STAYING ACCESSIBLE: THE
VALUE OF A WEB PRESENCE IN FUNERAL SERVICE
A CREATIVE PROJECT (6-HOUR CRPRJ 698)
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ABSTRACT

CREATIVE PROJECT: Staying Accessible: The value of a web presence in funeral service.

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The purpose of my creative project is to produce a website for Waters Funeral Homes that would serve as an information provider, marketing tool, and catalyst for communication with the funeral home’s former and potential clients. By reviewing competitor websites, determining the needs of the user base, and observing best practices in usability and visual design, I was able to produce a website for Waters Funeral Homes that reflects not only its business model but also the communities it serves.
In funeral service, change generally occurs slowly. Sometimes change is imposed by regulatory bodies and sometimes market forces drive it. One thing is certain: The rate of change is accelerating. An individual or organization’s ability to adapt and capitalize on change will determine its long-term survival and level of success (Siverls 2008, p. 59).

Waters Funeral Homes is ready for a change. On May 1, 2009, Waters Funeral Homes will launch www.WatersFuneralHomes.com, which will be the first venture into the web arena for this family-owned business. It took the passage of time and consistent requests from clients and community members to convince the leadership that a web presence was necessary. It is a late business decision, but it should prove to be a smart one. Establishing a website will not only put Waters Funeral Homes on the cyberspace map, but also allow the funeral home to further its service brand and maintain an open line of communication with former families and potential clients.

Waters Funeral Homes, whose locations include Pitman-Richman Funeral Home in Eaton, Indiana and Waters Funeral Home in Hartford City, Indiana¹, are the only funeral homes among its direct competitors to be without a web presence. This would be an issue for any business that sells a product, but is particularly so for an industry in which direct marketing to consumers can be tricky at best and illegal at worst. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) carefully regulates how funeral homes communicate with consumers. Moreover, consumers vary in their receptiveness toward death care

¹ According to the 2000 US Census, the population of Eaton is 1,603 and the population of Hartford City is 6,928.
related marketing (Wernick, 1995). Both realities make simple information providing the 
safest marketing strategy for a funeral home to adopt (Kopp & Kemp 2007).

Over 50% of families say they chose a funeral home based primarily on 
reputation (National Funeral Director’s Association [NFDA], 2004). Perhaps this is why 
most family-run funeral homes, including Waters Funeral Homes, rely on a word-of-
mouth reputation as the primary marketing strategy (Lynch, 2004):

Some 85 percent of the 22,000 funeral homes across the country are still family-
owned enterprises which have spent an average 54 years in their communities 
building their reputations, spending a meager 3 percent of their total income on 
advertising, relying on goodwill and reputation. (p. 13)

Waters Funeral Homes builds its word-of-mouth reputation by sponsoring local 
children’s sports teams, attending and contributing to local fundraisers, and endeavoring 
to give every family a personal, meaningful experience. Personal indiscretions by staff 
members or disappointed funeral home clients could seriously damage the funeral home’s 
reputation, which could take years to rebuild.

Relying only on a word-of-mouth reputation may have worked for previous 
generations, but how long can it last? Eighty-one percent of Internet users go online to 
research a product or service they want to purchase (Pew “Internet Activities,” 2008) and 
funerals are increasingly becoming a high-cost expense.²

In today’s market, businesses run the risk of being invisible to potential clients 
when they choose not to establish a web presence, including funeral homes. Small funeral

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² As of July 2004, the National Association of Funeral Directors (NFDA) website lists the average cost of a 
funeral (without cemetery costs) at $6,500.00.
homes that compete with larger funeral homes put themselves at a further disadvantage when they choose a template-based web design\(^3\) offered by many companies and organizations. A company’s website is an extension of itself. If the website is not distinguishable from that of other funeral homes, the funeral home itself may be similarly perceived. If the website looks unprofessional the funeral home may also be perceived as unprofessional (McKee, 2008). For Waters Funeral Homes, establishing a professional web presence will not only enhance their reputation, but also allow new business to find them.

Establishing a professional web presence is essential to creating and maintaining a positive connection with former families and potential clients. In general, Americans are uncomfortable discussing death and are relatively inexperienced in making death care arrangements (Kopp & Kemp, 2007). Providing funeral information in an easily accessible, self-paced, confidential medium in the form of email or web browsing may make clients comfortable enough to contact the funeral home in person in either a pre-need\(^4\) or an at-need\(^5\) situation. That initial personal contact is very important to Waters Funeral Homes. It gives the staff a chance to present their services as a family-to-family transaction in contrast to those of larger funeral homes whose demeanor and services are believed to be more impersonal and less sincere.

