

the DIRECTOR

FEBRUARY 2005

MEDIA MATTERS

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Costco Casket Contention

High-profile competition can actually provide your best opportunity to promote the value of your services to the media

The news broke (as they say in the business) about six months ago, and the media jumped onto the story, as expected. Telephone calls from reporters representing major daily newspapers came into my NFDA office in quick succession. They wanted reaction to the move by Costco Wholesale Corporation to begin test-marketing caskets in several Chicago-area stores.

NFDA Immediate Past President Mark Musgrove, as well as several other NFDA spokespeople, had the opportunity to offer some very positive funeral service messages because of the media's interest in the Costco story. "When mom dies at 4 a.m., we are the ones you call," Musgrove was quoted as saying in *USA Today*. NFDA President-elect Bob Biggins told the *Chicago Tribune*: "Funeral service is about caring for people. We're going to answer the phone at 2 in the morning at the drop of a hat and serve that family."

These messages delivered to the media were neither angry nor did they speak negatively of Costco. Instead, they conveyed the warm, compassionate service that funeral directors display daily – something that mega-retailers cannot provide.

With recent word that Costco now expanded casket sales into more states, the issue will not go away. In fact, it could prompt even more media curiosity. That means that funeral directors across the country might be confronted by their local media on this topic.

Your Costco Media Message

The NFDA staff, Executive Board and other NFDA spokespeople frequently discuss appropriate media responses to a variety of funeral service topics, so that we are prepared when challenging issues arise. We also receive training from media experts annually on how to deal with these types of issues. I talked recently with one of NFDA's media-spokesperson trainers to get her take on how best to respond publicly to the Costco story.

"With the issue of Costco, my best advice is to talk about what you know best and what you do," says Sue Castorino, president of *The Speaking Specialist*. "Use what you do best to your advantage with the media. You are funeral professionals; you are caring and compassionate people; you are always there. Let the reporter know that. Talk to them just like you talk with your families, and let the warmth and compassion come through," she adds.

Castorino cautions funeral directors not to appear or sound angry or defensive when talking about Costco, or any other competitors for that matter. Moreover, even though a reporter might try to provoke you into speaking negatively about your competition, *never* take the bait. Never be defensive publicly – take the high road.

Another piece of advice from Castorino: make an effort not to mention the word "Costco" when talking to a reporter who might be interviewing you on this issue. "If you talk about Costco or anybody else, now you're giving them more publicity.

Talk about what *you* do. Though you may have provided the reporter with a lot of information, you may only be quoted once or twice if you're lucky. So make every quote count. You know the questions may be coming; you know the issue is out there. Take some time to think about what you want to say publicly in response to this issue."

The key, says Castorino, is to take the opportunity to tell *your* story. Be proactive, not reactive. Say what you want to say about your service and your business in a positive way. Stay focused on what you want to talk about. And remember that your answer is more important than the question because it will be your response that shows up in the story, not their question.

Along those lines, Castorino reminds us of another important media interviewing tip: Do not repeat the negative part of a reporter's question because that will likely be the quote that gets aired or printed.

Finally, some reporters are masterful at putting words in the mouths of the people they interview. For instance, a reporter might use some negative language about your competition and then ask, "Don't you agree?" This could be an attempt to get a juicy sound bite or quote from you, so be careful not to get caught in that trap.

One certainty is that Costco's casket venture has provided a good lesson in the kind of funeral service story that gets the media's attention. As long as we are well prepared with responses, however, we should always view the media's interest as an opportunity to deliver a positive funeral service message. ♦



Sue Castorino is President of *The Speaking Specialists* in Chicago. She can be reached at – www.thespeakingspecialists.com