



funeral service **insider**

independent news & guidance for funeral home owners and operators

Legacy.com Launches ObitWriter To Make Writing Obits Easier

Mrs. Mancuso comes into your funeral home, and while she looks good on the surface (especially for being 80 years old), it's a different story emotionally.

She sobs as she tells you about her husband of 50 years, George, whose death at age 85 was not exactly unexpected. While she had thought she had prepared herself for the ordeal, the loss is devastating – and when you try gathering basic information for an obituary, she can barely go on.

While this may not happen every day at your funeral home, there's a chance you and your staff can relate, which is one of the reasons Legacy.com is gearing up to launch ObitWriter, an online portal that makes writing obituaries easier for funeral directors and families.

The offering is the result of an exclusive partnership with Narrative Science, a leader in advanced natural language generation and the creator of Quill, which is its platform that generates obituaries.



Kim Evenson

“Our mission is to be where every life story lives on, and we are always looking at what are the barriers to people getting these life stories – and one of them is just writing them and knowing how to do it,” says Kim Evenson, chief of marketing for Legacy.com.

Another reason the company is rolling out the offering to its funeral home network (it plans to launch it to everyone early next year) is so funeral homes and the families they serve can easily reap the benefits that go along with placing an obituary in a newspaper.

Gaffney Group Buys Dignity Memorial Firms

Corey Gaffney, president of Gaffney Funeral Home and Cremation Society of Washington, acquired five funeral homes and a chapel mausoleum in November from Service Corporation International's Dignity Memorial Network, according to a news release.

The funeral homes and chapel mausoleum are in Pierce, King and Kittitas counties, all in Washington state. They include:

- Cascade Funeral Home in Cle Elum.
- Powers Funeral Home in Puyallup.
- Powers Funeral Home in Sumner.
- Price-Helton Funeral Home in Auburn.
- Steward & Williams Funeral Home and Crematory in Ellensburg.
- Woodlawn Abbey Mausoleum in Puyallup.

“Well over 50,000 Puget Sound families have been very gracious and supportive of the Gaffney family for many years. In joining with these five historic funeral homes and chapel mausoleum, we reaffirm both our commitment and ability to provide top-quality funeral and cremation services,” Gaffney says. “Many of these funeral homes have woven themselves carefully into their surrounding communities. To respect the years of service and dedication that took, the changes that have been made should go unnoticed.”

For information about the Gaffney Group, visit www.gaffney.group or call 866-572-6003.



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We recently interviewed Evenson about the benefits of obituaries, obituary trends and what Legacy.com hopes to accomplish with its latest offering. Edited excerpts follow.

What can you tell us about what's happened to the length of obituaries placed in newspapers over time?

We are actually seeing the average length go up, but we're seeing slightly fewer people place them.

What we've seen in terms of a trend is obituaries have become much more personal, and that is driving a longer length of an obituaries. We conducted a study that showed 88 percent of people want to place an obituary, and 81 percent of those say if they were to use a tool like ObitWriter, they would be more likely to place an obituary in the newspaper.

Is it common for people to have such a problem writing something that is relatively straightforward?

I have a 15-year-old who doesn't like reading or writing. He opens Microsoft Word and stares at it. He does social media, video gaming, and then he comes back to Word and stares at a blank page.

ObitWriter is to help solve that blank-page problem and get from being something I have to do to how do I do it?

Thank God most of us are not writing obituaries every day because just managing the format is really difficult. This helps you get past the format and into the content that is really important.

Do people appreciate a printed obituary in a newspaper these days?

I think that a lot of people underrate the power of print in this category. It is really strong. The driver of people thinking about placing an obituary is print. When you ask them how much value do you place on putting it online, they place a fair amount of value on that, but the driver is traditional print placement.

Some of it, I think, is the emotional value of having something physical at a time that is so ephemeral. You are missing the person in this physical world and being able to do the physical notice to the community is a very beautiful tribute. It reaches a different audience than if you were just to make the notification online.

We conducted some of our research in homes, and people were able to grab a print copy of the obituary very quickly. They would very quickly get up, go to a bookshelf or run to another room and grab it – they could physically put their hands on the obituary as they talked about its value. It was such an honor for someone to put it in the newspaper – a lot of families we talked to had a tradition of their community newspaper having

covered other important occasions – whether it was their child’s softball games or something else. In one case, there was a grandmother who was literally a hero. She had jumped off a bridge to save a man from drowning, and there were several pieces on her heroism in the paper. To place her obituary in the same newspaper was hugely important to them.

