

“Point - Counter Point”

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CATHOLIC
CEMETERY
CONFERENCE

— by Richard Touchette, CCCE

It's all about relationships. Any successful sales program depends on building, cultivating, and maintaining relationships. One way to accomplish this is through commission salespersons. We have chosen a different path than the one Rich Peterson discussed in the December issue of *Catholic Cemetery* magazine.

Our market is vastly different from Seattle's. The Diocese of Albany consists of 14 counties in upstate New York. Population is shifting from cities to the surrounding suburbs. There are 95 Catholic cemeteries in the Diocese. There are about 40 cemeteries, religious and non-sectarian, including a new Veteran's Administration National Cemetery within a 15 mile radius of my office. Albany Diocesan Cemeteries manages 13 cemeteries in the Albany-Schenectady-Troy metropolitan area.

In addition to a highly fragmented market, this area has a stable population. Many people live in the same two family house they grew up in, and it's not unusual to see four generations of the same family in the same pew at Mass. These families tend to use the same cemetery as previous generations.

Albany Diocesan Cemeteries' core purpose, "Through Faith in Jesus Christ, we bring people to a fuller understanding of death and resurrection," is closely aligned with the Diocesan Vision Statement — "We are God's people sharing a responsibility to witness God's unconditional love and to bring Christ's healing presence to our world."

Our organization had employed a commission sales program in the past, but I was not satisfied with the results. We have now developed a successful pre-need program that relies upon the ministry of salaried Family Service Representatives. Pre-Need accounts for 70% of lot and crypt purchases.

Our program is built around our core values: Faith in Jesus Christ, Reverence of every person, Building relationships, Quality in all we do, and Individual initiative. I describe our strategy as Friend-Raising and Family Service.

Friend-Raising includes Events, Outreach, Public Relations, and Staff Development. Events such as historic tours of St. Agnes Cemetery, confirmation class service projects, Eagle Scout Projects, and bird counts bring people into the cemetery. These activities give us a chance to meet people and establish relationships. A Civil War Project at St. Agnes Cemetery, for example, has brought over 60 volunteers into an on-going relationship with our organization.

Each and every one of us tries to be present and available to the people who have, or will, entrust their beloved dead to us. A Blessing of the Headstone gives families an opportunity to gather in prayer at the grave when a memorial is installed. Memorial Masses in mausoleum chapels offer survivors companionship and consolation.

We depend on outreach and public relations to differentiate Albany Diocesan Cemeteries from other area

cemeteries and to promote sales.

An electronic newsletter, a newsletter for funeral directors, signage, vehicle identification, and advertising and an annual supplement in *The Evangelist*, the diocesan newspaper, build our brand and encourage participation.

Family Service Representatives are literally the heart of our organization. Family Service Representatives greet office visitors, answer calls, take funeral orders, attend to at-need and pre-need sales, sell bronze memorials. The idea is that the first person a caller or visitor speaks to can help them accomplish the purpose of the visit or phone call. Family Service Representatives are responsible for the welfare of the families that we serve. They are the families' advocate with the cemetery and represent the cemetery to families and funeral directors. Everyone in the organization is a salaried employee.

Sales are made at the cemetery. We do not sell pre-development or pre-construction. We want people to see exactly what they are buying. We provide information that will help families make an intelligent, unhurried decision, one that is right for their family, and at the right time for them.

Sales are based on the relationships we grow and foster over time at our cemeteries. They increase in proportion to the amount of care and attention we give to the people we serve.

Rick Touchette, CCCE, is director of cemeteries, Diocese of Albany. He may be reached at 518.432.4953 or email rick@rcda.org.