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Funeral Directors Get Creative as Boomers Near Great Beyond

New Marketing Schemes and Services Appeal to That Age-Old Desire for Serenity

By [Lenore Skenazy](#)

Published: October 13, 2008

These might be hard times for most folks in marketing, but one industry sees such boom times ahead it is unable to contain itself. Gleefully it contacted my friend the other day, startling her to the core.

"Since I work in the ad industry," said the friend in an e-mail, "I of course recognize that every kind of company needs advertising. However, I just turned 36 and received my first direct-mail piece from a cemetery. It is one thing to pass out of the coveted 18-35 demo. But to learn that the only marketers who are interested in you want you dead ... well ..."

Let's just say she didn't put the flyer on her fridge. Then again, when you realize that the funeral biz is gearing up for the big kahuna -- baby boomers -- you can understand why it's so jazzed. It must be like owning a trading post in sleepy San Fran when all of a sudden: gold! You want to make sure you get a piece of the action.

Or, in the case of morticians, the inaction.

And so, for the first time perhaps since the invention of dry ice, the industry is getting creative. There are new marketing schemes, hearses, crypts, new ways of appealing to that age-old desire for serenity and to its boomer counterpoint, the desire for a good time. Everyone wants to make his or her death meaningful.

To that end, Eternal Reefs will take a person's ashes and turn them into a "reef ball" where fish can hang out. George Frankel, head of the Atlanta-based company, said that loved ones call him because they don't know what to do with their "shelf people."

You know. People in urns, on the shelf. Turning shelf people into reef balls is not only "green," it actually helps the environment by giving fish a new habitat. Meantime, it gives families something too: a sort of party. They can bring the ashes to the company's manufacturing hub in Sarasota, Fla. and participate in making the ball.

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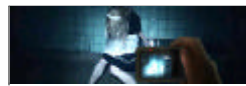
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"I don't mean to say we put the 'fun' in 'funeral,'" said Frankel, "but the whole family can come for a beach vacation."

Over at the Cedar Park and Beth-El Cemeteries in New Jersey, they're thinking more traditionally but, again, with an eye toward boomer idiosyncrasies. "We live our lives differently," said Lester Kerschner, the marketing manager. Boomers who have been comfortable in life worry about discomfort for eternity. "If you have your choice between a nice, heated, air-conditioned indoor facility or somebody putting you in the ground," the 60-year-old Kerschner said, you might well choose the cushy crypt. At his place, they "can't build them fast enough."

Even the most old-fashioned burial grounds are trying to be more welcoming. In Michigan, members of the Mount Elliott Cemetery Association are hosting concerts, photo contests, charity runs -- anything to bring people in (while they're still upright).

And when they come in by hearse? There's innovation there, too. The Eagle Coach Co. of Cincinnati has responded to the increase in cremations by inventing the "urn enclave." Pull a lever, and the enclave flips up from the floor of the hearse to hold and display the loved one's ashes. Holy human remains, Batman!

Between traditional burials, crypts, cremations and reef balls, Mark Duffey saw an opportunity too. He's CEO of Everest, a funeral "concierge" business, which is less silly than it sounds. For a flat fee of about \$500 (or \$48 a month), you can call his company, which has the country's only database of almost every funeral home's prices. The associates there help you figure out what you need and then do all the negotiating for you, fast.

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