

SPRING 2013

A Federation of Nonprofit Funeral Information Societies

VOLUME 17 NO. 1

*Protecting a consumer's right to choose a meaningful,
dignified, and affordable funeral since 1963*

Putting the FUN back in Funeral Consumers Alliance

-Josh Slocum

If we fed ourselves the way most of us approach getting active board members, it would look like this:

Camera dollies in to a man with a panicked expression, clutching the phone. .

John: The cupboard is bare, and I've tried everything, but all the grocery stores are closed. . .what will we do!?

Mary (on the other end of the line): Didn't you ask the kids to stop at the store even once this week before they came over for supper? You knew we were having them over on Sunday like we always do.

John: But none of them wanted to, Mary. I pestered and pestered them; I even left a note scrawled in red paint that said WE'RE ALL GONNA DIE OF STARVATION IF YOU DON'T GET FOOD RIGHT NOW! Nothing works. . .no one's interested in shopping.

Mary: Can you blame them? You're making a dinner party sound like a Donner Party. I live there and I

don't even want to come home. You do absolutely no planning, then you leave the kids horror-movie notes and act surprised when they say, "We're going to McDonald's."

Member development, like meal planning, has to be an everyday, ongoing part of life at your FCA. "Getting new board members" is not a discrete activity that happens once a year (when it is, it fails). Grooming the membership to see themselves as active participants, as *owners* of the nonprofit mission they support, has to be as much a part of your regular mission activities as answering the phone and email. Last-minute desperation is immediately off-putting to prospects. If you're at that point you've already gone too far.

First, realize there's no such animal as *Board member professionalen-*

sis. Board members are just people. They're just members. You were

probably once just a member-at-large. We need to train ourselves to see every member query, every communication to us from the public, as a potential

to bring someone into the fold as a contributor to the cause, not merely a "customer" that pays a membership fee and then passively receives products and services.

Let's look at two components of a more successful approach—everyday "member maintenance" and development, and special activities and gatherings.

Collect and curate—Every single person who calls or writes to inquire



(continued next page)

about membership, for help with a complaint, etc., needs to go in your database and right onto your mailing list. Every. Single. One. Whether they've made a donation or not. *Especially* those who you've spent personal time with to solve a problem. These people are the most likely to remember your kindness and respond to your call for service and donations in the future. Remember to ask for their email address!

Whenever you give a talk bring a sign-up sheet. Do not just leave it at the door, keep it with you. It works best if you present it with a bit of theater. When I speak I read and respond to the crowd's mood. When they're at their most attentive and engaged—sometimes it's a laugh-line, sometimes it's shock at a case of consumer abuse—I say, “Oh, that reminds me! Before I forget I want to give you this sign-up sheet. If you want to make a difference with us to help prevent this kind of abuse/lobby for legal change/etc., we're ready with open arms. We need you because you are the FCA. . nothing happens without your support!”

When I did this in Princeton two years ago they reported that nine people volunteered on the sheet to work on legislative change. Let your passion and enthusiasm shine and you'll find it's catching.

See the case-study below for a recent example of how this can work with a phone query.

Follow-up—Send the person a note along with your most recent newsletter or price survey. Thank them for their interest, and include a donation envelope. This is key—if you don't follow up with folks regularly you won't build interest.

Don't wait until the last minute and then spring potential board membership on a cold prospect—Otherwise interested people can be intimidated or uncertain by an offer to be (cue dramatic music) On the Board. The title itself carries connotations of huge responsibility; it sounds much scarier and less fun than we all know FCA service can be. Instead, think of offering *volunteer* opportunities.

Even the smallest tasks can help get someone in the door long enough to be worth mentoring. Contact members in an area where you need help picking up funeral home price lists for your survey, for example. Yes, I'm suggesting you call or email people right out of the blue. “This is Josh from FCA. I wanted to tell you about our latest project and ask for a little help. We're doing our updated price survey—you know how useful it is to folks—and we can get it done much more quickly if folks like you would stop at the closest funeral home to your house and pick one up for us. Would you help? We'd love to credit you and the other volunteers when the survey is done. Oh, and we're having a luncheon at Pam's house to compile the results—we'd love to have you there.”

