

CONNECTING YOUNGER GENERATIONS WITH CEMETERIES

By Mandy Benoualid and Cory Blaquiere

I often hear about how cemeteries are running out of space, but we will never want for space in Canada. What happens when a 100-plus acre rural cemetery is filled to capacity? Buildings are repurposed all the time, so why do old cemeteries have to stay cemeteries? Why can't they engage and evolve with the community and with technology?

Our society is more connected with the rise of Instagram, online shopping and the ability to search Google for anything. Although the act of hunching over a tiny screen seems to contradict social behaviour, we are in fact connecting with one another more than ever. All these minutes (or hours) spent online by millions of North Americans every day is the result of people connecting with each other and with their communities. It is this connection that cemetery and funeral home operators need to embrace if they are to evolve into something new and engaging.

Younger generations are keenly aware of our impact on the environment. Devoting a portion of a cemetery to maintaining a wildlife habitat or remediating a brownfield tells us our goals align with these youth perspectives and provides value to the community. Williamsburg Cemetery in Kitchener, Ontario was opened in 1994. When the cemetery was in the initial design stages, we recommended preserving an existing wetland on the site to meet the storm-water management needs of the Waterloo Region, instead of developing the 1.5-acre area into additional disposition opportunities. Today, the natural wetland is integrated with a boardwalk, gazebo, informational signage and public artwork, providing an inviting space that people explore and interact with daily.

Cemeteries are always finding new ways to engage their community and change the experience. Woodlawn Memorial Park in Guelph hosts a number of annual events like the Classic Car Show on Father's Day, the memorial service for Remembrance Day and Blue Christmas. Laurel Hill Cemetery in Philadelphia was established in 1836. While it is still active as a cemetery, most of its sections are approaching capacity.



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Now, the space is used for sports, recreation, theatre, movie screenings, car shows and festivals. This is possible through sponsorships and community volunteers. This also gives the community a sense of ownership and pride in the space. Involving the local community sends a positive message and gives the public a reason to get involved.

When I (Cory) was in school for landscape design, a professor told us that for every element we put into a design, we needed to list three reasons why we included it. If we can't, then there's probably a better solution. Why do we plant gardens in the cemetery? They look nice, but they also help define walking paths, they break up the landscape and they can provide valuable screening for privacy. Cemeteries memorialize those who've passed away. They are also versatile spaces. Without even knowing it, cemeteries can provide natural open spaces, public walking trails, seating and public artwork.

For the next cremation garden development, consider leaving additional space to open up the area visually. Columbaria need ample space between the niches or they tend to feel cramped. Try to leave a space equal to one-and-a-half times

the height of the columbaria when two are facing each other. Armour stone, raised planters and retaining walls can double as seating, which is a feature lacking in many cremation gardens. Combining hard surfacing, little to no shade and no seating creates a space that people want to leave, regardless of context. Incorporating shade trees, arbours, benches and gardens result in multi-use spaces that are inviting, which means more people will want to spend more time at a cemetery.

Attracting people to a space is also achieved through technology. Social media is used for marketing, brand awareness and community engagement. What is at the centre of all of these practices? Storytelling. Storytelling is how marketing gurus take the simple act of trying to sell a product and create a story around it to trigger an emotional response that resonates with consumers



and intrigues them to step into the cemetery and funeral home experience.

Cemeteries and funeral homes have access to lifetimes of beautiful, touching stories. Other industries would pay top dollar for this quality and quantity of engaging content. In a recent study, families indicated that sharing stories and looking at photographs is how they commemorate a loved one. Following a death, families are already going online to share and look at photos, stories, family history and more. Providing families with the resources and tools to share these stories adds value to cemetery and funeral home services and helps engage families, long after the service has taken place.

One of the first steps for cemeteries is digitizing burial records and obituaries and placing the information on their website. Using an online tool that can turn these records into interactive online memorials will trigger the storytelling and engagement potential that a cemetery has to offer. Not only will families be able to locate their loved one in the cemetery, they could search for genealogical information, add photographs, share stories and send condolence messages. They are already doing this online through Facebook. What is especially helpful with these tools is that the family is responsible for adding this information, meaning little to no extra work is required from a cemetery's busy staff.

While in the cemetery, this same information – burial records, plot locations, life stories – can be accessed via a web-based digital kiosk or mobile app. Imagine being able to walk through a cemetery and learn about the story behind each name on a monument or receive walk-to-grave directions and share a memory while paying respects. These interactive tools can also

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RFP to Develop Online Education for Cemetery Sales Representatives

The Ontario Association of Cemetery and Funeral Professionals (OACFP) is accepting proposals for the development and delivery of an online educational training program for a Cemetery Sales Representative.

This project will involve the development and delivery of an online educational training program for a Cemetery Sales Representative to be provided to OACFP members, as well as, non-members within the bereavement industry. Operators and/or licensees may be required to complete educational programs as a requirement of their licences.

The intent of this program is to provide educational training to cemetery sales representatives on the requirements to obtain a Cemetery Sales Representative Licence and provide an awareness and understanding of the following:

- Legislated requirements to obtain a Cemetery Sales Representative Licence;
 - The Act and the associated Regulations;
 - Industry and government expectations regarding best practices, conduct and professionalism.

For complete details for the Request for Proposal, please contact the OACFP Office at info@oacfp.com or 905-383-6528. Deadline for submission is March 29, 2018.

be accessed on a beautiful plasma screen or simple iPad at the facility's entrance where visitors can search for a loved one, read stories and connect.

Cemetery tours and genealogy searches are sought after and popular. Attracting families to a cemetery space or funeral home beyond a service is an incredible advantage. Storytelling tools are a simple way to help engage families and communities and change their cemetery experience.

Our job as landscape designers and technology developers is to provide help to those who've lost someone. These trends and opportunities are about bringing more people together and making it easier for them to engage with each other. We hope that in the future, people don't tell scary stories about cemeteries, but choose to spend their Saturday afternoon visiting them instead. **N**

Mandy Benoualid, CEO of the online memorial platform Qeepr, is committed to helping cemeterians and funeral directors create new and meaningful experiences for their families. Qeepr specializes in interactive technology for cemeteries and funeral homes, including online memorials, mobile applications and digital kiosks. Mandy is also editor of the consumer-focused bereavement website, TalkDeath.com, is co-host of the #TalkDeath web series, and works as a funeral director's assistant. She can be reached via email at mandy@qeepr.com.

Cory Blaquiere is a practicing landscape architect at Hilton Landmarks, a division of GSP Group Inc. He has worked with cemetery professionals as a designer and consultant for over 10 years. Cory currently sits on the Ontario Association of Cemetery and Funeral Professionals conference planning committee. Through design, he strives to push cemeteries and cremation gardens in new directions with a focus on sustainability and community.