

Golden memories

Louise Harris believes accessible and sophisticated technology can bring a funeral service to life

Until very recently, people kept their photos in albums – silent black and white prints of people gazing at the camera in stilted poses. If photos weren't stored in albums they were kept in a box in the loft. Over time the names of the people in them faded from memory.

It is a tragic loss when you think of it and one that nowadays we do not have to suffer. Technology means we have a completely different relationship with our memories.

We store photos and videos digitally on our hard drive, tag them, and share them with online communities of friends through social networking sites, YouTube, blogs and emails. We can easily create compilation slideshows and make videos. We have far more memories stored and shared this way than anyone ever did in the past. These memories are alive. They are accessible. And they enrich our personal history.

Communication is now so much more immediate and cheap, as are cameras – not to mention camera phones. We snap away happily, discarding as much as we want at no cost. The result? We now have spontaneity to our memories, and a marvellous vitality.

The digital camera has evolved into a must-have accessory quickly becoming the fastest selling consumer electronic device in history. Because it can be easily mastered by anyone, media technology opens up new horizons in both the personal and professional sphere. So how can this be used in the funeral industry? The answer lies in the rising number of requests for a multimedia element in funerals.

There is a growing trend towards using photos and video as part of the funeral ceremony. A few years ago the most you could see was a framed photo of the deceased on an easel beside the catafalque. Now we can look at a screen and watch photo slideshows, video montages with music, a pre-recorded video message from 'beyond the grave', or a documentary of the life

of the deceased. For those who can't make it to the funeral, the ceremony can now be streamed live via the web to their PC.

The baby boomer generation wants more. No longer do they have to close their eyes and reflect on the good times like a movie in their head; they can now watch it onscreen. Technological advances allow us now to delve into the emotional pool of our own life, or the life of a loved one and share it with friends and family.

Such is the richness of the resource, you can recreate your life using photos, video, music and voice recording, and then invite children and grandchildren to share in the good old times you had. In so doing, you bind them into the continuum of your family's history. There is immense value in this.

People who know how to do this themselves are already doing it. Out with the photo albums, in with the DVDs. If they can't, they may turn to their technology savvy children to do this for them or companies such as Sentiment to compile a time capsule of the life lived in a DVD, create a photo or video tribute, or even film the funeral.

At Sentiment, we have seen just how quickly demand for this technology has increased. Photo slide shows, video and photo-montages, pre-recorded video messages, live web streaming, filming of funerals, and funeral DVDs are all becoming more common. This is only just beginning, but very soon this will become as standard as choosing a coffin.

Video tributes, photo montages, life biographies and slideshows were once a luxury for the few who could afford to spend on such extravagances, but this is no longer the case. It is now affordable to all and is seen as a way to preserve the lives of those we love. In the words of one of our clients: "to watch this at a funeral gives more than any release of doves will ever give. This is the ultimate personalisation." So how can the funeral industry start to embrace this new technology?

These memories are alive. They are accessible. And they enrich our personal history

Ten years ago, some crematoria glimpsed the opportunity to serve their clients better by catering for the growing demand for personalised funerals. The catalyst was the Wesley Music system – allowing the consumer to choose his or her own music from pop and rock to classical.

Now the crematoriums are once again leaders in innovation, creating change and ensuring that they are at the forefront of emerging trends. They are investing in new systems that can offer the consumer extras such as live web streaming, projector screens and projectors so that families can view video tributes and photo slideshows. Once again they have turned to Wesley.

Established in the mid nineties, Wesley Music was set up to provide a highly specialised music service to the bereavement community. From the very beginning the company made it its business to provide crematoria and their clients with exactly what they wanted. The result has been a continuous development of their services culminating in the online computer-controlled media system they are marketing today.

By providing a single point of contact and arrangement for all requests regarding music, video, ceremony webcasting and recording, Wesley is able to ensure a consistently high quality of multimedia presentation at crematoria, allowing crematoria staff and funeral directors to concentrate on their own specialist areas while providing bereaved families with exactly what they want and need for their funeral ceremonies.

New clients are being added at the rate of two per month. Wesley are now in advanced negotiations regarding installation in other European countries. The Wesley System will also soon be installed in some Registry Offices in the UK.

Neil Heskins of Wesley says: “Webcasting and video tributes are already services we offer. They have been taken up by many of our existing clients and virtually all new clients. Wesley Music has been built upon listening to all our users and providing solutions to their needs. As a professional company we take pride in an ongoing understanding of our industry and the solutions current technology offers, coupled with our ability to implement those developments as required.”

A lot of old school funeral directors don't yet see multimedia presentation as a norm and consequently do not offer it as a service. This is

a problem that Sentiment is having to overcome despite the fact that we have found that consumer demand for filming funerals has increased by 600 per cent in the past 12 months.

We now routinely receive requests to produce video and photo montages to be shown at a wake or a funeral service. Now that Wesley has spotted the trend, we can be sure that this will become standard within the next few years.

Wesley states: “The funeral industry is no different to any other with regard to change – most want to embrace it, but many will always find it unsettling until they grow to appreciate the benefits.”

The funeral industry is proud of its traditions and has always embarked on change in a sensible and measured way, especially if change is likely to incur extra costs for their clients. Are multimedia funerals a passing fad or are they the future? All the evidence shows that change is being driven by increasing consumer demand. What's more the price is now right. The future is here.

To view samples of video tributes visit www.sentiment-ltd.co.uk and visit their productions page or go direct to www.sentiment-productions.co.uk Contact Louise Harris on 01628 523 016 for more information. To find out more about the Wesley music system go to www.wesleymusic.co.uk

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