Indiscretions or illegal business activities by funeral professionals often make both local and national news. These reports can affect how funeral professionals in

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3 The NFDA offers websites for members for $40 per month with a one-time fee of $299.00. It offers 24 templates in 4 different colors.

4 Pre-arranging or pre-funding the funeral arrangements before the time of death.

5 Arranging or funding funeral arrangements at the time of death.
general are perceived. According to Gallup’s “Honesty/Ethics in Professions” November 2008 poll, 40% of respondents rated funeral directors as professionals with only average ethical standards. This is key for Waters Funeral Homes because potential clients may be wary of the abilities of a small-town, family-run funeral home and feel more confident choosing the services (Appendix A) of a larger funeral home in a neighboring city. Adult children with no ties to their parents’ community often initiate and pay for funeral arrangements. A well-designed web presence will help potential families perceive the services offered by Waters Funeral Homes as at a minimum comparable to or greater than their competitors. Even though consumers do not purchase funerals online as they would a book or a DVD, the general impression given by a funeral home’s website may either encourage or discourage the consumer from contacting the funeral home for more information (Haig, 2008).

Establishing a web presence will help Waters Funeral Homes solidify and further their service brand to both current and potential families. The goal of my creative project is to produce a website for Waters Funeral Homes that will serve as an information provider, marketing tool, and catalyst for communication with potential and former clients. This goal will be accomplished by producing a site that observes the principles of web usability and visual design, avoids the weaknesses of competitor websites, and is mindful of the site’s target audience and user base.
REVIEWING THE MARKET: FUNERAL HOMES IN LIFE AND ONLINE

*The primary advertising vehicles for the death care industry are, indeed, funeral homes… themselves (Wernick, 2008, p 281).*

Waters Funeral Homes, owned and operated by Ted L. and Kay Worden Waters, includes two locations: Waters Funeral Home in Hartford City, Indiana and Pitman-Richman Funeral Home in Eaton, Indiana. Ted and Kay purchased Waters Funeral Home, formerly Richman Funeral Home, in October 1981. They purchased Pitman-Richman Funeral Home in August 2003. Waters Funeral Home was purchased from M. David and Polly Richman. Pitman-Richman was purchased from Robert and Jan Richman of Eaton\(^6\). Waters Funeral Homes employs three full-time licensed funeral directors and one administrative funeral assistant. Seven part-time staff members help during viewings and funerals. Waters Funeral Homes received 69 death calls in 2008. It averaged 69.25 death calls over the last four years.

The primary target market for Waters Funeral Homes is Blackford and northeastern Delaware counties. This includes the town of Eaton, the city of Montpelier, and Hartford City. Three other funeral homes share this primary service market: Glancy

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\(^{6}\) No relation to M. David and Polly Richman.
Funeral Homes, Keplinger Funeral Home and Garden View Funeral Home. See Appendix B for a breakdown of each location.

The competition

Glancy Funeral Homes include Walker and Glancy Funeral Home in Montpelier; Glancy-H. Brown and Son Chapel in Warren, Indiana; Walker and Glancy Funeral Home in Geneva, Indiana; and Furguson and Glancy Funeral Home in Van Buren, Indiana. Glancy Funeral Homes and its four locations is owned and operated by Jeff and Trudie Glancy. Jeff Glancy is a Blackford County native and a licensed funeral director. According to the website, the funeral home employs four part-time staff members. Glancy Funeral Homes received 186 death calls in 2008 with a five-year average of 178 death calls per year.

Keplinger Funeral Home is the primary competitor of Waters Funeral Home in Hartford City. Jim Barry, a licensed funeral director and New Jersey native, purchased the business from Carl D. and Carolyn J. Keplinger in March 1985. According to its website, the funeral home employs four staff members in addition to the owner. Keplinger Funeral Home received approximately 93 death calls in 2008 and has a five-year average of 88 death calls per year.

Garden View Funeral Home and the adjoining Gardens of Memory Cemetery is located approximately five miles south of Pitman-Richman Funeral Home in Eaton. Memory Gardens Management Corp., a private company headquartered in Indianapolis, Indiana, owns both Garden View and Gardens of Memory. Memory Gardens Management purchased Garden View and Gardens of Memory from subsidiaries of
Carriage Services, Inc. in July 2006 (Inside Indiana Business, 2008). According to the website, Paul Caldwell, a licensed funeral director, has served as general manager since the acquisition. In addition to Caldwell, Garden View and Gardens of Memory employs 15 full- and part-time staff members. Garden View Funeral Home received 125 death calls in 2008. It has a five-year average of 134.6 death calls per year.

