

The Redeeming Possibilities of Green Burial

By Lee Webster

“Green burial’s just a fad. Once things get real for these baby boomers, they’ll come back to traditional service, mark my words.”

Wait. That’s kind of like what they said about cremation, isn’t it? Before it became known as a “disruptive innovation” and began to replace bread and butter funeral home practices to the tune of 80-90% in some areas of the country?

Maybe it would be a good idea to hear this one out just in case. Let’s jump out of the prep room and into why green burial not only is not a fad, but why it’s back to stay — and how you can make it work for you.

The premise of green burial is simple. Non-invasive body preparation, simple caskets and shrouds, family and friends’ participation. Burial grounds from existing lawn cemeteries to conservation land trusts. “So...,” you’re thinking. “No embalming. No steel or hardwood caskets. No concrete vaults. How in the world can that possibly keep me in business?”

First things first. Green burial is not a disruptive innovation. It is not even a new concept. Green burial is the retooling of an age-old proven practice that is familiar to everyone, that works in the perfect symmetry that nature intended, and that cuts across all socio-economic lines. You don’t have to do anything but embrace the idea that people are looking for something different and that you have the power to help them find it.

Making green burial work for you as a funeral business owner is as complicated and as easy as understanding what it is that green burial families are hoping to achieve. Understanding what draws people to green practices is the key to discovering what goods and services you can provide that will enrich families’ experience, which in turn will create a new, specialized customer base.

In a 2014 survey performed by the Green Burial Council, green cemetery providers reported that they believed approximately 72% of their families were more satisfied with their experience than with past conventional funerals. They also indicated that they believed those who attend their first green funeral left with a whole new way of viewing the entire process and are probably likely to choose it for themselves and their loved ones.

What are green burial families looking for? In the same survey, the top reasons for choosing green burial were, in order:

- 1) minimizing their impact on the environment
- 2) wanting to revive old traditions
- 3) cost
- 4) spiritual and religious expression
- 5) a do-it-yourself ethic

Let’s take a minute to unpack that. It may be a revelation that money is not the deciding factor in green burial. In fact, cost is the one thing that many green burial advocates find equalizing. It is not designed as an alternative for people who are looking to get off cheap, though it may be less expensive by eschewing some purchases. But that is not the whole story.

If the top reason for this choice is based on a wish to leave the planet with the least amount of environmental impact possible, it follows that these customers have a heightened perception of value in the total experience. It indicates a desire to act in a way that is authentic to their goals and aspirations in life.

It may mean skinflints who are looking for a way to go out without spending a dime BUT it may also mean people who are interested in supporting conservation and land preservation well beyond their own lifetime. The price tag associated with that can be steep, and the price of admission to a green cemetery — and to

green funeral services performed by sympathetic and knowledgeable funeral directors — may be considered a testament to their conviction.

It follows that this demographic will pay a premium for well-made, genuine biodegradable products, such as seagrass, willow and wicker caskets, and cotton or linen shrouds. Shrouding boards, designer lowering straps, organic greens and other materials used to line and cover the grave, along with standard signage, catering, music, tents, and equipment rental needs, represent revenue that is in keeping with the aesthetics of green burial.

One of the major side effects of the rise in direct cremation has been the decline of ritual in funeral services. There is anecdotal evidence from cemeterians that cremation families are feeling that absence and converting back to earth burial, sometimes to be in keeping with religious tradition or to explore the spiritual connections that green burial presents. Green burial customers are often willing to spend what they need to in order to honor their loved ones, bringing back funeral home facility and graveside services and all that goes with them.

Choosing green burial doesn't necessarily equate to quick burial, though Jewish and Muslim tradition dictates same-day when possible. Many families choose to deliberately slow things down, take time for people to gather, and for everyone to be present and participate in the experience. Rather than whisking the body away at death to be returned in a small cardboard box, green burial and its preparation requires more attention, logistics, and planning.

For that, green burial families don't necessarily want less help. They may simply want a different kind of help. Even families who have chosen to bring or keep their loved one home for a vigil or simply to wait for burial don't necessarily want to do everything themselves. Blended funerals — where families take more responsibility and funeral directors accommodate outside of the funeral home base — still require basic services, and may present opportunities on a green price list that reflect the special nature of services they are receiving.

This applies to body preparation as well. While they have chosen to forego standard embalming, some may opt for green embalming with nontoxic chemicals, or simple bathing with essential oils, such as lavender which has naturally-occurring disinfection

properties. They may ask for assistance in obtaining dry ice or other cooling agents, all sufficient to achieve body stasis for the necessary period of time. Transportation, paperwork, filing for Social Security or military benefits, submitting obituaries, and other services offered to conventional burial customers are equally valued.

Not all green burial families are interested in arranging for disposition themselves either. For these families, hiring a professional to orchestrate the proceedings is no different than for a conventional burial. It is still the funeral director's responsibility to provide information that helps those families make informed choices, facilitate their decisions, assess the body's condition, map out practicalities and potential problems and their solutions, and file for permits. It is also the funeral director's job to ensure that the transition to the cemetery goes well, that the cemeteries' guidelines are followed, that the participants stand where they are supposed to and stay safe, and that the whole production runs smoothly.

In the end, green burial presents a chance to do what funeral service has always done best: care for the family and those left behind. Funeral service providers who can help green burial families achieve their dream of an eco-friendly exit with simplicity and authenticity can stay in business and flourish.

Oh, and what about when there is no green burial cemetery near you? Build it and they will come by becoming the local authority. Remember, no one goes to a restaurant and orders things that are not on the menu. If you carry certified green products and are ready with educated answers about green burial, people will find a way to get green burial opportunities created in their community — and thank you for it. FBA

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