The time that a newspaper is forming a relationship with people is not at the time of the obituary. The newspaper is a part of the community and the obituary of that person is an extension of that relationship.

Are some newspapers charging different prices for obituaries depending on whether they are placed online, in print or both?

This is not common. It is typical that online placement is included with the placement of a print obituary.

But there are a few experiments around that ... for instance, some newspapers will offer a very small or free print placement and you can upgrade it to have an online placement. This hasn’t caught fire, but it may grow over time. In markets where print is being reduced, the timeliness of online being part of that package is very important to families, so in a market where the paper is running less frequently and doesn't meet the timeline where you want to announce things, then leveraging

online is very popular.

What are some of the obstacles preventing families from placing obituaries in the printed version of the newspaper?

Overall, newspapers are trying to make placing obituaries much friendlier for families.

Aside from the cost, the fact that it’s based on a line rate – and what the cost will be in advance – can be very difficult for families to understand. Newspapers are working on giving people very robust examples so they understand what the costs are at various levels.

You mentioned earlier you’d seen a slight drop-off in the placement of printed obituaries. How much of a drop-off has there been?

It has been slow and steady and not large. I would also say that when we’ve worked with newspapers to turn that around, we’ve been successful in doing that.

Partly, it’s funeral homes not understanding the power of the obituaries, which is one of the original vehicles for social marketing. Think about what a printed obituary is doing: It is fundamentally announcing the funeral to the people who most care about the deceased – and that type of communication for an incredibly valuable customer and to a circle of potential customers is what today we’d essentially call social

marketing. There are so many products and services that wish they’d have a marketing vehicle like this where they were identifying their best future families for that funeral home and broadening the reach of their funeral home with the people most likely to care about and use those services in the future.

Why don’t all funeral homes appreciate the value of obituaries printed in the newspaper?

There is a common misconception that if you keep your obituaries on the funeral home website and don’t let anyone else have them, that that is the best-case scenario, but it is exactly the opposite.

By being in a broader network, and Legacy.com specifically, you are literally harnessing the search value of the New York Times, the Washington Post and others ... to say to Google that this funeral home is important as related to these obituaries.

There is a very practical marketing value to placing obituaries in the newspaper that I think if every funeral home understood, they would really encourage their families to place a newspaper obituary.

I think newspapers and funeral homes are so much better together. If you are a newspaper reader, you are more involved in the community, you vote at higher rate and you care more about the social fabric of the community. So, you

don't only get the search strength but you share a common audience.

People coming to support someone who has lost someone are high community connectors and that is who the newspaper reader is. There is this incredible synergy.

Do you understand why some funeral homes want to keep the obituary to themselves?

From the funeral home's perspective, we all wish that people woke up and went to that funeral home website, but people don't have that habit. People have the habit of going to the newspaper and checking the obituary section. They also have the habit of Googling when they need information and finding Legacy.com via search. We are the top place where people come when they search 'funeral home' or 'funeral homes' or 'obituaries' – or anything related to those three terms.

I grew up working in consumer marketing, and if your business model demands changing consumer behavior, you are always in trouble. Something we do really well at Legacy.com is leveraging where the families are and what your visitors are already doing and making it easier for them. When you look at other models, they fundamentally rely on changing behavior. We try to keep that amount of work really low.

Is there something newspapers need to do a better job at in

building relationships with funeral homes?

I think a lot of times they haven't thought about newspaper pricing in the context of how that comes across to the funeral home and family as an outsider. I think the pricing model grew out of a typical classified advertisement model, and there might have been a time when that was OK. But, as we've continued to evolve as consumers, we are interested in transparent processes. We want to be guided online and have it be very easy.

Are some newspapers adjusting pricing downward?

We've seen newspapers that are considering tiered pricing, where it's really clear if you buy a small obituary, this is what it is going to cost, this is what a medium-sized obituary will cost and this is what a large-sized obituary will cost. I think this is a category that can benefit from that kind of thing.

Tell us about ObitWriter and how it came about.

Stopher Bartol, our CEO, first met with the team at Narrative Science several years ago. At that time, they came out of a Northwestern University incubator and were located in Evanston, Illinois (where Legacy.com is also based), and so we have a lot of common connections.

At that time, they were taking box scores and final scores and turning

those into articles that basically had no human intervention. So, for instance, they were giving a computer essentially all the statistics related to a baseball game and getting back an article that seemed as if it were written by a person.

At the time, Stopher thought it was really interesting and something that could be applied to obituaries, and about a year ago he said, 'Hey, it's the right time.'