The online competition

Glancy Funeral Homes.

GlancyFuneralHomes.com was built by a friend of Jeff Glancy. It consists of an initial page from which you select one of the four locations you want to visit. A link on each location’s main page will take the user back to the initial page that lists all four funeral homes. Each funeral home page has the same layout/design and offers links to the following information:

- About Us
- Our Staff
- Our Facility
- Services
- Merchandise
- Pre planning
- Obituaries
- Contact Us
- Send a Condolence

The information provided on GlancyFuneralHomes.com is typical of that on most funeral home websites. Obituaries are listed directly on the site and often include photos. Online condolences can be sent by clicking on one of the three send online condolences buttons, which sends an email directly to the funeral home. The pre-planning, services and merchandise sections give basic information and encourage the user to contact the
funeral home by phone for more information. The site loads without frustration using
dial-up and even more quickly on a faster connection. I browsed the website many times
this semester and never encountered a broken link or missing information. All
information is presented clearly and uniformly throughout the location pages. The site is
user friendly. A novice should have little or no trouble finding needed information.

Although GlancyFuneralHomes.com provides useful information in an easily accessible way, the website has three main problems. First, the website is difficult to find if the user does not know the web address. A Google™ search for “Glancy Funeral Home” lists several different sites before the funeral home’s actual website. In some searches, the funeral home link appears on page two of the search. More important, the title link for the site shows up as “index” during the search (Appendix C) because the splash page was not tagged properly during the build. There is a list of JPG names under the title link instead of descriptive information. I performed the search several times over the semester with the same result.

Second, I found the site is visually unappealing and borderline unprofessional. It has the look of early web design created in Netscape Composer. Some fonts are difficult to read both in font type and color choice. Most interior photos of the funeral homes have an effect on them that makes them appear fuzzy and unclear. This is particularly disappointing because three of the homes are converted residences with beautiful interior architecture. Only the staff photos are consistently clear and crisp. Three of the main location pages have local photos on them, the merchandise and pre planning sections use generic stock photos not reflective of life in rural Indiana. For example, the pre planning section shows an older couple walking barefoot along the beach. It is a peaceful scene,
but not an activity common in Blackford and surrounding counties. Perhaps a photo of a
couple sitting on their front porch would be more appropriate.

Finally, the site does not list the funeral home’s email address explicitly. The
click to email button on the contact page will open a new email with the email address
inserted if the user’s system is set up for this. If not, the user will be unable to email the
funeral home without calling and asking for the email address. See Appendix E for a
comparison table of all funeral home site offerings.

Keplinger Funeral Home.

KeplingerFuneralHome.com was built by Frazer Consultants\(^7\) in Waunakee, WI.
According to the company’s website, Frazer Consultants offers memorial personalization
products, and design and interactive technology to the funeral home industry. They also
offer technology and marketing consulting services to funeral homes, including
logo/identity design and web development. They offer 24 different template websites as
well as custom websites. Template websites begin at $1,995.00 and custom websites
begin at $3,995.00. Template and custom websites are subject to a monthly “research,
development, hosting, support and update” fee of $75.00. The website is updated by a
funeral home employee on an as-needed basis.

\(^7\) [www.frazerconsultants.com](http://www.frazerconsultants.com)
The information provided on KeplingerFuneralHome.com is typical of funeral home websites, offering links to the following information:

- Home
- History
- Staff
- Arrangements
- Visitations
- Aftercare/Resources
- Services
- Monuments
- Contact Us

The home page features a simple Flash animation of wheat\textsuperscript{8} swaying in the wind with a black bird flying in the sky. Three local photos are used on the home page: two of the funeral home and a collage of the courthouse. The fonts are easy to read and in complementary colors.

The right side of the home page has a \textit{featured visitation} obituary with a photo of the deceased. Additional visitations are listed below the featured visitation. The featured visitation column remains static as the user navigates to other pages. The staff page has professional, business-like portraits of each staff member with a short biography outlining their ties to the community. The arrangements, services and monuments sections give basic information about the services and products Keplinger Funeral Home offers. The arrangements link allows the user to create an account and preplan their arrangements online. All three sections encourage the user to contact the funeral home by phone or email for more information. The aftercare/resources page recommends four books on grief and the healing process. This page also encourages the user to contact the funeral home for more information.