Case Study

John from Colorado called. His sister was scrambling to find money to pay for Aunt Sadie's funeral. Sister was convinced that “I'll have to come up with \$4,000 in addition to the \$6,000 we already have, because I've heard a funeral costs \$10,000.”

Wait a minute. \$6,000? Yes, the

family already had \$6K from Aunt Sadie. I said to John that was more than enough for what they wanted (cremation followed by burial in another state). What's more, your sister needs to put herself back in the driver's seat. It's *her* decision how much the funeral costs, not the funeral home's.

Turns out John—a businessman who started a specialty food company—already gave his sister the same kind of advice I would have given. Don't walk in with a blank check, know your budget before you buy, and remember that love and money are not the same thing.

As we talked I gave John the tools to back up what he was saying. The Funeral Rule, shopping by phone ahead of time, etc. Over a wide-ranging conversation with lots of laughs I told John I would clone him and send him as a volunteer to every FCA group in the country. Well, turns out he was just ready to ask about how to volunteer. “How do people get trained to help you guys carry this out?” I replied, “We just started during this 45-minute talk.”

He was eager to contact our affiliate in Colorado, and he offered to make a donation without my even asking.

Follow-up is crucial. Here's what I did:

- a. Put John in our database.
- b. Tagged him with a code indicating he was a potential volunteer.
- c. Immediately sent an email to John, with a cc to the board members of our Colorado affiliate.
- d. Attached our last newsletter and a few other materials I knew John would like.
- e. Physically mailed a copy of my book, gratis, along with a brief

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handwritten note and a remittance envelope.

John emailed back the same day and said he was joining the FCA group in Colorado!

Put the Fun Back in Funerals

We often underestimate the importance of *fun* when trying to attract people to our cause. But we know how human relationships are forged and maintained—by breaking bread with each other. When you move to a new neighborhood you have the neighbors over for a light meal or a potluck. Webs of mutual interest and feelings of “I’ve got your back when you need me” are created this way.

It’s the same with issues and causes. Here are some ways to inject some social time and relationship-building into your FCA recruitment:

Death Cafes—These informal gatherings are getting lots of press. They’re groups of people who want to have a bite to eat and be able to talk about end of life planning with others who share their concerns. Type in “death cafe” on Google and you’ll come up with headlines like, “British Web designer and self-named ‘death entrepreneur,’ helps people talk about the taboo topic over tea and cake,” and “A few dozen Ohioans will meet Wednesday evening in a community room at a Panera Bread outside of Columbus for tea, cake and conversation over an unusual shared curiosity.”

Go do a Google search right now. Look at the pictures of the participants. Notice something? It’s not just old folks. People from their 30s to their 80s—with a heavy tilt toward the middle-aged, who will be burying their parents sooner, not later—are there. Get over the idea that “only old folks want to talk about this.” It isn’t true.

If there’s a death cafe in your community, your FCA peers and you should be there yesterday. And if there isn’t, what an opportunity! Start one right away.

Death and Daiquiris—or donuts, or dim sum. Host a brunch and bill it as a relaxed meal where people can ask any question they want about the end of life and meet others with similar concerns. Members of the FCA of Eastern Massachusetts and their pals who are into green burial and family-directed funerals host a regular get-together called Ghoulish friends with food, wine, movies, and sometimes a sleepover (I’ve been and it’s super-fun). Or, have a potluck with a funereal theme. I’ve been meaning to do this myself, so I may as well write out the invitation here. *Dearly Beloved,*

You are gathered here. . . well, you will be gathered here unless you want to miss Dishes to Die For! You all know I talk about death for a living. You also know I like to cook (and we all like to eat and party). So join me at [address] on [date] for an evening of funeral food-n-follies. Bring a dish to pass-on and your funniest or strangest story from family funerals past. No story too morbid, no joke too irreverent! THRILL to the tale of Grandma Slocum’s viewing just days after her grandchildren gave her a homemade haircut! CHILL as I recount the hilarious hijinks of her final conveyance. . . into the wrong grave!

