Situations like this one rarely disrupt the services themselves. Funeral directors are accustomed to adapting quickly and ensuring everything proceeds smoothly. Behind the scenes, however, these adjustments require additional coordination and decision-making.

This invisible effort is what allows family members to experience a service that feels thoughtful, organized and meaningful.

In recent years, funeral homes have faced additional pressures that make coordination more challenging. Supply-chain disruptions have made the availability of products less predictable. Staffing shortages have required many funeral directors and owners to take on additional responsibilities. But at the same time, communication tools have improved.

"I think it has actually gotten easier," Sowers said. "We're able to text, use websites and have outside services help when we need. It's a lot easier than the old days with pagers and antiquated devices."

Even so, directors find themselves balancing the evolving expectations of families and the operational details required to bring services together.

As the profession continues to evolve, funeral homes are beginning to think more about how to streamline operational processes without compromising the core values of the profession. For most directors, the goal is not to abandon trusted supplier

relationships or disrupt long-standing ways of doing business. Instead, the conversation focuses on improving visibility and coordination across all the moving parts of services.

Greater clarity around product availability, pricing and ordering could reduce uncertainty and make it easier for funeral homes and suppliers to work together. Some directors believe the consolidation of vendor information would make procurement easier.

"I suppose making everything available on one platform would help," Sowers said. Even small improvements in the way information is shared and confirmed could save valuable time – time funeral directors could then devote to families, leadership and community engagement.

At its core, funeral service is about compassion, presence and trust. Family members remember how they were treated. They remember the kindness of the staff, the care shown during the service and the guidance they received during their time of grief. They rarely see the logistical work that makes those moments possible.

When operations run smoothly behind the scenes, funeral directors can focus fully on what matters most: being present with the families that depend on them. Every funeral or memorial service represents hours of preparation and coordination that family members don't see. From the first call to the final service, funeral directors manage an intricate network of responsibilities involving paperwork, logistics, vendor coordination and service preparation. It

is work performed quietly and professionally, oftentimes without recognition, yet this invisible effort is what allows family members to experience a service that feels thoughtful, organized and meaningful.

As the profession continues to evolve, improving operational clarity will help reduce stress, strengthen funeral home sustainability and support the directors who serve their communities every day. ☰

Spencer Haik grew up working for his family's casket-distribution business, and he is the founder of a technology company that serves the funeral industry.



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