\textsuperscript{8} Wheat, a symbol of the Christian faith, is commonly used in memorial personalization products.
Obituaries are listed under the visitations link. Each obituary listing includes the following buttons:

- Sign Guestbook
- View Guestbook
- Send Flowers
- Photo Album

The guestbook is for users to post and view online condolences. Each obituary has a map/driving directions link at the end. The send flowers button links to a list of flower shops. YourFlowerPeople.com is the first listing, followed by six Blackford County businesses. The photo album link allows users to submit photos of the deceased for the funeral home to review before final posting. Each obituary includes a photo, or another appropriate graphic (American flag/pastoral scene/stuffed animals) if the deceased’s photo is unavailable.

The contact us page lists complete contact information, including the funeral home’s email address and a contact form. The site loads with some frustration using a dial-up connection, but it loads easily on higher-speed connections.

In my opinion, KeplingerFuneralHome.com has greater visual appeal and a more professional appearance than GlancyFuneralHomes.com, but it also has some content and navigation issues that Glancy’s site avoids.

First, the terminology is not as clear as it could be. The terms arrangements, visitations, and services could be confusing for a first-time user. In speech, all three terms are used interchangeably to mean a viewing, funeral or memorial service. I would recommend using the following terms instead: make arrangements, obituaries, and our

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9 I visited this site several times a week this semester. I never saw an instance where the photo album was used.
services. Doing so would clarify the information provided under each heading. The euphemism visitations used in the static right hand column softens the obituaries terminology in the heading if this is a concern. Additionally, I would recommend substituting the term condolences for view guestbook and send condolences for sign guestbook. The guestbook terminology seems inappropriate given the reason this person has a profile on the website.

Second, the website has some layout issues common for template-based sites. The home page has a large empty space at the bottom where the template is leaving room for additional text, or possibly a few ads. The featured visitations column has an empty white box beneath it. Both issues are consistent throughout all pages. Text and photos often float awkwardly on the page and font sizes are inconsistent. Obituaries appear correctly in Internet Explorer, but the right side of the text disappears in Safari or Firefox. While not a navigation issue, it is very possible another funeral home has a nearly identical site.10

A Google™ search for Keplinger Funeral Home lists the funeral home’s website first; however, the first title link reads “Error! Your browser does not support iFrames” probably because the home page was not tagged properly during the build. The second link lists the site correctly, but as a secondary link to the main site (Appendix D).

Finally, none of the map/driving directions links work. All navigate to an empty MapQuest window. My recommendation would be to offer driving directions under the contact us link at the top of the page so it can be found quickly and without much effort.

10 See www.niefuneralhomes.com and www.chetryanmortuary.com. Both were designed/built by Frazer Consultants.
Even if the map/driving directions links worked, the user would still need to go into an obituary record to find the link.

Garden View Funeral Home.

Garden View’s site, www.GardenViewandGardensofMemory.com, offers the most information of the three sites. Users navigate the site with following headings:

- Home
- Obituaries
- About Us
- Facilities
- Showroom
- Consumer Info
- Planning Ahead
- Immediate Arrangements
- Grief Support
- Shops
- Recommended Links

Credit card logos and the handicap accessible symbol appear below the main headings.

This is important because not all funeral homes accept credit cards.

The welcome page begins with a short article promoting the annual Easter egg hunt in April. Below the Easter egg article is a welcome statement from the general manager. Recent obituaries are featured to the right of the article. The about us page has a history timeline and a list of staff members with their emails and phone numbers. Some staff member entries include photos and others do not. There is also a post of their current newsletter, which is essentially the latest press release. Users can sign up to receive newsletters by email.

Obituaries are listed directly on the site with a guestbook for online condolences.
Users can also sign up to receive obituary notices by email. The facilities section offers several good photos of both the funeral home and the cemetery. It also has a map, driving directions and the local forecast.

The showroom page has an embedded video on how to simplify casket selection, as well as photos and descriptions of the caskets, burial vaults, urns, and flower arrangements they sell. Only the flower arrangement descriptions include pricing.

The consumer information page offers links to several Batesville Casket Company personalization products. This includes the electronic brochure *Funerals - A Consumer's Guide* describing why funerals are important written at Batesville’s request by grief counselor Dr. Alan Wolfelt of the Center for Loss and Life Transition in Fort Collins, Colorado.

