

HIGH - TECH AND HIGH - TOUCH

The Millennium Direction For Cemeteries?

— by Anne Field

This time eight years ago, the world was gripped by the frenzy of the so called “Millennium Bug!” Today, the newest technology mania is Apple’s latest money-making bonanza, the much heralded iPhone. Hungry consumers, with insatiable appetites for the very latest gadget, (even with its \$500 price tag), took to the streets to be strategically placed outside Apple stores when this latest technology craze went on sale. They wore T-shirts emblazoned with “**igot the iphone!**” and waited in queues, which snaked around city blocks in New York, while others camped out overnight on other city pavements, in order to be among the first to claim the glory of being “on the cutting edge!”

Even Philadelphia’s mayor, John F. Street, declared, in defense of his place in the line, that he would be a far more effective mayor, if he was a ‘mobile’ public servant to his community, rather than sitting behind his desk in City Hall! It would seem that the new do-everything, touch screen sensitive cell phone, is fast becoming the bench mark in communication technology. Certainly, the Apple Corporation is banking on it, with a target market of 10 million of these ‘revolutionary’ units to be sold globally by 2008!

Whatever we think of this hysteria, it is crystal clear that not only our businesses, but also our lives, are on a lightening fast ride in the Information Age. We only need to reflect back on the lengths gone, to tally the money that was spent, in order to be ready for Y2K, and now to acknowledge our ‘need’ to have the web, movies, email, at our fingertips, to know that we are inextricably hooked to technology!



Touch screen information kiosks provide a great public interface to cemetery patrons once all the hard work of auditing and validating burial location has been completed.

Custodians and Caretakers of Centuries of Information

For us as Catholic cemeterians, custodians of centuries of information, this poses some interesting questions. We are responsible for the preservation of generations of family faith, heritage and history, and we cannot afford to lose this intellectual property. Arguably, the preservation and management of this historical data, as well as providing for future generations, has to be one of our highest priorities. In the context of this first decade of the new millennium, how do we keep pace with the Information Highway? Do we really need to become an on-line cemetery, or are we, by virtue of the fact that we are in a traditional and conservative industry and ministry, exempt from such worldly matters?

Catholic Cemeteries in the Information Age

As cemeterians, the obligation and responsibility to our local communities are, without doubt, the focal point of the service offered.

There is a public expectation that our cemeteries are a safe repository for family history and information. That cemetery records are both available and readily accessible. In the past while family historians may have had little choice but to physically come to our cemeteries to pour over records for relevant information, different choices will be demanded in the future.

The Information Age has heralded a new era in terms of accessing information. While surfing the Web, shopping on the Internet and email communication may still be outside the comfort zone for some of us, there is a new generation for whom this technology is second nature. We Baby Boomers grew up with family trips to the library, which was both educational and recreational for us, but today’s market is demanding that the “global information library” be available with the click of a mouse button.

The Big Picture / Global Trends

Acknowledging and respecting that the Catholic cemetery ministry is conservative by nature, how prepared are we for these shifts in consumer

expectations? How do we plan to serve a market that will expect, as part of their qualification of our services, to log onto our Website, browse our catalogue of memorialization items, and look up available information on their loved ones. Shoppers in the “Millennium Market” would expect to do all of this from the comfort and privacy of their own home sitting at their personal computer.

Having spoken with many cemeterians in the past 15 years, in the USA, South America, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, my observation is that the cemetery ministry is in major transition. The spectrum of opinions on how “technology - ized” we become, spans the full length of day to night. I have the sense that there is an underlying “examination of conscience” currently going on throughout the many cemetery management groups in these countries. Can we maintain the status quo (and of course our market share), without having to turn into computer nerds? Can we continue to rely upon our dusty file rooms full of cards and deteriorating paper maps as our source documents to serve our families in this decade and beyond? Or, do we need to critically examine our strategic planning to incorporate and exploit the best technology has to offer.

The Australian Cemetery Scene

Throughout Australia, most corporate entities have taken a proactive approach in seeking the best in worldwide technology. Our Memorial Parks and Cemeteries are no exception.

