

CHANGES OVER TIME

Having spent over 50 years in the monument industry, I have witnessed so many changes in the bereavement sector, however not for the better. When I started there was an atmosphere of co-operation between all sectors of the bereavement sector to help families through the nightmare of losing a loved one.

By the time I started to apprentice with my family business, cemeteries had started selling flat markers which monument builders did not really feel comfortable about however we gave cemeteries the benefit of the doubt that they required this to help make cemeteries survive. Unfortunately, this expanded to creating marker only sections with the markers included with the lot. This cut off the consumers ability to shop around for the company that they were most comfortable dealing with.

The onset of monument sales completely turned the relationship between monument builders and cemeteries upside down. I remember in the early days our company knew every cemetery employee, including many of the ground's keepers, by name. My Mother had many lunch dates with some of the cemetery office staff and I had lunches with many of the cemetery managers. These were not events paid for by us but shared expenses. This was a case of real friendships. After the start of monument sales by the cemetery, it seemed like the cemetery got rid of the majority of the staff we were friends with. Several of them came to work for me at Smith Monument.

Toronto Trust Cemeteries, as it was known early on, had a system where monument builders could come to their cemetery offices and there would be an updated list of the recent burials and lot owners information available on the front counter to pick up. This information is public record. As monument sales ramped up by cemeteries, these lists disappeared and monument builders had to request to see the lists. Many times we would be told the cemetery staff were too busy and we would have to wait. Then to make it even more difficult, the system put in place was that you had to make an appointment and the time allotted would only leave enough time for one company to come in. The reason given was that the offices were disrupted by the monument builder when the office staff were busy. This seemed to indicate that the list on the counter was a sufficient system for both parties. The onset of computers should have made it even more convenient to avoid office interruption by emailing lists to those on a list. So my assumption was that these delays were to help their own staff to get a head start on sales. The cemetery staff would use the grey area that the family was already a customer from the burial so that fact that the law forbid telephone cold calls did not apply to them.

Another indication that monument builders were being inconvenienced was the system of getting lot information by telephone. It was common practice when a family forgot their lot papers when shopping for a monument, the monument builder could call the cemetery office and obtain the information. This was a policy that was helpful to the bereaved family member. With the onset of cemetery monument sales this changed drastically as the monument builder would be told they were too busy in the cemetery office and to call later. The other excuse was that the person that handles that is off today, call tomorrow. That information was on computers by now so it was just a stall tactic. The next excuse the cemetery added to their list of reasons to not help would be that they could not give this information out over the phone because it might not be the lot owner asking, please send them in to the office. Of course, getting the family in the office would allow the cemetery sales staff the opportunity to try and sell the monument.

Each monument sold required a signature from the lot owner and a diagram from the monument builder showing all dimensions of the proposed monument. In the beginning we could have these approved at the counter. Once the monuments could be purchased through the cemetery, there were delays. Monument builders were forced to hold back requesting these diagrams until the contract could not be cancelled due to the fact that if we were requesting a diagram, cemetery sales staff now knew the family had purchased a monument and could contact the family to talk them into cancelling and get a better deal. The cemetery would give quotes and tell people if they got a better price to come back and they would match it or beat it. This never bothered me since I would just say, they didn't give you their best price right off the bat so maybe they were over charging you in the first place. Smart people would agree and I could make the sale. Soon I was getting families walking in asking me for a quote in writing. This was happening on a regular basis so when I enquired why, the family told me they were asked to get my price and bring it back to the cemetery for a better deal. I was a full-service manufacturer so I was more affordable than most cemeteries since they had to order from a supplier. I was not bothered by this however it certainly was an inconvenience to the family.

I came to realize that selling to the consumer was a money issue for commissioned sales people and the idea to help families through this difficult time was out the window.

Cemeteries have the ability to install the foundations which I found quite acceptable until they started offering the families foundations at no charge if they bought from the cemetery. The high (profitable) prices paid from the monument builder for foundations allowed them to do this since I believe they were making enough profit from our foundations to help pay for their foundations. Pretty cushy set up.

Toronto Trust kept changing name which didn't seem to make any sense but now that they were branching out as a money-making machine and taking control of an Ontario asset, it is easier to understand. They got in to the funeral business. This step was going to play havoc with funeral homes and the families were being fought over for this business now. Again, the idea of helping the family through a difficult time was changing even more.

A situation arose when the cemeteries decided that only they could do inscriptions on the mausoleum crypt fronts. I had been inscribing these on a regular basis. I was informed that they wanted to prevent mistakes by outside suppliers. Basically, they were saying I was not qualified however 2 weeks later called to see if I was interested in the contract to inscribe the panels. Now I'm qualified? The price to the families was also increased right away once they had no options to shop around.