I’ll lay the groundwork for the festivities with the tuna-macaroni salad that gets brought out every time a Slocum dies (we do make a fresh one each time). Bring your own family’s favorite “bereavement casserole” and join me for a casket-side chat. Wine will flow freely and there will be plenty of non-alcoholic refreshments, too. Be there or you’re dead to me. Love, Josh

You can think up any number of creative and affordable ways to have fun and do some serious work, too. Invite your membership and ask them to bring a friend! Evite.com is a great way to send invitations, and you should definitely spread the word on Facebook.

Save the date! Conference in June 2014 In Minneapolis



Yes, we know we told you by email the conference would be in Chattanooga. Surprise! Despite the best work of our woman on the ground, Karen Smith, of the national board and the FCA of the Mid-South, we couldn’t make it work.

Minneapolis is a great city, and the airport is a hub, which means the flights are significantly cheaper than they would have been to Chattanooga. We’re also finding the hotels and transportation more affordable.

As always details are subject to change, but the likely dates are June 5, 6, 7, 2014. Drop us a line and let us know what programming you’d like to see at fca@funerals.org.

IMPORTANT!

Mark your organizational calendar to check every spring that you’ve submitted your form 990 to the IRS. Most FCAs are small enough they only need to complete the e-postcard (990-N). Several groups lost their tax-exempt status for failing to file three years in a row!

Is it time to hibernate? Putting your FCA in low-power mode

-Josh Slocum

Has your board got one foot in the grave? Do you lurch from meeting to meeting just hoping to get a quorum? Does no one want to be on your board ever, no matter how hard you try?

You're not alone. The most common request for help we get is from local FCAs with few active board members and no new prospects. I've had time to do a lot of thinking and some experimenting over the years, and it seems clear we need to change our approach to filling seats on our boards. But first, we need to start with a fresh perspective about how our FCA runs, the purpose of our boards, and the role of members-at-large.

Step one—back away from the ledge

If your FCA is in crisis mode and you feel like it's time to shut your doors, step back and make a cup of tea. You cannot recruit effective, enthusiastic people in that state of mind. Prospects can smell the desperation a block away and they'll run. You may not even be aware that you're projecting panic but you are. Building a better board takes time and patience. Like planting a crop, you need to be willing to put the time in getting the seeds to germinate and then wait for the harvest. *This will not happen overnight and there are no magic checklists to speed it along.*

This sentiment needs repeating: You will not get a simple immediate fix by calling the national FCA office in a panic at the last minute. If you truly want to bolster your organization you have to be ready to commit some time and some energy in a new

and different direction and wait for the flowers to bloom.

Why call an emergency meeting to talk about closing? Not a thing is going to happen to your FCA if you decided to go into low-power mode and coast for a while. Sure, there are tasks that need attending (and they may not be getting attention right now, I know). But doing the very basics is not that demanding, and eliminating everything but the essentials in the short term frees up your time and mental energy to plan for a better tomorrow.

Low-power mode

• Filing the annual form

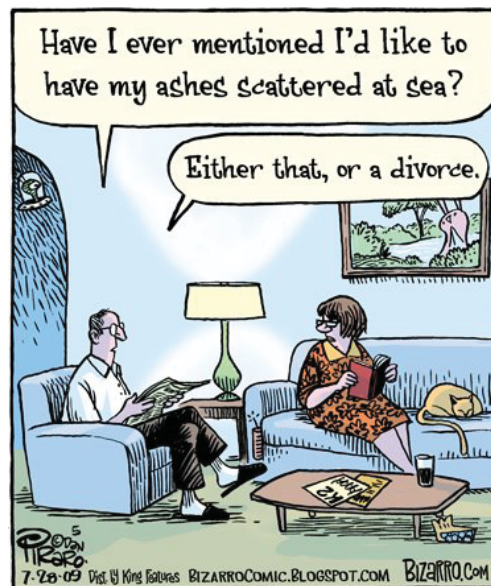
990—This is the nonprofit version of your tax return. For most of you, all that's required is the electronic "postcard" the IRS asks small-budget groups to complete. Find out what you need to do at the IRS' website.

• **Filing any annual paperwork with your Secretary of State's nonprofits division.** Each state is different, but most require a brief annual report which is rarely more than a list of current board members and assets held. Check with your state government for details.

