

# Consumer Cremation Research: When is a Disposition Not Really Final?

*Editor's Note: Beginning in 2003, Matthews Cremation Division (MCD) conducted an intensive consumer research study on all aspects of cremation. Conducted by market strategy firm Competitive Resources, Inc., the study focused on six major topics:*

- *Arranging a Cremation*
- *Gatherings & Services*
- *Cremation Merchandise*
- *Final Disposition*
- *Crematories*
- *Pet Loss Services*

*This article is the fourth in that series. Future articles will look at each of the remaining topics.*

People inside our industry talk about burial or cremation as “disposition” options, but for cremation families the job isn’t finished. Once the cremation is over, consumers confront what has become an increasingly difficult question: what to do with the cremated remains. When our industry doesn’t give them the answers they need, many family members end up on the closet shelf. This article discusses the results of Matthews’ recent consumer research project, and the opportunity to give families better support as they make this final decision.

## **Poor Uncle Fred**

As a child, I fondly remember the days of venturing to the attic and looking for worldly treasures. Growing up...what was kept in the attic provided several lifetimes of memories. Passed along from generation to generation to generation...family heirlooms, photo albums, garments of the time and various antiques...each provided a story about our family heritage. As I grow older, what has suddenly become alarming is how these family heirlooms will be viewed by future generations. I recently experienced the challenging exercise of preparing our grandparents’ home for sale and having to work through the distribution of their personal belongings. Like many families, our ability to absorb all of their furnishing wasn’t nearly enough and the painful truths became a somber reality. For most of my grandparents’ items, we were confronted with the agonizing knowledge that these belongings were going to go somewhere other than with us. We knew we were either going to donate to local charities, sell to strangers or toss in the dumpster. It’s a challenge that every generation faces – one we’re helpless to change. As we ponder these generational transitions, we have to wonder how our cremation urns will fare. Will future generations find a place for them, or could they too be thrown away, sold or left behind? Will the cremated remains of poor Uncle Fred hold any meaning to a great-great-niece or nephew? This and other related cremation disposition topics are the foundation for our next chapter – Part IV of our consumer research conducted by the Matthews Cremation Division.

When we asked consumers about that ultimate disposition (a final resting place), the feedback we received truly reflected a changing society. Because our lives are so transient, the choice of where to

## **Getting Uncle Fred Out of the Closet**

*In our early discussions of what consumers had done with the cremated remains, we were impressed by how many people had chosen “in-home placement.” We later learned that it was because we hadn’t asked the question properly. For some consumers, in-home placement refers to a cherished place in the living room, or a “shrine” on the mantel. Far more often, however, that in-home placement is on the top shelf in the hallway closet.*

*For most of our consumers that closet shelf was never meant to be a final resting place. Racked by emotion in the days immediately after the death, they were just saving the difficult choice for another day. Unfortunately, the rest of their lives interfered. The establishment of a permanent memorial for Dad was trumped by the house, the kid’s school work, soccer practice and the urgency of having to do the laundry. Like most procrastination, this was accompanied by sheepishness or even serious guilt. Even that guilt, however, hadn’t been enough to get Dad’s urn out of the closet.*

*In some ways, that spot on the closet shelf is our fault. Our industry hasn’t made it simple or easy enough to solve that dilemma. The sheepishness and guilt that the consumers felt is clear evidence that they are motivated – the lack of motivation belongs to us. We couldn’t solve the problem for them in the initial arrangement conference, and we haven’t developed a profitable, affordable, understandable way to help them afterward.*

*That brings us full circle – back to dilemma of poor Uncle Fred and the thousands of other urns that share the same fate. If death overtakes their families before they get the job done, what can we expect their children to do with this dilemma? If the children don’t share the same reverence for Uncle Fred, his “last ride” could be to the town landfill in a big green truck. If not careful, the future of our industry could be going with him.*

place the urn is becoming a real quandary. As we talked with consumers about their own choices for disposition, it became obvious that there was a struggle with their decision. Whether it was ground burial, placement in a niche or columbarium, scattering or taken home...the choice could carry an awful burden for loved ones. We heard that with any option, there could be consequences that would disturb an individual for years to come. Time and time again we heard consumers say things like "We buried Mom's urn back in Ohio, but I live in Florida"...and they are there and I am here". There was no peaceful resolution that wasn't going to be challenged in some particular manner. The reality of today's mobile families is that someone or something is always being left behind – almost any permanent resting place means that someone is being left out.