The planning ahead and immediate arrangements pages offer the user the choice of making arrangements in person or online. There are links to a basic planner and details planner page, but the page they link to reads *coming soon*.

The grief support page has links to seven outside websites that offer support and information on dealing with grief and loss. The shops page has three books for sale. Everything on the page links to Amazon.com. There is a search bar that gives results from Amazon.com; however, it only displays books of grief and loss. For examples, the search term *knitting* yields no results. There is one link on the recommended links page for Memory Gardens Floral.

Garden View’s site provides useful information in an easily accessible way. The site loads quickly even on dial-up. The address is a little long to type in, but the site is the
first link listed in a Google™ search for Garden View Funeral Home. However, I was disappointed by the generic site design and use of misleading terms.

First, the design lacks personality and warmth. At first glance, it looks more like an online newspaper site than a business site. It’s very text heavy and the layout is outdated. Garden View received 125 death calls last year not including the number of burials at Gardens of Memory Cemetery. For a funeral home with its resources, the website should have been professionally designed to reflect the funeral homes services and unique personality. Instead, Garden View chose a template produced by Batesville Casket Company, their exclusive casket distributor¹¹, designed to promote and sell Batesville products.

Garden View updates part of the web content in-house, but the site itself is copyrighted by Batesville Services, Inc. Only portions of the website are copyright Garden View Funeral Home & Gardens of Memory Cemetery. See Garden View’s conditions of use page under the copyright notice heading for more information.

A result of Garden View’s relationship with Batesville, the site uses misleading terminology on the consumer info page. Instead of links to the FTC website, funerals.org¹², or veteran information, the page has links to services and products offered by Batesville Casket Company. The linked brochure Funerals - A Consumer's Guide discourages direct cremation, calling it “an empty option” unless it is preceded by a viewing or memorial service.

Finally, Garden View describes itself on the welcome page as a family-owned and

¹¹ See www.meaningfulfunerals.com, a demonstration site for Batesville representatives.
¹² Website of the Funeral Consumers Alliance, a nonprofit dedicated to protecting the rights of funeral consumers.
operated funeral home. This is true, but misleading in the traditional sense. Garden View is owned by Memory Gardens Management Corporation, which was purchased by husband and wife Robert Nelms and Deborah Johnson Nelms in late 2004. Currently, the two face several felony counts for allegedly using over 20 million dollars of the company’s cemetery maintenance trust fund for personal reasons (Chapman & MacAnally, 2008).

Waters Funeral Homes.

The comparative review of competitor websites provided direction for the content of WatersFuneralHomes.com. Because the information provided by each funeral home’s site was essentially the same, the goal was to differentiate the Waters Funeral Homes’ site in the way it delivered information. More specifically, the site design had to go above and beyond competitor sites in visual appeal. To do this, I enlisted the help of professional graphic designer Lynnette Whitesell. Whitesell is not only an award-winning graphic designer, but she is also the eldest of the five Waters children and a resident of Hartford City. Her skill as a designer and her understanding of both funeral service and the target market made her the perfect choice to shape the website’s look and feel.

The home page of WatersFuneralHomes.com continues the blue color the funeral home has used in the few marketing materials it has done over the years. It also incorporates the brown, parchment-like pattern and torn photo edges used on invitations and thank you notes from the funeral home’s 25th anniversary open house. Incorporating these past references with the new image of the trees and sky provides a sense of continuity while furthering the funeral home’s brand. By using only the Waters logo on
the home page, the funeral home begins to bring Pitman-Richman Funeral Home under the Waters umbrella more aggressively than it has in the past. Pitman-Richman will come fully under the Waters brand with a name change once the leadership is convinced there will be no resentment from the Eaton community.

To further distinguish the Waters site from its competitors, only professional-grade photography was used. Tony Frederick Photography of Muncie, Indiana provided photos of Waters Funeral Home and staff. Tony Frederick Photography, a division of CS Kern, Inc., shot the photographs in trade over the last three years for the funeral home. Waters Funeral Home allowed Frederick to photograph several caskets for a client shoot. In turn, Frederick photographed the funeral home and its employees. James Clary, a third-year photography student at Ball State University, provided the photos of Pitman-Richman Funeral Home.