• **Retrieving the mail and answering consumer inquiries** that come by phone, mail, and email. This includes depositing checks that come in and promptly sending the donor a thank you and whatever your membership pack consists of. This doesn't have to be every day, but it should be regular. And it does not have to be

one person; it can rotate. If your board members are really saying, "Oh goodness, that's too much," show them the door. This is such a basic, minimally time-intensive task for most small groups there is no legitimate excuse, especially from folks who've said they want to volunteer for your FCA.

What about membership donations that come in? You need to be clear to donors what they can and cannot expect. The first step is to make it clear on your website that your group is operating at a limited capacity temporarily, then give a list of what they can expect, even if it's just a funeral planning kit and a slightly dated price survey. Use this note to ask for recruits!



Special thanks to Dan King for his permission to use his art

Flying with ashes—what you need to know

-Lisa Carlson, reprinted from funeralethics.org

Consumers flying with cremated remains should bear in mind several important issues before heading to the airport. First, it is not always reliable to place cremated remains in luggage, as the luggage can get lost or damaged. But carrying on a container with cremated remains will have to pass successfully through airport security scanners. Therefore, you should know what kinds of containers are most likely to pass and what won't.

Scan-able containers

- cardboard or fiberboard
- cloth
- plastic
- transparent glass
- and probably all wooden ones.

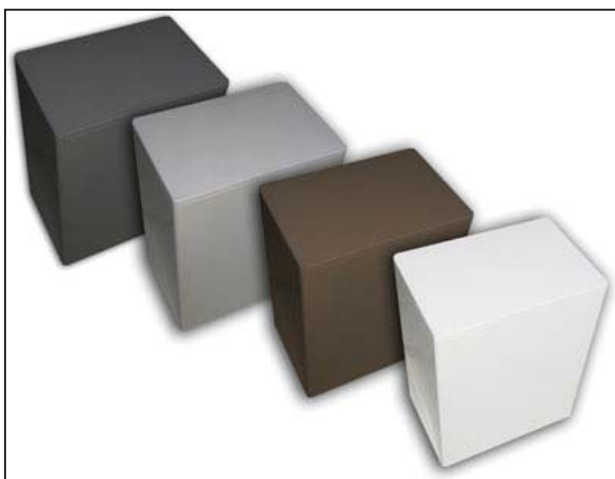
Non-scan-able urns

- metal
- stone such as granite
- ceramic

Transportation Security Administration (TSA) workers are not permitted to open non-scan-able urns and check through the contents. Therefore, if you arrive at the airport with cremated remains that won't pass through security, you're in danger of missing your flight.

Other points to remember

If the person is newly deceased and you are actively working with a cremation provider for the arrangements, indicate that you want the cremated remains delivered to you in a non-metallic shipping container,



Standard plastic urns supplied by most crematories. These are suitable to carry on an airplane. Image courtesy National Mortuary Supply Company

even if your family's plans call for a more elaborate container to be used before final disposition. (You may transport an empty non-scan-able cremation urn separately, but it will be opened and inspected by TSA staff during the security check.)

Consumers who already have cremated remains in a non-scan-able container but who need to travel with it will have to remove the cremated remains so each can be sent through security separately. Generally, cremated remains will be in a plastic bag inside the urn, making removal a relatively easy task. Other times, there may be a narrow neck on the urn with no plastic bag inside. In that case, it's a good idea to pour the cremated remains into a new plastic bag before boxing. Any simple cardboard box can be

used to re-package them before heading for the airport. If removing the cremated remains is too emotional for you, by all means, call on a local funeral provider, member of the clergy, or nonprofit group to assist you with the task.

Shipping cremated remains

If you are uncomfortable having the cremated remains taken from an urn, you may wish to consider shipping the urn with contents intact to your final destination. Or perhaps you will not be traveling at all and need to make shipping arrangements anyway.

UPS and FedEx **will not** accept cremated remains for shipment.

Cremated remains may be shipped through the U.S. Postal

Service, but **they must be shipped by registered mail with return receipt requested.**

It would be a good idea to double-box the container,

...Cremated remains may be shipped through the U.S. Postal Service, but they must be shipped by registered mail with return receipt requested.

with adequate stuffing between the two boxes to prevent any damage. Make sure the person on the receiving end is expecting the package and can travel to the post office to sign for it. Also, don't just ship cremated remains to a cemetery and expect the cemetery to know what to do with them if you haven't made advance arrangements.

