

# THE ROLE OF FUNERAL DIRECTOR

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**Abstract:** In general, the public not only in the UK, but in the world, has very limited knowledge of the funeral industry, yet feels easy to criticize it or judge the ones employed, and associated with the funeral industry. Unknown but, nevertheless, inherently stigmatized role of the funeral director is investigated.

Identifying managerial issues in the course of researching the chosen area of study allowed authors to recognize the conflict between the empowered funeral director and disadvantaged, by the virtue of distress purchase, bereaved customer.

**Key words:** funeral industry, funeral director role, funeral industry management.

**JEL:** M10.

## Introduction

*„Ethical issues confront organizations  
whatever line of business they might be in”  
(Crane & Matten, 2016, p. 9).*

Authors have learned that global view is essential to understand ethical issues. It is difficult to give exact figures, however approximately 81 million people die every year in the world and the background for this research came from the fact that funeral business, in general, is not known to the public. People do not like to speak about death and dying, hence investigation

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into the funeral industry is considered to be dealing with one of the most difficult taboo subjects.

Funeral directors „cannot stimulate and encourage more people to die, neither can they encourage them to die more than once” (Cowling, 2010). How then can business survive and be successful in an industry, where the rules of the market do not apply?

The main goal of the article is to present that the customer relations in the Funeral Industry in the UK are very complex, because of the distress purchase and unique role of the funeral director.

## 1. Funeral Industry in the UK

*„It is a taboo subject, isn't it?”*  
(Hopwood, 1996).

Brian Parsons in his paper „Yesterday, today and tomorrow. The lifecycle of the UK funeral industry“ states that there has been considerable change in the structure of the British funeral industry. Despite the fact that large organizations, which manage funerals on a centralized basis, occupy a significant position it is still the family owned firms that dominate the market. Brian points out that emergence of the large organisations „can be attributed to a combination of societal and technical changes, such as preference for cremation and the institutionalisation of death“. Later he states that „the emergence of the management of funerals on a centralized basis can be identified as the most strategic development encountered this country“. The emergence of large specialist organisations has also been the result of two significant problems experienced by small-scale firms: succession and business perspicacity. These have enabled the large organisations, in recognition of the economies of scale through centralised, large-scale operations, to acquire troubled small firms (Parsons, 1999).

As Parsons (1999) shows, the UK funeral industry has seen significant external changes:

1. The increasing preference for cremation, despite that historically, cremation fell out of favour when Europe went Christian because religious

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leaders reckoned it would be impossible for ashes to be reconstituted as a human body on the day of resurrection.

The figure for cremation in the UK now stands at 72.45 %, which is one of the highest in Europe. Cowling (2010) explains that cremation now saves around 200 acres of land per year in the UK. The Cremation Act 1952 and opening of a succession of crematoria is regarded by Parsons (1999, p. 129) to have affected the development of funeral directors, and provided the opportunity to increase business capacity.

2. The shift in the location of the body between death and disposal – „the place of reposition of the dead“ (Parsons, 1999, p. 129).

„Historically, care and custody has been a community-centred activity, (...) and the family home – usually the place of death – provided the place of repose“ (Parsons, 1999, p. 129). However this was changing, and as shown in Cottridge (Cottridge, 1933), since 1930s the dead body would remain at storage and viewing facilities e.g. of the funeral home, and not transported home before disposal anymore. Parsons (1999, p. 130) call is the „institutionalization of death“ and further refers that it has been increasing in combination with the following factors:

- authorities' concerns that the dead body could be a threat to a public health,
- the unsuitability of new residential property to accommodate a coffin, and
- „change in neighbourhood relationships“ (Houlbrooke, 1989, p. 234), and increasing demand for domestic privacy.

All this combined, as Brian later summarises, has lead to the fact that „many families were only too glad to assign the responsibility for the body to the funeral director“ (Parsons, 1999, p. 130). In effect, this custody and the increasing level of control over the funeral, empowered the funeral director.

Firstly:

*„the shift in the place of death from the community to the institutionalised environment has given the funeral director custody as the body no longer rests at home in the interval between death and the funeral“* (Parsons, 2003, p. 73).