WatersFuneralHomes.com does not provide as much pre-need information as Keplinger or Garden View’s site. Users cannot pre-plan their funeral wholly online; however, there is a PDF containing commonly needed pre-arrangement information available for download. Waters Funeral Homes wants the user to print the form, fill it out at home where they can look up the necessary information, and bring the form to the pre-arrangement conference. Unlike Garden View’s site, users cannot search for caskets or other products. For Waters Funeral Homes to offer this service, they would need to establish an exclusive relationship with a supplier as Garden View has done with Batesville Casket Company. Such a relationship would not benefit Waters Funeral Homes because they do not purchase enough caskets annually to qualify for a discount.
They receive discounts and special pricing by establishing long-term relationships with sales representatives of varying suppliers.

The information on WatersFuneralHomes.com is easily accessible. A novice user would have no trouble navigating the site. The site loads well on dial-up, especially the text-only pages. Users are never more than three clicks away from where they want to go. Every link is available on every page. The email address is available as a link, and is also listed explicitly. The addresses, phone numbers and fax numbers are listed in several places. There are no third party advertisements or product links—the information on the site for the benefit of its employees and clients only.

By choosing a web presence that was designed specifically for their business, Waters Funeral Homes will further its brand, lend credibility to the information provided on the site, and visually stand out among its local competitors.
THE METHOD: IDENTIFYING USER NEEDS

General usability and the needs of the user guided all design and content decisions. In order to produce the best possible site for Waters Funeral Homes, I followed the five best practices of navigational usability design as outlined by Jakob Nielsen in *Designing Web Usability*: aggregation, summarization, filtering, truncation, and example-based representations. In addition, I followed the five principles of visual usability as outlined by Steve Krug in *Don’t Make Me Think: A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability*. I did this by creating a clear visual hierarchy, utilizing conventions, making obvious what is clickable, breaking up pages into clearly defined areas, and abandoning unnecessary graphics and images (2006).

A website must be responsive to the needs of its user base in order to be successful. The primary user base for WatersFuneralHomes.com is Blackford and northern Delaware County residents. The secondary user audience is former Blackford and northern Delaware County residents wanting to be buried “at home.” Both the primary and secondary user audience breaks down into two groups: pre-need clients and at-need clients.
Pre-need and At-need Clients

Waters Funeral Homes does no direct marketing of its pre-need services. This is due in part to the cost of a direct mail campaign, but there is also a concern of offending the recipient and losing the opportunity to serve them—and future family members—as a client. As such, the majority of their pre-need business is walk-ins. According to Waters Funeral Homes, this group of people tends to be between 50 and 70 years in age.

For the website, I targeted baby boomers between the ages of 45 and 65 as potential pre-need clients. According to the Pew Internet Project Data Memo, 82% of young baby boomers (45-54) and 79% of older baby boomers (55–63) that use the Internet do so to research products before they buy them (2009, January 28). Additionally, 74% of young baby boomers and 81% of older baby boomers use the Internet to research health-related information. Funeral information is not health-related information, but it is body-care related information. Pre-need clients will use the website to locate contact information and to research the services Waters Funeral Homes offers. Pre-need clients will also use the website to contact the funeral home directly by email.

At-need clients will use the website in a slightly different way. A small portion of at-need clients may use the website to find initial contact information or to research the services Waters Funeral Homes offers. The majority of at-need clients will use the website as a resource for friends and family members to find out more information concerning final arrangements and driving directions. I produced the website with an at-need 35-75 age range demographic in mind.
WatersFuneralHomes.com was designed with the dial-up user in mind. It must load quickly for it to function effectively as an information provider and marketing tool. According to Horrigan & Sydney of The Pew Internet Project, 24% of rural dial-up users say they cannot get broadband Internet access because the infrastructure does not reach their residence. Blackford County alone includes approximately 5,191 residents living outside of Hartford City and the town of Montpelier\textsuperscript{13}. For this reason, WatersFuneralHomes.com contains no streaming audio or video, no flash animation, and no background audio.

Funeral Home Employees

Identifying and addressing the user needs of the funeral home employees was also important. The management of Waters Funeral Homes expressed the following primary concerns regarding the website:

- The site must be inexpensive to host and maintain.
- Main content should only require updating annually at most.
- Staff must be able to update obituaries at anytime from anywhere.

The first two issues are essentially financial concerns. Although the initial site design cost the funeral home nothing, the leadership was concerned about the cost of maintaining and hosting the site. In anticipation of this project, the funeral home purchased a 10-year domain name through Kern Creative Group in Muncie, Indiana for $90.00. Kern Creative Group will host the website for a monthly fee of $30.00 and will

\textsuperscript{13} The populations of Hartford City and Montpelier subtracted by the total population of Blackford County as reported by the 2000 US Census.
update the website when necessary. Any content or design changes will be billed at a rate of $75.00 an hour.

