

IMSA: ADVOCATING MEMORIALIZATION BEFORE IT BECAME A BUZZWORD

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Memorialization of a loved one has always been important for families but it seems to be a topic that is receiving more attention lately within industry publications and conferences. Perhaps this is because of a concern that society seems to be more casual or worse, in a rush to “get things over with” and we need to be sure that families realize the importance of memorialization. Whatever the reason for the renewed focus, however, the advancement of memorialization is extremely positive – and is something that has been supported by the International Memorialization Supply Association since its inception in 1976. As IMSA commemorates forty years as an association, it is interesting to look back at how it came to be and how it continues to evolve.

The origin of the International Memorialization Supply Association (IMSA) was the Cemetery Supply Association (CSA) which began in 1955 as an organization of suppliers serving the cemetery industry. One of the main functions held by the CSA was an annual trade show where its supplier members exhibited their products to cemetery personnel. Separately, another association comprised of the cemeteries held annual meetings for its members – this group was called the American Cemetery Association (ACA) which itself went through an evolution of earlier organizations and eventually became the International Cemetery, Cremation and Funeral Association (ICCFA). Understanding the value to their respective members of one event combining the ACA convention with the CSA exhibit, the two groups began cooperative annual convention/expos in the mid-1970s. During this same period, the CSA changed its name to the International Cemetery Supply Association (ICSA) to reflect the expanding composition of the supplier group.

While the ICSA and the ACA each had other programs for their members, the annual convention and expo proved to be a success both in terms of participation as well as fostering relationships between the organizations. This was beneficial for the industry as a whole and demonstrated the value of working together on common interests. Ultimately, the trade show came to be viewed by the ACA as such an integral part of their convention that they eventually assumed the management of the expo. Still, the cooperative relationship remained strong as the ICSA worked closely with the ACA on decisions regarding the convention locations, facilities, program schedules and other matters. Eventually the expo component was so interwoven into the ACA convention that logistics and related decisions were absorbed entirely by the ACA, which in the mid-1990s became the International Cemetery and Funeral Association (ICFA).

Still, the value of memorialization was a major theme that continued to unite the associations. Funeral professionals and cemeteries help families with commemoration services for their loved ones while ICSA member companies offer the memorialization products and services to help create those meaningful funerals. Indeed, as the suppliers branched out to serve funeral homes, combination operations, and crematories, and the concept of memorialization strengthened, the ICSA decided in 1991 to incorporate

that into their association name and became the International Memorialization Supply Association (IMSA).

Over the ensuing years, IMSA forged relationships with the other industry trade groups including the Catholic Cemetery Conference (CCC) and the National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA), again sharing common goals in the advancement of memorialization and professionalism in the industry. IMSA is a trusted resource that brings diversity and unique perspective to the various association meetings through its many different company members with diverse products. IMSA and its members also work with various state and regional associations, again pulling together and sharing ideas.

Cooperatively working with other industry associations is considered so vitally important to IMSA that the Board of Directors incorporated that throughout their organizational strategic plan revised in 2016. In fact, all three core IMSA objectives reflect collaboration to some degree:

- (1) Promote the success of its members by supporting best standards and practices in the deathcare industry through open communication and information sharing
- (2) Expand the dissemination of innovative information throughout the industry
- (3) Advocate cooperation amongst various associations serving the industry

IMSA members have long recognized that the most important area of cooperation for everyone in the profession is in understanding and serving families. To that end, for over two decades, IMSA member companies have provided the results of their own extensive consumer research at industry seminars and conventions.

In addition, IMSA has been a proud member and supporter of the Funeral and Memorial Information Council (FAMIC) for many years. The FAMIC Survey – initiated in 1990 as the “Wirthlin Report” – is a long-term study of consumer attitudes toward all aspects of memorialization, which has provided an invaluable resource for every segment of our profession regarding how families think about funeral services, cremation, pre-planning, cemeteries, and many other related topics.

From a nascent organization of several suppliers sixty years ago to a vibrant association of over one hundred suppliers today, the International Memorialization Supply Association is a collective group of subject matter experts who share common goals with those who use their products and serve families. No matter the choice of burial, cremation or final disposition, dignified memorialization of loved ones provide fulfilling experiences for families – and validation of the important, guiding role of the funeral service profession.