We've seen some other companies come out with similar ideas and solutions.

There are plenty of people and in plenty of different areas that have done this in a templated way ... and that is very different than what we are doing. We are offering a very sophisticated way of collecting obituary information – and one that we think is better.

What type of research did you conduct before deciding to move forward with the ObitWriter offering?

We do a lot of research, including ethnographies, poll research with newspaper partners, surveys, etc. Whenever we do them, we choose at least 1,000 people from the general population.

We recently conducted research with McClatchy (a newspaper network) and worked with people who had placed an obituary in the last year or had a death in the family

in the last year, and we just asked about ways to make the category easier. We heard that people would love to have a guided experience and would love for it to be transparent and have more information online.

There were instances with a person over 80, and we thought, 'Are they going to be interested in online?' And what we heard is, 'Yes: I would have loved to have done this via email and versus running back and forth and trying to make arrangements.'

How will the ObitWriter offering simplify the process for the funeral home?

One thing we've heard is that this might change the staff a funeral home uses to intake the information it needs for an obituary.

So, think about the doctor's office analogy where you have different people taking your blood pressure, greeting you, etc. They feel having this ObitWriter program available may allow them to have a different person within the funeral home work with the family on the obituary.

The other thing we saw is that funeral directors that didn't always have a very refined process ... we found that they were just excited about this being able to change that.

How difficult is it for families – during a time of grief – to put

together an obituary for a loved one?

On the personal side, we've had two people in our office go through this process fairly recently, and while they didn't come from the editorial team, they are certainly way more knowledgeable than the average user in terms of how to write an obituary. Both people said independently that the process is very hard. These are people working for Legacy.com who know what they're getting into.

People talk about two things as pain points:

1. Just getting that first draft done, because once you have the first draft done, you circulate it to other family members and get it approved as there is usually some level of coordination. For example, someone may be able to do most of the obituary on their own but need to check in with other family members – and until that is done, it's really very difficult.

2. Newspaper and funeral homes coordinating and trying to understand how the obituary is going to be placed and the costs around that is another major area for improvement.

I think there is a large range around what various funeral directors place value on. I think for some people, it's a necessary but unwelcome part of the process that they wish they could spend less

time on – and others see it as about their families and long-term connection with the community – and they try to make the obituary special.

Is there a cost to use ObitWriter?

We are launching it entirely free. Our goal is to get it out in the marketplace.

Do you need to place an obituary in a printed newspaper to use it?

Our bet is that it's going to be used to increase print obits in the newspaper, but we are not restricting usage in any way ... obviously, there will be situations where that doesn't happen, and hopefully the families will think of us fondly.

We are taking on the costs and offering it for free; our goal is to be a help to funeral homes and our newspaper partners.

How will families use it?

Once it's launched, they will go to legacy.com/obitwriter. There is no software to install and nothing blocking it. (Editor's note: Visit new.legacy.com/obitwriter and enter your information on the bottom to get on the early-access list as the final site is still being developed and is not yet live.)

How exactly does the offering

work, and how long does it take to write an obituary with it?

My grandfather died before Legacy.com was founded and my grandmother died after – and to see this for myself, I did my grandfather's obituary. At first, I did not have all the information I wanted to have, and that made me realize I needed to talk to my mom and get additional information.

So, I think it can be really short if you have all the information available. For me, getting the information was really the most time-consuming part, but once the information is together, the benefit is with ObitWriter, you don't have to think about the format at all. It is taken care of in a very natural way because it is essentially predicting how you'd say it. When you add additional information, the obit changes slightly in every way. It's really interesting because you're able to get very different results than any templated approach that would be the same every time – you are able to get a fresh take on what the obituary would be based on the amount of information provided.

How did people at the National Funeral Directors Association convention in Boston react to ObitWriter?

People are very excited about seeing how it could help at their funeral home. There were definitely people who saw it could be a huge time savings or that this could help

How ObitWriter Works

ObitWriter captures all of the important facts and information about your loved one and transforms it into a meaningful story with the click of a button. You can then review and share the obituary with family and friends or submit it directly to a newspaper for publication.

As a family writes the obituary, they are asked for details on items such as name, place of birth, date of birth, date of death, predeceased and survivor information, career information, education information, military service information, involvement in charities and organizations, hobbies, service information and more.

Visit new.legacy.com/obitwriter and enter your information on the bottom to get on the early-access list as the final site.

them improve the quality of their obituaries.

I think for anyone who didn't see the value, they are largely thinking about it as a templated system or already have a process that is working for them, and if they do, that's great. But I think for people who are currently less than anything but pleased with their current process, they can see they could have a free service that does this quickly.

