

Pet Loss Services
Mentally Positioned to Succeed – Part II
By Steven P. Schaal

Editor's Note: Beginning in 2003, Matthews Cremation Division (MCD) conducted an intensive consumer research study on the subject of Pet Loss Services. This article represents one of a series of pet loss related focuses about the business development opportunity for this growing consumer audience.

Your Point of Entry!

As we reviewed in Part I of the article “Mentally Positioned to Succeed”, there are numerous creative strategies to consider when developing your own pet loss program. Getting the attention of today’s pet owner requires careful evaluation of all the possible methods to which to gain entry into these exciting new products & service opportunity. No matter what marketing effort(s) fits your particular comfort level (or depth of wallet), it is important to remember that in most communities we are pioneering a different level of service (Pet Memorials v Pet Disposal) to an audience that has had very little exposure regarding meaningful offerings to memorializing the loss of a family pet. All of our marketing efforts must focus on building service significance that connects this pet owner to your place of business. If you place as a priority that your business model focuses on the pet owner and the Celebration of Companionship (not just the handling of animals), you and your staff will be mentally positioned to succeed. Keep in mind that beyond the excitement of expanding your offer of service and gaining access to a new source of important revenue, the most powerful influence for funeral professionals is to expose your business to a consumer who may have never set foot in your existing business until now....at the time of a pet’s death. This will become an exciting new point of entry!

Marketing as a Profit Center

Okay, let’s assume you have made the decision of building a pet loss business and you have in place the facility, personnel, retail products and equipment to serve this clientele. How do you get the message out effectively and cost-efficiently? Doing your homework early is the best way to insure both of these values come to fruition. The old adage is that marketing correctly should be identified as a *profit* center and not a *cost* center. Let’s face it; marketing and advertising has gotten a bad rap over the years and at times for good reason because of the net results. The “rap” comes from ill-conceived plans that don’t garner results. Spending \$10,000 or \$25,000 on a marketing program that doesn’t produce the necessary business is a tough pill to swallow for any owner. Marketing is an art, not a science, thus thoughtful planning before implementation will increase our for a foundation for long-term success.

The place to start is the basic four “W’s” for developing our marketing and planning strategy – **Who, What, When, and Where.**

Who is your target audience? Defining this is the key to maximizing your marketing dollars. The obvious answer is pet owners but that is a broad spectrum. Today, 63% percent of households own at least one pet, and many of those are multiple pet families.

To provide deeper clarity to our mission, let's start by identifying the competitive landscape. Pet Loss is an emerging industry and you may just discover that you are the first to the market...Wonderful huh! Let's also identify that once your business is established, the competitors will come out of the woodwork trying to get a piece of the action. Questions you should ask early not only includes the competitive landscape but also how affluent (or not) are your potential clients, how knowledgeable are they on pet memorial care, what mediums do they use to receive their information and where do they live, work and recreate? Recently, friends of mine took their Yellow Lab to a gala fundraiser for the Humane Society with 450 other attendees and their pets. The event brought together 250 dogs and their owners. The audience diversity was staggering and it was surprising to witness such a younger crowd! Understanding all the pet networks within the community should never be a surprise because this will be the key to directing the appropriate funds correctly and efficiently.

What, is what you may have already determined – types of Pet Loss services. However, that answer too may only skim the surface of possibilities and needs to be fully understood. Are you going to offer only memorial products within a showroom or are you also going to own cremation equipment and provide these services directly (versus contracting through a third-party)? If there is already competition in the area, here is a good spot to differentiate your services through controlling the all important “chain of custody” as it relates to this important family member. Keep in mind, owning the equipment and controlling the service helps you elevate a large portion of the profit equation.

When, this category, although key in a retail setting has a little less relevance here for most regions of the country. The one aspect to consider is if your pet owners are transient. For example, if you have your facility in the sunny south, your potential customers may be “snow birds” and thus only available certain times of the year. Not that we can't survive in a seasonal business...it's important to budget/plan accordingly.

Where you market your services are in many cases not in your control. The market dictates that to a large degree. Do you have competitors in your community to the south? Is the largest and best population base in suburbs to the north? If you have done your homework in the “Who” planning phase these questions should be easy to identify and answer.

