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Contact: Jessica Koth, 262-814-1536, JKoth@NFDA.org

When Words Matter: NFDA Releases Groundbreaking Communication Guide for Funeral Professionals

Brookfield, Wis. – The National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA) has released “When Words Matter: A Funeral Director’s Guide to Clear and Compassionate Communication,” a groundbreaking, research-driven resource designed to bridge the growing language gap between funeral professionals and the families they serve. The study and guide were unveiled today during the Opening General Session of the 2025 NFDA International Convention & Expo in Chicago.

Available now as a free download at [NFDA.org/Research](https://www.nfda.org/research), this new guide is grounded in original NFDA research conducted earlier this year with more than 1,100 U.S. consumers across four generations. The findings reveal a striking disconnect between how funeral professionals and families understand commonly used industry terms and offer actionable strategies for improving clarity, trust and emotional connection.

“Families aren’t wrong – they’re simply speaking a different language,” said 2025-26 NFDA President Daniel J. Ford, CFSP. “Our words are shaped by training and tradition, while families’ words come from culture, faith, media and emotion. This guide helps us bridge those differences so families feel understood and supported.”

Addressing a Widening Communication Gap

The guide grew out of a key strategic initiative within NFDA’s 2023–26 plan: to explore the differences and similarities in how funeral directors and consumers talk about death, grief and remembrance.

While funeral professionals have long used terms like “funeral,” “memorial service” and “celebration of life,” the new study revealed that families often define – or misunderstand – these terms in radically different ways.

For example, only 16% of consumers defined memorial service as a service with the body present in a casket – the same definition used by funeral directors.. And, more than 75% of respondents said they had never even heard the term direct cremation.

Younger generations, especially Gen Z and Millennials, reported the highest levels of confusion and the strongest preference for clear, plainspoken language.

“This is a pivotal moment for our profession,” said Ford. “Today’s families are diverse – culturally, generationally, spiritually – and they bring different expectations to the conversation. As funeral directors, we have a responsibility to meet them where they are – listening first and then speaking with clarity and compassion.”

A Practical, Interactive Tool

“The gap between professional language and consumer understanding isn’t unique to funeral service – it exists in law, medicine, accounting and nearly every specialized field,” said Ford. “The difference is that in funeral service, the words we use carry extraordinary emotional weight. ‘When Words

Matter’ helps us translate our professional terminology into language that resonates with families, building trust and understanding.”

“When Words Matter” includes:

- Consumer quotes illustrating how different terms are perceived.
- Side-by-side comparisons of industry terms and plain-language alternatives.
- Conversation starters and roleplay scripts to train staff in empathetic communication.
- Website and print checklist to help ensure consumer-facing materials are clear and welcoming.
- Self-reflection questions for ongoing professional development.
- Team action plan templates for implementing changes over the next 90 days.

“This guide is not a rulebook for funeral directors; it’s a conversation starter for the staff at your funeral home,” Ford noted. “Some of what’s in here may challenge long-held assumptions. But it’s also an invitation to grow, to serve with even greater excellence, and to ensure that every family walks away feeling seen, understood, and supported.”

Part of NFDA’s Unmatched Research Commitment

“When Words Matter” continues NFDA’s decades-long commitment to producing the funeral profession’s most trusted, independent research. In the past year alone, NFDA has released:

- “Across Borders, Across Traditions: A Global Study of Funeral Preferences” (2025) is the first international survey of consumer attitudes toward funerals.
- “Changing Consumer Preferences: A Generational Perspective on Attitudes Toward Funeral Service” (2025) offers deep insights into how Baby Boomers, Gen X, Millennials and Gen Z think about funerals.
- “Consumer Awareness and Preferences Survey” (2025) offers quantitative and qualitative research on what U.S. families expect from modern funeral service.

All studies and tools are available at [NFDA.org/Research](https://www.nfda.org/research).

“NFDA is proud to lead the profession in original, evidence-based research that helps funeral directors make informed business decisions and deliver meaningful service,” Ford said. “Language shapes experience and “When Words Matter” is another example of NFDA helping members strengthen the connection between what we say and what families hear.”

A Tool for Every Funeral Director

Whether serving grieving families or advocating for the profession, “When Words Matter” helps funeral directors improve communication in their day-to-day work and long-term strategy.

“In our profession, the words we choose aren’t just important, they’re sacred,” Ford said. “They shape the way people remember, heal and find meaning. This guide is one more way NFDA is helping funeral directors lead with integrity, empathy and skill.”

NFDA is the world’s leading and largest funeral service association representing 20,000 individual members who represent nearly 11,000 funeral homes in the United States and 49 countries around the world. NFDA is the trusted leader, beacon for ethics and the strongest advocate for the profession. NFDA is the association of choice because it offers funeral professionals comprehensive educational resources, tools to manage successful businesses, guidance to become pillars in their communities and the expertise to foster future generations of funeral professionals. NFDA is headquartered in Brookfield, Wis., and has an office in Washington, D.C. For more information, visit [NFDA.org](https://www.nfda.org).

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