How do you envision funeral homes implementing ObitWriter? Will they let families use it on their own, use it on behalf of families or do some kind of combination?

I see funeral directors who really value and understand the value of obituaries using it on behalf of the family. It's a very pleasant process.

You want to be associated with that ease of use. It's also fun to hit the button: You put in all the information and it generates this complete obituary.

However a funeral home finds it most useful to use, we are supportive. We certainly don't dictate how it would work best in anyone's workflow. Some people would say, 'Great, let's set the family up on an iPad. There are a few things we need to do, and this would be a fantastic activity for the family to do during this time.' At every funeral home, it will fit in differently into the individual flow. We are anxious to see how funeral homes use it.

I see another segment of users using it directly. We get a lot of traffic to how to write an obituary content. People are pulling up those articles because they've never done

it before, and we see that group of people being able to do it directly and potentially walking into the funeral home with a completed obituary in hand. I think there will be growth on both sides.

Will you be reaching out to hospice care organizations and such to promote the offering?

There are groups that guide people through this experience, and we do see this tool as a way to provide outreach. We are very interested in making it easier for anyone guiding people to use this tool.

When will you launch the offering to everyone?

We will only launch it after our 1,500 newspaper partners and 3,500 funeral home partners have used it and given us feedback. So, we don't have a date for a public launch yet because we wanted it to

go out to those partner groups so they can tell us it is ready.

The soft launch to our partners will be in December and the broader launch will be determined. Right now, it is password protected and only accessible to our partners.

Moving away from ObitWriter, several months ago, you acquired ObitData.com, which is a tool to help funeral homes calculate their market share as well as the market share of their competitors. How is that going?

ObitData.com is super cool and shows you that market share data so you can see right away.

But from the business side, it is no fun to know what your market share is unless you can do something to grow it. So we've been able to combine that understanding with a targeted preneed program that has the largest reach

of anyone period. We are the No. 1 place where people are looking for the term 'funeral home,' which gives us an unusual opportunity to direct people to funeral homes in larger numbers.

What we've heard back is by adding preneed leads to a program that finds out about market share, that the value of the program has gone up substantially – and we haven't changed the cost.

We have the largest funeral home directory in the category and for all of the most relevant pages within that funeral home directory, you would get the preneed leads. Our traffic comes from scoring well across funeral home search terms, so it's a broad range of search terms that bring you to the funeral home directory and the pages of the Legacy site. This program uses location-based metrics to provide the most relevant preneed leads.

Special Offer for VIPs to Attend the Cremation Innovations Summit in Atlantic City on Dec. 15

Some of the profession's top thought leaders on cremation will be sharing tips and strategies to boost market share and enhance customer service at the Cremation Innovations Summit, Dec. 15, in Atlantic City, New Jersey.

The conference features Doug Gober of Gober Strategic Capital, Dan Isard of The Foresight Companies, Welton Hong of Ring Ring Marketing, Coleen Ellis of Two Hearts Pet Loss Center and Brent Taylor of Brentwood Funeral Services.

We have a few extra seats, and to thank you for being a subscriber, **we're offering you a SPECIAL DEAL:** Enter discount code "VIP" when checking out at www.katesboylston.com/summit to **save 50 percent off your ticket.**



Doug Gober will be one of the speakers at the Cremation Innovations Summit.

Stericycle Litigation Update: Class Action Settlement Announced

By Christopher Farmer, Founder of The Farmer Firm

On Oct. 26, 2017, the United States District Court for the Northern District of Illinois preliminarily approved a \$295 million settlement to settle claims with members of a nationwide class action of Stericycle customers claiming Stericycle engaged in a fraudulent price-increasing scheme. The suits allege that the biomedical waste company breached contracts and defrauded its customers out of hundreds of millions of dollars through a series of impermissible and fraudulent practices, including systematically and regularly raising prices despite agreeing to supposedly fixed-price contracts and failing to inform its customers about the price increases.

Members of the class are limited to customers identified as “small quantity” customers by Stericycle. Other larger flat-fee customers may also have been overcharged by Stericycle but are not a part of this class.

The settlement faces several additional time-consuming hurdles, including another, final review by the court, and then, settlements like these typically go through an appeals process that can last years. If the settlement is finally approved and survives anticipated appeals, \$42.8 million dollars will be set aside by Stericycle for attorneys’ fees and expenses, and the remaining amount will be divided among class members on a pro-rata basis. It is estimated, based on our initial calculations, that class members will receive approximately 20 percent of the amount they were overcharged (as compared to the contract price).