To keep costs down, I chose to post obituaries through Blogger.com. The obituaries link takes the user directly to the blog site. Each funeral home has a separate obituary blog; however, the funeral home can update both blogs by logging into Blogger.com under one user name. For archiving purposes, obituaries will be posted to the blog on the same day they appear in the newspaper. If the funeral home decides to move the obituaries to another location, they will be able to export the information and import it into the new site.

I chose a free blog site because of its cost-effectiveness and ease of use. It will cost the funeral home nothing to update, novice users can update it, and it can be updated at anytime from anywhere. This is essential because only two funeral home employees are willing to use a computer. Using Blogger.com allows both employees the freedom to be away from the funeral home for vacation or other travel and still be able to update the obituaries for free. Funeral home employees started posting obituaries to the blog in February 2009.

Funeral home employees have already begun to spread the word about the new website and its May 1 launch date in conversations with former families and community members. The web address will be added to the pens, notepads and calendars at the time of the next order. No direct mailing to announce the new site is planned.

By observing the principles of general usability and visual design while recognizing the needs of the site’s user base, I took the first step in creating a website for Waters
Funeral Homes that will serve as an information provider, a marketing tool and help maintain an open line of communication with former and potential clients.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Every business needs a website—even in a town where everyone knows your name. In today’s market, it is no longer enough to be present “in real life.” A business also must be present online. It was time for Waters Funeral Homes to establish a web presence and to do it in the right way.

With this in mind, the site I built has three main problems. First, I did not have the skill set to establish an email address through the website. Having such an email address is essential to managing the brand. The email Waters Funeral Home currently uses is pitman_richman@netzero.net, and Kay Waters uses her personal email address to send obituaries and photos to newspapers. This issue will be corrected when Kern Creative Group hosts the site. At that time, the primary business email address will become info@watersfuneralhomes.com.

Second, the obituary blog does not perfectly coordinate with the website. I was able to edit the blog’s html enough to create the background from a 38 x 38 pixel square of the website’s background; however, I was not able to make it look exactly the way I wanted.
I will continue to make adjustments as Blogger.com updates what it will allow users to modify.

Finally, the site does not have as much pre-need information on it as I wanted. I wanted to supply enough pre-need information so that someone could come to the arrangement conference with few if no questions. Waters Funeral Homes prides itself on the service of its staff and believes that if they are able to meet with someone just once, they will have their business and the trust of their family members for generations to come. They believe that sitting down with someone and answering all their questions is the first step to building this type of rapport. And, they might be right. Over 51% of the NFDA Family Contact Survey respondents said that they chose their funeral home because the funeral home had previously served a family member (2004).

Although Waters Funeral Homes is not comfortable doing so right now, the website should offer more detailed pricing information, in particular, a general price list PDF available for download. Although none of their competitors’ sites currently offer a general price list, I think there will come a time when the target market will expect to be able to download a detailed price list from the website. If they cannot get one from Waters Funeral Homes, they will move on to a funeral home site that has one. Even further down the line, the website should offer an interactive form that allows the user to create their own service and generates a price list much like restaurant websites allow the user to create their own meal and generate nutritional information for that meal. Currently, I don’t think the market Waters Funeral Homes serves would be comfortable with this level of interactivity on the funeral home’s website. However, I can foresee a
time in the distant future when consumers will be comfortable prearranging their own funeral on the Internet.

Jeff Brown, a Chicago-based freelance writer, quipped in *Marketing News* that, “There’s a fundamental marketing challenge in the funeral industry. It’s impossible to create new business.... If an average of 2,000 people die annually in a community, it’s highly unlikely the death toll will grow to 2,500 the next” (p. 17). It is true. A funeral home cannot use marketing to affect the number of people who die annually in its community. A funeral home can, however, endeavor to increase the number of calls it receives by staying accessible to the community it serves.
CONCLUSIONS

All businesses run the risk of being invisible to potential clients when they choose not to establish a web presence. Americans of every age use the Internet to research purchases and to find health care information. At some point in a consumer’s life these searches will inevitably include end of life issues, or death care related products. When the time comes, a consumer may turn to the local funeral home. If they do, the funeral home better be ready with a website that is professional, usable, and easily accessible.

