



The Silent Family and Clues to Look For

by Todd Van Beck

THE SILENT FAMILY

We are all familiar with the sphinx. She just sits there staring off into space. The sphinxes we meet in the funeral home present us with real puzzles. It is our task as funeral directors to help "solve" these human riddles by bringing them out of their silences through skillful handling. Silent families come in many varieties. The truth is, most silent families are that way because they're not quite sure what to do or what they want. They are not intentionally being difficult; they're simply in a difficult position.

Often we must pry open tight lips with the right questions. In the following instance, however, the funeral director saw he was confronted with a case requiring action, not words: The man was in no mood to talk. The funeral director had asked, "Have you thought about what service you would like for your wife?" The answer came back swiftly and harshly. It was one word: "Cremation." After thinking about the way the response was delivered, the funeral director decided he wouldn't use a lot of words. There was another way to map out every conceivable option. He showed the man *every* item of merchandise which the firm offered for a cremation service. The funeral director *did things* for the man, instead of talking him to death. It doesn't always happen this way, but by the end of this interaction, the

man purchased a sizeable service.

Silence often denotes a cautious nature. On the other hand, some families are just silent by nature. They have probably been imposed upon a number of times, and they

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now refuse to open up until you've convinced them of the fact that you and your funeral home are truly there to help them through a period of tremendous crisis.

I served a family once who absolutely would not talk. I would ask a straightforward question about vital statistics, and they would just sit there – silent. Finally, one of the daughters began to weep. She confessed that the family had a terror of funeral homes and that they had never been in one before this occasion.

The arrangement conference came to an abrupt halt, and I gave them a tour. I got them coffee and danish, showed them every room in the building, and tried to make them comfortable in general. An hour later, the arrangement conference started again, and there was a world of difference.

In less than an hour we were through. I believe had I plowed on without taking this sort of break, I would have driven that family further into silence and distance. If I

had assumed I could achieve the results I wanted with this family through a normal conference, or if I had pretended to have established a familiarity with these people before the ice really broke, I'm sure I would have simply antagonized them further.

Silence is occasionally "put on." Some of the silent ones take this position towards funeral directors simply as a pose. They actually get a kick out of it! I had a family in the selection room one time who had narrowed their choice to three caskets. Without pushing any one of the caskets, I explained fully the differences between and the advantages of each one. The family just stood there – not uttering a word.

Finally, the son looked at me and said, "Do it again." So I started all over again. I went through the same process and had just started to review the merits of the third casket again when the son started grinning at me. "That's alright," he said. "I just wanted to see if you could tell the same story twice." He had his "fun" and was ready to get down to business.

The silent family is often silent in order to get all the facts without disclosing what they perceive as their own weaknesses (fear, grief, economics, etc.) To get under their veneer and see what progress you are making, ask them open-ended questions: "What has been your experience

with this?" or "What do you think?" Few silent families can withstand the lure of open-ended questions. Once the family warms up and talks, they are no longer "sphinxes." Your principle problem in serving them has been solved.

CLUES TO LOOK FOR

As funeral professionals, we grow more expert in dealing with families in direct proportion to the degree to which we cultivate our ability to analyze the character of each individual. We must develop an understanding of the individual's likes and dislikes, and their desires and tastes. This can be of great value to you. We must be alert to catch every clue – whether by tone of voice, attitude, gesture, or action. This will enable us to have a sympathetic understanding of a family, and to serve them in a way that will win their respect and confidence.

Always look for clues to serve the family better. For example, a couple wanted to pick out a cemetery in which to buy lots. They went to a funeral director to take a tour of the various cemeteries in the community. As they got in the funeral director's car, the wife was talking about how she loved flowers and really enjoyed her garden. The funeral director caught the clue instantly. At first, he had been intending to take the couple to a very contemporary cemetery. Acting on this one clue, he turned the car in the direction of another cemetery which was known far and wide for its horticultural excellence.

At the gate of that cemetery, he stopped the car and said, "There are several cemeteries around our city, but this one is known as an arboretum." He then drove the couple through the cemetery grounds, noting how neatly the property was landscaped. He drew their attention particularly to the magnificent floral gardens throughout. The couple was enchanted and decided right on the spot that they needed to look no further. Because the funeral director picked up on one

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clue, this couple received excellent service that saved everyone involved a good deal of time.

As professional people, we should realize that surface indications are seldom to be trusted. It's a mistake to judge the other person by some act or mannerism that may not "click" with us. When we begin to feel "thumbs down" about another individual, they sense it through some subtle tip-off on our part, and we have then seriously impaired friendly relations.

As funeral directors, we have to remember that the numerous and various people we meet each day for the first time are analyzing us carefully, just as we are analyzing them. These families are also looking for clues about us that will tell them whether we are reliable, kindly, honest, and desirable to deal with. Families will always mentally appraise us for any advantage they may gain in dealing with us.

A charitable, tolerant attitude on our part towards others will cause families to be attracted to us. A funeral home receptionist in Cincinnati exemplified this virtue. She was always charitable and gracious to families and the public even in spite of any negative behavior, no matter how slight, that she might observe or sense. Scowling, an elderly man approached her and rasped out the name of the deceased person whom he wanted to see. In a flash she caught a clue. She responded soothingly, "This cool, damp weather really makes my arthritis act up, and it can sure be a pain." His gruffness suddenly left him. He smiled and asked in a much milder tone, "How did you know I have been suffering

with arthritis? I haven't had a single night's sleep for days." She replied, "I noticed your eyes look tired from the pain, just I know mine can. I can really sympathize with you." The old grump responded to that with a sympathetic reply of his own. So he wasn't just a "bear;" his joints just ached!

Every family we contact has good points. We will derive pleasure and advantage by thinking kindly of the other person and treating him or her considerately and tolerantly.

In spite of the fact that quality offerings have to cost more than those that are mediocre or shoddy, families will sometimes shy away from things which they perceive as expensive. A funeral director from Tulsa has a system for identifying and handling such clients. He says,

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"A lot of our families come in here looking for bargains, and that's quite alright. Sure, I always have a few families who request the best, but if I sold only to them, I would not stay in business very long. My system with the bargain-hunting client is to ignore the subject of price entirely. I show them everything from our finest to our least expensive items – and I treat that family as if they were funeral experts. Eventually, most of them drop their exclusive focus on price and actually desire real quality. More than 98% of my funeral sales are based on quality alone."

His system demonstrates the ability to read character and a willingness to offer service of the highest order. All of us in this great profession can benefit by studying the clues our families give us. It makes for a much healthier relationship with them, and it helps to create lasting loyalty to your funeral home.