Additionally, the class does not address the excessive break-up fees that many businesses were forced to pay in order to get out of contracts with Stericycle. Nor does it address the desire many of our clients have to get out of current Stericycle contracts.

The proposed settlement does allow for class members to exclude themselves from the settlement, that is, to opt-out by filing a written request for exclusion. Class members will receive a notice of the class action settlement by postcard sometime between now and Dec. 20, 2017. It is important to save this notice if you intend to opt out. Class members that opt out are free to pursue their claims against Stericycle outside of the constraints of the class settlement. The deadline to opt out is Jan. 22, 2018.

As previously reported in Funeral Service Insider, we at The Farmer Firm are representing a large group of funeral service businesses in bringing their claims directly against Stericycle. Due to the uncertain future, extended time line, and high fees expected in the class action settlement process, we will not be participating in the class, and instead will recommend to our clients that they opt out of the class and bring their claims to Stericycle directly. As of today, we anticipate our group of funeral service clients will exceed 100 businesses comprising about 3,000 locations.



Christopher Farmer of the Farmer Firm is continuing his fight on behalf of funeral professionals against Stericycle.

Any member of the class who does not file an opt-out notice before Jan. 22, 2018, will be bound by the terms of the class action, and you will be unable to pursue additional damages from Stericycle. You will not be able to recover break-up fees, and you will remain in your contract with Stericycle if one exists.

Our goal is to recover from Stericycle an amount that exceeds the value of the class action settlement and do so more quickly than the funds will be available under the class action settlement. In addition, our goal is to recover break-up fees for those clients who were forced to pay for canceling their Stericycle contracts, and to seek termination of those Stericycle contracts for those clients who desire to work with another provider.

You have the opportunity to possibly recover some of the hard-earned money that might have been taken from you by fraudulent business practices. If your business used Stericycle in the past 15 years, you may have been defrauded, but you must act now.

If you would like to learn more about Stericycle litigation, or to discuss having your contracts and billing reviewed free of charge to see if you were defrauded, please contact me at chris@thefarmerfirm.com or call me at 713-367-1013 to discuss this matter. Please do not wait any longer; you must contact us before Jan. 16, 2018, to authorize The Farmer Firm to file an opt-out notice on behalf of your company.

Rich Darby to Share Memorialization Tips on Free Webinar

Families want their loved ones to be remembered and celebrated in meaningful ways. Funeral professionals can help. Join Rich Darby at 2 p.m. ET Dec. 19 as he highlights “How to Take Memorialization to the Next Level.”

Darby is chief operating officer at Trigard, which offers a range of memorialization products and services. During this FREE webinar, he will share memorialization secrets and tips you can employ to bring closure to families and stand out from the competition.

A licensed funeral director since 1987, Darby is a funeral service veteran who knows what families want and how you can meet – and exceed – those expectations. In addition to overseeing operations at Trigard, he also directs funerals at his family’s seven funeral homes.

Visit www.katesboylston.com/webinars to register.



Rich Darby

Foundation Partners Hires Jason Widing to Join Development Team

Jason Widing has joined Foundation Partners Group as vice president, business development, according to a news release.

“Jason has been developing strong relationships in the industry for years” says Bob Bukala, president and CEO of Foundation Partners Group. “His ability to connect with funeral home owners and really understand their business is something that made him a perfect fit for our business development team. We look forward to having Jason join our team and become a major contributor to our business strategy.”



Jason Widing

“Having been on the preneed side of the industry for the last 13 years, I’ve watched Foundation Partners’ rapid growth,” Widing says. “With their progressive leadership team and exceptional field staff, they are jumping in with both feet to embrace change and lead the industry. I wanted to be a part of that.”

“This is very much a relationship industry,” Widing adds. “For me, what I do is not transactional – it’s about furthering the legacy of the firm. One of the most important parts of my job is to understand the needs and wants of the owner and the communities they serve. Partnerships are built on understanding.”

Widing has more than 15 years of business development experience in the funeral services industry. Prior to joining Foundation Partners, he was senior director of business development for Precoa where he was responsible for driving and delivering new business objectives through strategic partnerships.

Funeral Service Insider Will Be on Break Next Week

Funeral Service Insider will be on break next week to network with some of the profession’s top experts at the Cremation Strategies Conference and Funeral Service Business Plan Conference in Nashville. Your next issue will be dated Dec. 18.

There is still time to sign up for the events at www.CremationStrategies.com and www.KBbizplan.com.

Sincerely,

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