Okay, now that you know the Who, What, When, and Where, let's put the plan in action. Start by being observant to you surroundings. What mediums do you notice in your community? Is the advertising standard with billboards, newspaper ads, TV, radio, bus signage, event and their sponsors, point-of-sale, the internet or others? There are virtually thousands of options. We are a very diverse culture and that is very much reflected in the ways we receive our information. Some read the newspaper while others use the web, etc. Ask those you know and who might be potential customers. You don't need to break the bank on consumer research to find out these answers. Most people don't mind answering “buying” related questions and many are glad to provide input and even appreciate the

opportunity to voice their opinion...especially when it comes to their faithful and loving pets. Ask pet owners if they know of the choices out there, have they considered memorializing the beloved pet, what would they consider appropriate types of products & services? Make certain you don't just ask at the beginning of your business campaign, but continually ask and always be open to changing with the customer demands. As marketers and business people, we are successful by adapting to the consumer needs and not making them transform to what "we like" but more importantly, us adapting to what "they like". I have witnessed too many businesses "die a death by a thousand paper cuts" by simply doing the ostrich routine and sticking their head in the sand and ignoring consumer trends. Those who understand the buying habits of their customers and adapt as needed survive and thrive in the market.

Which Advertising Avenues Are Best For You

There are two basic types of advertising – **Awareness** and **Action-driven**. The tendency is to concentrate on the second and down play the first. I understand that tendency; it is natural to want immediate revenue. This is not black and white with many marketing functions leaning toward one objective or the other. Many cross-over and perform dual functions equally well.

Let's start with the first – **Awareness**. This is especially critical when you might be pioneering a new level of service much like Pet Loss into the community. This is an emerging market where the dynamics of information is rather limited! It goes without saying that this needs to be "soft" marketed...allowing pet owners the opportunity to become aware of the options before selling them your product or service. If you establish your market positioning as a repository for information and education, you are already one step ahead of the competition. Marketing tools such as informational brochures, advertising, posters, white papers, counter cards, are all great point-of-sale-items within your facility. All of these "touch point" marketing tools tell the Pet Loss Care story and connects that positive message back to your facility. One of the best mediums for posting educational information is on the internet – within your web site. Accessing information "on line" has become one of the fastest ways to reach this new age buyer. Recent web statistics have indicated that nearly 70% of the U.S. population (233 million) uses the internet. In 2007, 20% of total spending by U.S. population will be through the internet. 86% of "Third Agers" (adults in their early 40s through mid 60s) research products and services online before purchasing. If our strategy is to position our message in as many entry points as possible so that our exposure is maximized, the internet represents a major influence to achieving this important objective. As you consider the educational promotion via the web, I would strongly recommend that your material is thorough so that consumers will view your business as a valuable resource. Beyond the standard material of available services (IE. Cremation/Burial Options, Private or Public calling hrs, etc...) and a view of memorial products (Urns, Video tributes, Keepsakes, Garden Memorials, etc...), we would also recommend a visible network with your local animal care providers (IE Adoption, SPCA, Humane Societies, Groomers, etc...). Demonstrating that your passion for this family member steps beyond just the time of death is an important component when connecting to this audience. Especially if your intention is to have this animal care network support your business proposition it is

important to recognize these other community agencies.

Action-driven is just as it states, it drives the viewer to take action, preferably to buy your product. These could be print or electronic advertising, outdoor or other mediums highlighting your facility as the area's top Pet Loss professional. This type of advertising does not deal with *what*, but *who*. It trumps benefits you have to offer such as on-site cremation, caring environment, choices, etc. It subtly positions your business as the region's leader.

Symbolism over Substance – Make the message authentic!

When you consider your options for the external strategies for building awareness such as with press releases, open houses, billboard advertising, etc...it is essential to have pets within your visual setting. I was recently at a ground breaking ceremony where the unveiling of a new pet cremation facility was about to occur. As the proud new owners were preparing for the event with shovels in hand and the arrival of the press (local TV, Newspaper, Radio stations) was pulling in the parking lot...not one person associated with this new business had a pet in arm. What a missed opportunity and a dangerous message to present when we are promoting the importance of the family pet but no where in our presence is this special companion. Because you might be breaking new ground within the community, you are already at a disadvantage with no established pet relationship credentials (unlike Veterinarians) where your level of pet care has connected with this consumer. Having this visual remain an intricate part of the promotion strategy will allow you to become a credible resource at their time of need.

The key to marketing this new business venture is consistency and commitment. You need to set a course that is best for you with a budget that makes sense and mediums that will drive results with a solid commitment to stay the course. Marketing is a long term endeavor that will garner results if positioned correctly and implemented consistently. The opportunities are endless in the Pet Loss industry for those professionals that ride the wave and seize the opportunity. Come join us, the waters fine!

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