Many Australian cemeteries have a computerized set of integrated accounting, mapping and sales systems. Touch screen information kiosks, directing cemetery patrons, with a printout of a map of pin point accuracy, to the exact location of their loved ones grave, is a service item that is ‘expected’ by visitors to our cemeteries. Even those families for whom a cremation service has been performed, but no memorialization has yet been purchased, are given this information.

Accompanying this is a discrete invitation to speak to the cemetery’s trained consultants about memorialization options.

The public information system is not just for newer cemeteries, but is also applicable to our heritage listed cemeteries, with information dating back to the 1800s. Also included on the touch screen are feature articles, and images, of notable citizens interred in the cemetery, as well as various policies and news and marketing information from the cemetery.

Of course to ‘go public’ with this information requires that our ‘house is in order,’ in terms of our records. Painstaking effort has been put into auditing the newly computerized map and the interment records, and once reconciled; a limited subset (for privacy issues) of this public information is placed on the information kiosk. Of course, those wishing to not be ‘locatable’ are excluded from this public information.

The Macquarie Park Cemetery in Sydney sees the usage of the kiosk information system as an invaluable public relations and sales and marketing tool, and its patrons make great use of the facility. An excellent promotion of this world class cemetery can be viewed on www.maccem.com.au.

CNN Features State of the Art Cemetery Software

As we all know, cemeteries and funeral homes, as respected community institutions, are often featured in the media, but sometimes for the wrong reasons. May 2005, saw one of our Australian cemeteries featured in the media, and on a global level, but with an excellent public image. CNN had ‘got word,’ via the Australian Government Business Trade department’s Website, about some of the ‘smart’ hand held computer technology CCC Supplier Member Axiom Business Systems had available for cemeteries.

So CNN flew its corporate camera crew to Sydney to create a feature on the progressive thinking of a cemetery

using public-friendly systems such as information kiosks and mapping information on palm pilots! This was screened on CNN in prime-time viewing in the USA, and then around the world. It was good news indeed, not just for Axiom, but for all cemeteries, as the focus of the feature was on the growing trend of today’s cemeterians who were beginning to embrace modern day technology a tool to “breathe new life into this centuries-old business” The CNN feature can be viewed on Axiom’s Website, www.charoncms.com.

Where To From Here?

Innovation, in the technology world, is the key to survival. Having managed a computer company throughout the last 25 years, I have always maintained that we have had to reinvent our business at least every two or three years. For other businesses, the cycle may not be so short, but commercial reality dictates that change is inevitable for all of us.

Where will change drive cemeteries and crematoria in the new millennium? Referring back to the model previously referred to in Australia, whilst my opinions are subjective, I believe the strategic direction in technology being undertaken by these management groups is both pacesetting and customer focused.

This is the age where we have a market demanding high tech solutions yet still want the high touch approach in personalized and individual attention.

IT Innovations Currently Being Used in Cemeteries

Other technology advances running in parallel with these innovations include:

- Secure Internet access to cemetery/mausoleum site maps.
- Electronic Memorial Kiosks with potential high revenue streams, for minimal capital expenditure in data setup. Return on investment has to be an issue even for the most conservative cemeterian!

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High Tech, continued

■ On-line funeral/ burial services that facilitate families in remote areas or overseas being able to participate in their loved one's farewell via the Internet. This practice is already widely used in Australia.

■ Cemetery staff being able to accompany and direct potential customers through their grounds with an online map of available sites in a palm-held computer.

■ 24 hour access for on-line bookings for Funeral Directors.

■ eCommerce solutions that will provide 24-hour shopping memorialization options to cemeteries patrons.

It is an axiomatic statement to infer that the only limitation on these kinds of developments is the scope of our imagination. Technology has the power to reframe our current paradigms when it comes to how we do business from here.

However, the primary goal remains, and always will be, to excel at our level of customer service. In the age where consumers are asking for more with less, this, and this alone, will determine our economic viability, and whether or not commercially we stay on the map!

Maybe in the not too distant future, cemetery managers and operators will also proclaim (as did Philadelphia's mayor about his own role), "I will be a much better cemeterian if I am mobile, out in the grounds with my revolutionary *icemetery* unit, selecting

and selling property on my point-of-sale palm pilot, even updating my inventory system in real time, as opposed to sitting behind my desk!"

Sounds way out; I wonder?

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