### **It's Education, Stupid.**

In some ways, the issue is disarmingly simple. To paraphrase Bill Clinton's 1992 election mantra, *It's The Education, Stupid*. The amount of misinformation regarding family choice with a cremation disposition continues to be the industry Achilles heel. Before we began this research, I worked with many funeral colleagues who avoided the topic of disposition because they didn't own the ground, niche, the columbarium or chartered boat. These inactions come back to haunt us as we look at the ramifications this carries for the consumer and our industry.

In our consumer research, time and time again we heard "I never knew" when presenting various ways in which to establish a memorial with cremation. You could almost hear Ross Perot's famous "giant sucking sound" - but this time it was lost opportunity and income. If you knew that a particular memorial would dictate various additional products and services that could be sourced at your facility...wouldn't you want to talk about it? For the funeral provider, avoiding these discussions is clearly going to affect your business financially if you missed this critical opportunity to educate your families. Educating your families early and often on the resources within the community will strengthen your position as a valuable resource to selecting families. Leaving this opportunity in the hands of anyone else will certainly leave you in a very vulnerable position.

No matter how much our society has changed, the cemetery represents common ground and familiar turf as a starting point for any discussion of memorials. Still, when we began to solicit feedback about cremation and cemeteries, there wasn't an immediate connection between the two. Choosing cremation was supposed to help families avoid the high cost of real estate, and as one woman politely asked in amazement, "Why would you bury with cremation?"

That's a fair question. But it's also evidence of a huge information gap. When we showed consumers photos of cemetery cremation installations, too many of them were surprised.

### **Give me some space.**

In our research we showed consumers various niche and columbarium designs and discussed their place and purpose. Their responses were another interesting surprise. Personal space was a major influence in determining which cemetery disposition was

most appealing. It was mentioned often when we presented upright niches that may hold 10-20 spaces, the fact that there were “strangers next door” or “bodies so close”. While it could seem puzzling if we think of the thousands and thousands of acres where people are buried next to total strangers, the cremation environment was clearly something different. Because the urns are so much smaller, placing them next to each other made our consumers feel crowded. The phenomenon was strongest with indoor columbarium installations. What was tolerable outdoors became intolerably crowded when they went inside.

For some of our consumers the issue was clearly the closeness of strangers. When we asked “How would this be if the people around you were other family members?” their objections dissolved. Their concerns were also directed toward the living. Especially with indoor installations, they talked about how uncomfortable it might be “if you were there grieving for your loved one and somebody else sat right next to you.” When we showed other concepts that weren’t in such closed quarters, the heads began to nod with approval.

Glass-fronted columbarium installations were a special concern for some of our consumers. They apparently imagined a thriving black market in used cremation urns, because they consistently raised the issue of theft. While this hasn’t been a big problem in churches and cemeteries across the county, our consumers were still clearly worried.

### **The Quest For Freedom**

In our discussion of cemetery property, we presented various memorial gardens that would support both outside niches, park benches, fountains and scattering areas. This type of presentation clearly received the highest marks. Part of that approval stemmed from a sense of freedom. For some of our consumers the choice of cremation was tied to a desire to free the soul...the body was nothing more than a vessel. Modern cremation gardens were clearly a better fit with that desire. To some of our people they represent life and vitality, and offered a more pleasant, inviting experience for remembering their loved ones.

These types of settings allow families the freedom to release the ashes or place them in a permanent memorial. Either way, this represents a pleasant place to visit and offers an atmosphere that symbolizes the value of life...not the sorrow of death. This represents an industry shift that is influencing consumers’ perceptions of cremation and requiring us to rethink every aspect for our business.

### **Home by the sea**

When we talked to our consumers about scattering the conversation was dominated by stories about scattering or burial at sea. They talked warmly about how appropriate and meaningful the ceremony had been and how fondly they remembered it. They mentioned businesses such as the Neptune Society as a resource for performing these services, and a few people mentioned having looked in vain for a Neptune branch in their areas. It was interesting (but perhaps not surprising) that for the majority in our audience, this concept had never been mentioned by the firms they dealt with. After a discussion of some of these possibilities the

idea was greeted positively by many in the room. Like most things, the definition of appropriateness varied by individual. Still, the importance of having a choice would always trump the possibility of a bad idea.

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