Fundraising 101 (it's easier and cheaper than you think)

Most of you have a list of charities and causes you donate to. Perhaps it's your public radio station, your local domestic violence shelter, the humane society, the food bank. You know why you donate to them—you find their work important and valuable, and it *makes you feel good to do your part*.

But how, mechanically, does it happen? What triggers you to write that check or to sign up for a monthly donation through your online banking system?

It's direct mail. Real, physical, pulped-and-pressed paper that comes to your door. The "junk mail" you think you never read. But you do read some of it, and you likely put some aside in a pile for "charities I'll support this month when I pay bills." There's a reason that organizations as large and well-known as the American Red Cross pay big money to send you paper appeals—it *works*. It works better than fundraising dinners. It works better than spammy emails you'll delete.

Direct-mail is the backbone of almost every nonprofit's fundraising efforts. *Constantly trying to drum up new fee-paying members will never work to balance your budget*. Done well, direct mail is neither complicated nor "too expensive." If your FCA isn't already doing it this article will show you how. The biggest source of financial support you'll have is your existing membership. These are people who've seen first-hand what you can do for them. You've already sold them on why FCA is great, they've already

told you they like your work by joining in the first place. Give them every opportunity to keep it going!

Direct Mail Basics

An effective, easy to administer fundraising program:

→ Sends appeals by mail at least twice yearly, preferably spring and fall.

→ Uses a stand-alone appeal letter, not just a text box on page three of your newsletter. You can fundraise through your newsletter, of course, but it is not a replacement for separate, fundraising-only communications.

→ Uses appeal letters written in a direct, conversational tone. Successful letters tell a personal story illustrating how a gift affects real people with real concerns we can all relate to.

→ Always includes a pre-addressed remittance envelope (no, not postage-paid). Don't bother with a letter at all if you don't send a remittance envelope; it's literally throwing your money away for nothing.

→ Acknowledges donors with a thank-you letter promptly.

When I came to FCA in 2002, the board knew the organization desperately needed a better way to raise funds. But none of us really knew what we were doing; I certainly had no expertise in that arena. Over the past ten years we've made enormous progress by reading and learning about what successful nonprofits do to keep the lights on. In 2002 we brought in \$4,500 in donations from

the one tepid appeal I included in the newsletter. Last year we took in about \$70,000 in that same category, thanks to a combination of direct mail and other efforts (mostly direct mail).

The advice below isn't anything unique that we came up with; it comes from reading dozens of articles, blogs, and books by people who make their living helping nonprofits make money. We'll list some sources at the end.

Getting started, step by step

1. Bulk mail permits and non-profit mailing rates

If you have 200 or more pieces to mail you can take advantage of the US Postal Services bulk mail rates. Even better, if you're *also* a 501(c)(3) nonprofit you can get an additional discount per piece. If you're not a 501(c)(3)—remember, you're not automatically a (c)(3) just because you're a nonprofit, that's a special IRS designation for what's called "public charities"—you can still use less expensive bulk mail but it will cost more.

If you use a mailing house like we do, you can use their bulk mail permit. Ask your mailer for details. If you do it in-house contact your local postmaster to apply for a bulk mail permit.

If you're a 501(c)(3), ask your postmaster how to apply for non-profit mailing rates.

Real-world example: FCA national's mailing list has about 2,000 addresses. If we mailed first class (46 cents each) our postage alone would cost \$920. But because we use bulk mail and nonprofit rates

our bill is only \$315. That's **16.5 cents in postage.**

2. Writing the letter

A compelling letter includes the following characteristics. Even though some of these may seem surprising or trivial, they're not. They really do work. Remember that what *you* think a letter should read like is not the goal. We want to craft letters that have been proven to work *with donors*. You're not writing a term paper for English composition class.

An effective letter:

→ **Tells a story** with a real person readers can identify with. This is where you highlight the way your FCA does good work for real people. It appeals to emotion and empathy on a human scale. You should be collecting emails, quotes, and any kind of testimonial from friends who've praised your FCA. Ask them if you can use their words, and anonymize the story if necessary (but only if necessary). An example follows this article.