And secondly:

*„In general terms it can be seen that the growing complexity of the death management system, such as legislation, bureaucracy and possible choices enhanced the role of the funeral director. Thus in keeping with the increasing tendency for consumers to employ experts to perform specialist tasks in the case of funeral provision, the funeral director acquired greater control“ (Parsons, 1999, p. 131).*

In analysing the changes in the funeral industry in the UK, Parsons (1999, p. 132) explains the problems of small-scale, family owned firms lying in the issue of succession, or its starting to lack „despite its long tradition in the funeral industry in the UK which existed often for several generations“. He then notes the following reasons for that change:

- the social stigma attached to the occupation that dealt with the dead,
- the commitment of providing 24h service,
- the responsibility of managing a small business and increasing opportunities of intra-generational social mobility (Abercrombie et al., 2000, p. 196),
- operating in a small business which generally offered „fewer promotion prospects, less job security and lower wages“ as identified by Goss (1991, p. 156),
- lack of business acumen, and the fact that majority of funeral directors have not had business-oriented training, and little opportunity to broaden their commercial perspective (on succession into the family firm).

## 2. Theoretical determinants of work of Funeral Director

*„In a sense it's a very important role, and the fact is we can't do without this service“ (Hopwood, 1996, p. 14).*

Parsons (2003, pp. 67–68) shows that funeral director works have received analytical attention during the final decade of last century. As it has already been shown earlier in the literature review, because of the develop-

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ments in the funeral industry in the UK, increase in cremations, „institutionalization of the death“, and the shift in the location of the body between death and disposal, the funeral directors in UK in the 1930s started to „acquire more responsibility; particularly in terms of custody and care of the body“. They, then, became more empowered. Brian Parsons also states that „funeral director is generally perceived to be a repository of technical information“.

Funeral directors „act as the intermediary between the bereaved and the organizations that furnish the mode of disposal“. On the other hand, Cowling's book „The Good Funeral Guide“ (2010) informs that the primary caregivers to the deceased body are the family and closest ones. The power according to Cowling should come back to the people, who might choose to employ funeral directors or not, and carry out the funeral all by themselves, and take care of arrangements with all intermediaries in the processing with the funeral and body disposal.

According to Parsons (2003, p. 76), it is the funeral directors who are one of the primary caregivers to the bereaved, and they are employed as their agents – „paid experts, while the client simply issues instructions in the capacity of contractor“.

„Following a death, contact is made with the funeral director to make arrangements that primarily – but not exclusively – centre around disposal of the body“ therefore, funeral director is „often linked to the circumstances of death“ (Parsons, 2003, pp. 67–68).

When instructions are received to undertake funeral arrangements, a series of planned and coordinated physical and administrative tasks utilizing high capital-intensive resources such as specialist staff, equipment and facilities must be available to meet demand at a moment's notice. The removal of the body, embalming and preparation for viewing, coffin finishing, coffin bearing and driving vehicles embrace the physical tasks, whilst negotiation with funeral officiants, the cemetery and/or crematorium are examples of administrative tasks (Parsons, 2003, p. 68).

### **3. The conflicting role of funeral director from the perspective of empirical research**

The exploratory character of research allowed for precise understanding of the issues in the Funeral Industry in the UK and identifying key areas for this dissertation. The studies included 10 meetings with informants in the UK (Edinburgh, Birmingham, Washington, and Newcastle upon Tyne) and one in Poland (Wągrowiec). Some interviews were carried live during these meetings, and others were carried over the phone, and questionnaires obtained via email. The interviews with Mrs. Queenan (a co-ordinator at C10SR) and Charles Cowling (secular funeral celebrant, and a private researcher into the funeral industry and UK funerary practice) will be analyzed in detail.

On one side it is criticized, on the other, the importance of the role of funeral director is enhanced. The type of service delivered by funeral directors is a result of the demand of the people. Parsons also shows the switch from community care of the body to industrialization of death in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the UK.

Mrs. Queenan makes a clear point that the unsubstantiated perceptions about the subject of death and funeral industry must be detached from what the funeral directors actually do. They simply specialise in the provision of a required service to the customers, like in many other service industries. Therefore, it is not unethical to deal with the deceased body, neither it is illegal (unlike e.g. drug dealing, prostitution or distributing lethal weapons etc.)

This argument resolves around the idea to clear the public's inherited negative perception (as described earlier in this analysis), and detaching the death from the services of funeral directors. Furthermore - accepting their work as ethically unproblematic (a body needs to be handled either by the funeral director, the next of kin, or if no family is found, by the local council).

Discussion with Mrs. Queenan reveals funeral directors appear in the context of extremely difficult time of the bereaved, when one might not be able to make a sound decision according to purchase of services, but at the same time customers do not have a point of comparison. People do not buy

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expensive goods or services very often, therefore there is no point in comparing a funeral with any other purchase.