Shortly after that, I was approached by a cemetery organization to supply their monuments. However, after our initial discussion I was informed I would not be allowed to deal with consumers and sell monuments that would be installed in their cemetery. This was a great way to eliminate your biggest competitor. Not being stupid, I realized that they could cut me off retailing for long enough then change suppliers and I would be out of business.

Monument builders were not allowed to install their own marker sales and to dig a 4" deep hole was over \$100 which seems like a bargain by today's prices. Some cases there was damage to the markers left at the cemetery for installation and I would receive a call to tell me that it was delivered that way. We knew this was not the case and approached the offending cemetery with the idea that we take a picture of it upon delivery and that they sign off that they inspected it. This idea was refused. Better to disturb the family to make them think we made a mistake, I guess.

One interesting occurrence that solidified in my mind that there was no longer a good working relationship between monument builders and some cemeterians was near the end of my career in the manufacturing monuments. My family's manufacturing plant was the only local location to have major repairs to monument completed. I received a call to ask if it was possible to repair a damaged monument overnight. It seems the cemetery backhoe had knocked a corner off a family's monument. Apparently, this family was constantly complaining about something at the cemetery and they begged me to fix it and get it back before they saw the damage. I agreed and had it picked up as the gates closed. Myself and another employee worked all night to recut the top and re-polish it and had it ready to return to the cemetery before the family was aware it was gone. I did not charge them any extra because of the overtime I paid my employee. Everyone was happy and the family was not unnecessarily upset. Two weeks later my staff discovered we had overlooked an order for a foundation installation in this same cemetery. I proceeded to call to ask if they would rush it in the foundations they were installing that week. They refused and said it would have to wait for the next pour. I requested that we be allowed to set it on boards so the family wouldn't have to wait. I said we would remove it for the cemetery when they were going to dig for the next pour. Again, I was refused permission and had to go apologize to my customer who was not pleased by our mistake but were nice enough to accept our apology. Three days later the family came to me to say that a monument 2 rows over from theirs was sitting on boards and wanted to know why I told them it could not be done. After looking in to this situation I discovered this was a sale by the cemetery. Not only was this the last repair I did for this cemetery, I came to a realization that families did not receive care and consideration from the cemetery if they bought from an outside supplier.

On several occasions a couple of fly by night fraudster monument sales people (yes we have bad apples too) took deposits from seniors and then ran with the funds. Rather than say buyer beware, our company stepped forward (and other monument builders have done the same) and supplied these people with monuments or markers at no cost. In each case the cemetery did not help these poor seniors with their cemetery fees and they had to pay full price. Peter Silverman at City TV even stepped forward to help when he found out the cemetery was not interested in eliminating their fees. Another situation, when I donated a marker for a family that was being denied the funds from a gentleman's estate by the public trustee, Goldhawk put this on his show and was dismayed by how the cemetery could charge over a hundred dollars to dig and install the marker in less than 15 minutes. He was there to witness it in person.

There are other cemetery organizations that started making new rules about when we could install monuments we sold. Appointments had to be made and there was little allowance for being late because of traffic. In Toronto that can be beyond our control. Saturday deliveries were forbidden unless it was one of their own sales.

Now there is a cemetery organization that has cut off our ability to set our own monuments. Monument builders now deliver to the cemetery and they charge to install the monument. The charge for this is higher than the monument builders charge to go from their factory and installed on the grave. If the family buys from the cemetery this fee can be waived. Just one more way to attempt to keep the family from shopping around.

Although I am unhappy about cemeteries selling monuments, I believe that on a level playing field a monument builder with their training and knowledge would easily out sell a cemetery commissioned sales person. One of the main reasons it is important for cemeteries to be licensed is their advantage of not worrying too much about the second burial because they have Mom or Dad buried so of course they automatically have the second burial or more depending on the lot size. The funeral director is self-regulated because if they screw up on the original funeral the consumer has the option to go elsewhere for future funeral arrangements. The monument builder has a similar reason to make the monument to the families satisfaction because they can have any future inscriptions or markers purchased at another supplier.

This is just a sampling of issues faced by bereaved families in todays marketplace. Funeral directors used to be caring individuals that spent hours with families to help them through these trying times and many today still are however with the conglomerates taking over funeral homes and cemeteries, the bottom line has become the most important for the shareholders. This has saddened myself and many other second and third generation monument builders who grew up in the industry trained to look out for the consumers needs and help them through a very difficult process. My retirement did not reduce my desire to help these families. It saddens me to watch these changes and I have great hopes that the members of the cemetery industry wake up and realize that all these events have pushed more people to avoid the traditional way we celebrate the life of our loved ones.