→ **Talks directly to the reader** in a conversational tone. Don't be afraid to write in the first person, and make sure you refer directly to the reader with lots of "you" statements. Here's an example of the wrong way and the right way:

Wrong: *FCA of Anycity provides information that helps consumers find funeral arrangements they can afford. The Board of Directors asks recipients to consider donating to help the organization further inform the public.*

Right: *If you've ever volunteered for a charity you probably remember the first time someone told you what a difference you made for them. Jane Collins from Hooville was my "first time." When she told me that the money she saved on her husband's cremation allowed her fly her two sons*

home for the memorial I knew we'd done something special, something unique, for this family. This is what you do every time you make a gift to FCA of Anycity.

→ **Includes a PS.** Research shows people often scan to the PS first, so use it to entice your donor to read the whole thing. Example: *PS—The Collins boys were so glad to be able to come home to support their mom they told me about it a week after the memorial.*

→ **Includes a remittance envelope.** This is the most important part. Making it easy for the donor with a remit envelope is the most cost-effective way to double or triple your donations. Yes, it matters even when people donate online. Having that piece of paper in their hands makes all the difference.

3. Thanking the donor

Prompt acknowledgment and gratitude is crucial. Waiting too long to send a thank-you tells the donor you don't care and you take them for granted. Ideally thank-yous should go out immediately on receipt of the donation. For small groups like local FCAs with volunteers, try to aim to get them out within a week. If you have time, a handwritten note—even a short handwritten PS at the bottom of your thank-you—means a lot. Most of us use standard letters, though, adding personal notes when appropriate and when time permits.

If you are a 501(c)(3), be sure to include this language so your donors can satisfy the IRS when they take a tax-deduction: *As always, Funeral Consumers Alliance of AnyCity provides no goods or services in exchange for donations.* What that means in plain English is that you're not selling or giving donors something special as a direct *quid pro quo* for their gift.

Important—the IRS requires

501(c)(3)s to send written acknowledgment for all gifts of \$250 and more, though every gift should be acknowledged in practice.

Funeral Follies: real things said by real people

Talking about death isn't easy for a lot of us and we often slip into magical thinking when we do. With hilarious results. Here are some quotes from consumers who've called us.

— "Who do I call when I die?"

— "We had just gone to Florida for the winter; I think he was surprised to drop dead like that."

— "But that crematory's on the other end of town. Seems like an awful long ride."

— "I chose that grave because there's a nice view."

— "He was just kind of stuffed in that casket. He looked really uncomfortable."

And a bonus from the vanity bag:

— "Where can I get my skin preserved and displayed? My body is a work of tattooed art and it should be seen by the people after I'm gone."

~♦~

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Newsletter

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HAVE YOU SEEN THE NEWS?

Funerals.org carries the latest news for funeral consumers and FCA groups. Recent updates include:

- Montana funeral directors try to outlaw retail cremation
- FTC releases video on complying with the Funeral Rule.

...check out the Daily Dirge at funerals.org!

FUNERAL CONSUMERS ALLIANCE is the only national, nonprofit, nonsectarian, 501(c)(3) organization solely dedicated to protecting the public's right to choose meaningful, dignified, and affordable funerals.

Since our beginning in 1963, we have served as a source of information and advocacy to grieving families, lawmakers, the media, and the funeral business. We offer accurate, authoritative advice on all matters relating to funerals, cremations, burials, and other after-death arrangements. We support legal reforms to better protect the public against abusive practices, and we serve as a clearinghouse for consumer complaints of illegal or unethical treatment. We also give educational materials and advice to our more than 100 volunteer-run consumer information groups around the country.

With our help, thousands of families are better educated about their rights under federal, state, and local laws. FCA has helped people save hundreds of thousands of dollars in unnecessary funeral costs by showing families how to make informed decisions in a time of crisis.

FCA is not funded by any government agency. We do not have any corporate or funeral industry sponsors. For more information, write:

**Funeral Consumers Alliance
33 Patchen Road
South Burlington, VT 05403
www.funerals.org**