The truth is that, in general, customers do not understand the works behind the scenes, but as Mrs. Queenan makes a good point – „even if they did, would they want to do it themselves (e.g. when the deceased was a wife or child)?“ continuing that it is the job of funeral director (who is specialist and professional in caring for the dead), further establishing that funeral directors are necessity in every society in every country. According to Cowling (2010, pp. 17–22) in UK, the funeral is only an option, but disposal of body is a legal obligation by law, within a certain timescale.

Interview with Mrs. Queenan revealed that funeral business is a touching subject, an interpretation of business ethics might apply to the funeral industry in that one might argue that taking advantage of people at a stressful time is not ethical. However, this must be proven first before judgments are made. Therefore, a question to ask is whether there is evidence of unethical behaviour by funeral directors in the UK.

To discover this Mrs. Queenan points out to the concept of „Just Price“, as expounded by St. Thomas Aquinas. Ethical business is based on ethical practice of fair exchange for fair value. The understanding of this will be clear when we understand the detailed responsibilities and the important role of a funeral director in the UK.

„Many people will say to you, the undertaker was marvellous; he did everything... as to waking up to a huge bill, this is less likely. Undertakers in the UK are not notoriously exploitative, and will have given an estimate or a price for the job in advance of the funeral“.

Mr. Cowling says that there is much ignorance about the way a funeral director operates. They are feared and resented. This is reinforced by popular attitudes to death, and by the anger people feel when someone dies (Habenstein, 1962; Kübler-Ross, 1969; Parsons, 2003).

In the buyer-supplier power relation („you do not know and I know“), both have different information and come from opposite spectrums of condition, therefore one is reliant on the other. In funeral business, the customer will rely on the funeral director, hence the need for ethical considerations, or is there? Can they allow themselves for unethical behaviour?

*„Most of us could not do without them, they make a living from what we can't do, they are professional in their work, there is no margin for error“*  
(Cowling, 2010)

### Conclusions

There needs to be a fundamental fact distinguished – in moral sense it is wrong to over-abuse the virtue of position in the relation between a funeral director and a customer, and in commercial terms it is right for business to carry out its activities. It would be wrong strategically for any business not to look for profits, investments and growth. Funeral industry is a normal business industry, there is nothing unethical about being in that business. In fact, it is very ethical that somebody wants to do the job of a funeral director (a job thought unbelievable by many), embalmer, coffin manufacturer, crematorium operator (having in mind the stigma attached to the professions in the funeral business), for it serves the society and caters for all sorts of people's needs in the difficult times when death occurs.

Presence of asymmetric information (also knowledge, experience and power inequalities) occurs in the principal-agent relations, and is a classic example, along with inherent conflict of interests, of features in the agency relations. It can also be present in the customer–funeral director relations where one party greatly depends on the other.

However, in the adaptation of the provider of distress purchased service to the role of the funeral director, we must add the broader responsibility of ensuring that the customer is completely satisfied, and all burden of arranging the very many responsibilities and worries in a time of death of a loved one are taken away from the customer. Rather than just making a sale of the businesses services, the funeral directors have imposed moral responsibility, and successful ones will even exceed the expectations put on them by the customer.

Mac Intyre (2018) confirms that the traits of ethics, listed in the literature review, are acquired by learning and most notably in business - by be-



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ing in relationship with others in community of practice. Achieving commercial success in ways that honour ethical values and respect people, communities, and the natural environment.

Taking into account business ethics and the issues of right and wrong, one might not want to invest in industries i.e., which deal with weapons, toxic chemicals, child labour, gambling, drugs, pornography, animal testing, genetic engineering tobacco products, etc. However, none of these negative criteria are associated with the funeral business, and fundamentally, there is nothing wrong with it. What is more, it is a necessary industry for it touches everyone of us; hence investments and developments in the funeral business are yet to occur.

On the other hand, where funerals are concerned, the normal market rules do not apply. „A funeral home, however good, cannot stimulate an appetite for its products, neither can it inspire repeat business – it cannot encourage more people to die, nor can it encourage them to die more than once” (Cowling, 2010). Having that noticed, it may be down to the ensuring good reputation through ethical trading on the side of the funeral director and encouraging the customer to fully explore their option.

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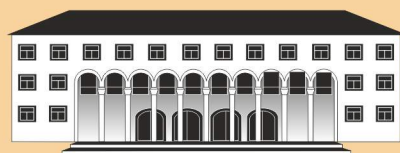
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