Business websites are no longer just an extension of the business—they are the business itself. In fact, they may be the only part of the business a client ever encounters. This is essential for family funeral homes whose traditional business model has relied on a solid reputation instead of a strategic marketing plan. However, there must be a shift in attitude. As corporations continue to buy out competitors, funeral homes will no longer find themselves competing against the skills and reputation of their neighbor, but against the glossy brochures and Flash animated websites produced by a marketing director several states away.
The goal of my creative project was to produce a website for Waters Funeral Homes that would serve as an information provider, marketing tool, and catalyst for communication with the funeral home’s former and potential clients. By reviewing competitor websites, determining the needs of the user base, and observing best practices in usability and visual design, I was able to produce a website for Waters Funeral Homes that reflects not only its business model but also the communities it serves. Establishing a website signals the beginning of a shift in attitude for Waters Funeral Homes and offers the funeral home a new way to stay accessible and approachable in its communities.
REFERENCES


Siverls, A.M. (2008, September). Eight steps to implementing change in your funeral home. The Director, 80(9), 58-66.


APPENDIX

A. General services offered by funeral homes:

Care of the Remains
- Removal of body from place of death
- Embalming of the body
- Other preparation of the body (cosmetology, hair care, dressing and casketing remains)
- Sanitary preparation of body when there is no embalming (washing, disinfection)
- Forwarding remains to another funeral home
- Receiving remains from another funeral home
- Transportation of remains to/from airport

Administrative Services
- Arrangement conference with family or responsible party
- Recording vital statistics
- Preparing/filing necessary authorizations and permits
- Preparation and placement of obituary notice(s)
- Staff assistance before, during and after the visitation and services
- Coordination of all parts of funeral service (clergy, musicians, flower delivery)

Funeral/Memorial Services
- Immediate/same day funeral service
- Direct cremation
- Graveside only service
- Visitation at funeral home or other facility
- Funeral service at funeral home or other facility
- Memorial service at funeral home or other facility
- Use of funeral home automobiles (hearse, limousine, sedan, service/utility vehicle)
- Purchase of casket, cremation containers, outer burial container, vault or grave liner
- Purchase of clothing for deceased
- Purchase of memorial stationery (register book, prayer cards, memorial folders)
- Purchase of memorial video
- Broadcasting service online or to one location
- “Green” burial options
B. **Funeral Home Information Table**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Funeral Home</th>
<th>Owner(s)</th>
<th>Location(s)</th>
<th>2008 Death Calls</th>
<th>5-year Call Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Garden View</td>
<td>Memory Gardens Management Corp.</td>
<td>10501 North SR 3 Muncie, IN 47303</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>134.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Glancy</td>
<td>Jeff &amp; Trudie Glancy</td>
<td>Walker &amp; Glancy Funeral Home 109 West Windsor Street Montpelier, IN 47359 Glancy-H. Brown &amp; Son Chapel 203 North Matilda Street Warren, IN 46792 Downing &amp; Glancy Funeral Home 100 Washington Street Geneva, IN 46740 Furguson &amp; Glancy Funeral Home 201 West Main Street Van Buren, IN 46991</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>178</td>
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<tr>
<td>Keplinger</td>
<td>James (Jim) Barry</td>
<td>509 N High St Hartford City, IN 47348</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>88</td>
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<tr>
<td>Waters</td>
<td>Ted &amp; Kay Waters</td>
<td>Waters Funeral Home 501 W. Washington Street Hartford City, IN 47348 Pitman-Richman FH 200 South Hartford Street Eaton, IN 47338</td>
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<td>33.6</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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### E. Funeral Home Online Information

<table>
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<th>Glancy Funeral Home</th>
<th>Keplinger Funeral Home</th>
<th>Waters Funeral Homes</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td><strong>Accept Credit Cards</strong></td>
<td>Yes – logos on home page</td>
<td>No</td>
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<td><strong>Aftercare or Grief Resource Links</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Animation or Flash Component</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Contact Us Info</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Driving Directions</strong></td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>Inside individual obits/Broken map link</td>
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<td><strong>Facility/Location Photos</strong></td>
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<td>Books/Batesville Products</td>
<td>Call for more info</td>
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<td><strong>Music or other audio</strong></td>
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<td>Monuments</td>
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<td><strong>Staff Photos</strong></td>
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<td>Services Info</td>
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<td>Template-based Site</td>
<td>Provided by Batesville</td>
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<td>Frazer Consultants</td>
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