



Our Unexpected Ethical Dilemma – TV Advertising



An unexpected ethical dilemma

These unprecedented times have turned our lives upside down and as a result, our levels of anxiety and stress are dramatically affecting perspectives and sensitivities.

The rapidly changing environment of a pandemic would be a challenging backdrop for any company, but the stakes become even higher when your business is death related and you advertise on TV.

Pure Cremation has been advertising on daytime television since November 2016, steadily increasing its presence until, in late 2019, the directors agreed a bold and experimental uplift in advertising for the first months of 2020. This strategy has been extremely effective, generating record numbers of pre-paid plan enquiries and sales each month since the start of the year.

Our target audience is more aware of its mortality than the rest of the population, and while we are pleased that our gentle, animated advert prompts thousands to take positive action, enquiring about or buying our simple funeral plan...we accept that the vast majority will always remain unmoved, if they registered our advert at all.

But this pandemic has created an unexpected dilemma that we now have to manage.

TV stations have seen a sudden and catastrophic decline in advertising. The withdrawal of travel advertising alone has resulted in hundreds of empty slots to fill and the prospect of greatly reduced revenues for the broadcasters.

The TV channel owners have temporarily solved their revenue problem by multiplying the frequency of the remaining advertisers, without their agreement – it's immensely frustrating when you work so hard to set a level of advertising that delicately balances the need to raise awareness with the sensitivity of the subject.

As well as having to pay for these extra slots, we are acutely aware that this increased level of advertising is being served to a very different daytime audience- much younger, frustrated and frightened.

For the millions now forced to stay at home, either furloughed or trying to work from the sofa or dining table, the concept of a daily or weekly routine has evaporated. The days blur into each other as news feeds bombard us with grim tidings; we sorely miss our family and friends, and some are also dealing with bereavement. Add in frequent reminders (however beautifully drawn) that "no-one lives forever" and it's no surprise that we are getting a few complaints as well as the usual compliments.

Our mission is simple- to help people make more informed decisions and take positive action. And we know from experience that TV advertising is the most effective way to do this, with thousands of new funeral plan customers each month as a direct result of our TV campaigns.

But our gallant staff currently deal with 2 or 3 “hit and run” calls each day with displeasure expressed loudly, sometimes immoderately, then silence – we’re given no opportunity to respond.

At least an email complaint allows you to deliver a personal response...unless the email address is deliberately fictitious.

So here’s our dilemma.

Our outstanding customer care team, selected for their empathy and kindness, are the ones dealing with the occasional rants whose frequency is likely to increase as the toxic combination of lockdown and the virus truly ‘bites’.

We are working with all the TV stations that we use, asking them to reduce our TV advertising plan so it is more attuned to the national mood, but this can’t be implemented until May. And we hope that we’ve found a way to ensure that this plan won’t be undermined by any broadcaster’s decision to fill their empty schedule with our advert.

So why not cease advertising completely?

Because our TV advertising achieves too many good things:

- raising awareness of a new funeral choice which helps everyone make more informed decisions, whatever those may be
- giving hundreds of bereaved families the confidence to choose a reputable direct cremation provider to care for their loved one
- protecting thousands more by empowering individuals to plan and pay for their own funeral in advance
- securing peace of mind in a turbulent world for those who become plan holders

And of course, the increase in funeral plan sales allows us to invest in the best staff, equipment and facilities, which have never been more desperately needed.

So, we’ll have to brace ourselves for more complaints, hold fast to the knowledge that our intentions are good, and to the fact that we make a real difference to thousands of people- vastly greater in number than the few we might (unintentionally) offend.

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