



photo by Liz Kaye Photography

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ICCFA Magazine author spotlight

► Ellis' Two Hearts Pet Loss Center, Indianapolis, Indiana, provides consulting services for organizations that want to offer death care services for pets, and information about pet grief. With her in the photo above are Crisco and Ellie Mae, who previously appeared with Ellis on the cover of ICCFA Magazine's March-April 2006 issue.

www.TwoHeartsPetLossCenter.com

► In 2004, Ellis opened the first stand-alone pet funeral home in the United States, Pet Angel Memorial Center, Carmel, Indiana. She later sold the business, which is still operating and has expanded.

► She recently received the first death and grief studies certification specializing in pet loss companionship from Dr. Alan Wolfelt's Center For Loss, Fort Collins, Colorado. She has also completed the educational requirements to be certified in thanatology.

► Ellis started in the human death care industry, working for Forethought, Batesville, Indiana, beginning in 1990. She has a bachelor's degree in marketing from Fort Hays State University, Kansas.

More from this author



► Ellis co-chairs the ICCFA Pet Loss Professionals

Alliance, which will hold its second annual conference as part of the ICCFA's 2011 Convention & Expo, March 8-11, Mandalay Bay, Las Vegas, Nevada. Turn to page 70 for more information.

PETS

More funeral homes, crematories and cemeteries are looking at pet services as a possible new revenue stream, but what does it take to run a successful pet death-care business?

7 dos and don'ts for starting pet death-care services

Many organizations are intrigued by the idea of extending their service offerings to include pets, but are unsure about exactly how to make a pet service successful.

What are the differences in how you offer your services when you're handling pets rather than people? What is the same? Is there a single business model you have to follow?

I have talked with many people in funeral service who are interested in the pet side of the business. I've outlined below some of the areas I get questions about and others I've noticed in reviewing what some in our industry are doing.

This list is of course not exhaustive, but it covers several of the most basic factors people need to take into consideration if they want to start a pet business that will serve families well, build positive relationships with families and reflect well on their company's brand.

Dos and don'ts

1. Do consider alternatives to simply making arrangements with veterinarians.

It can be tempting when you're branching out into a new area to look around and say to yourself, "Well, this is what everybody else is doing, so that's what I should do, too."

The problem is, traditional pet death care service as it has gone on for years has been based on running a truck route, picking up animals from veterinarians, taking them to the crematory and returning the remains to the veterinarian. This offers you no actual contact with families, no chance to show them the excellent service you provide.

I think there's another way to handle this business, one that speaks to the way our society views pets today. Pets have become part of the family. Pet parents aren't

reluctant to say, "It's my baby."

Pet parents want their "children" treated like family. They want to say farewell with the same dignity and respect they would give human family members.

So think about how to set up a business that's about providing experiences to pet parents, rather than about becoming the low bidder on the veterinary contract.

You can market directly to pet parents and establish relationships with them that will benefit the human side of your business.

That's not to say you don't want to also build relationships with veterinarians in your area. I think you do want to be a resource for them and let them know about the services you offer, since they already have relationships with the people you want to serve.

But at the end of the day, the pet parents are the ones with the checkbook, and they're the ones who want a meaningful experience of saying goodbye.

It's our role as death-care providers to educate them on what their options are, since it's even more true on the pet side than on the human side that consumers "don't know what they don't know."

When your human loved one dies in a hospital, the doctor doesn't handle the funeral home arrangements, doesn't show you a casket booklet and tell you to pick one out. To me, having the veterinarian handle arrangements for your animal loved one is just as odd. Not to mention that veterinarians are not trained to help families through the grief process.

2. Do design facilities and services for pets as well as their people.

You want to welcome animals into your facility, and that means designing them accordingly. There will be "accidents" by animals who either aren't potty-trained or are nervous, so that means no carpeting—

PLPA working on standards, guidelines, continuing education

Interview of PLPA Co-Chair Coleen Ellis by ICCFA Managing Editor Susan Loving

Tell us about the formation of the Pet Loss Professional Alliance.

I wanted to work with the ICCFA because I'm a fan and supporter of the association and I know how progressive it is. I felt it was a natural fit for the ICCFA because the association has moved the human side of death care forward with its networking and educational opportunities, and that's what I wanted to see happen on the pet death care side.

Working on the PLPA has been much like starting a new business. We've had to decide on a name for our group, our mission statement and where we plan to go. We did a little preliminary work before our first meeting, which was at the 2010 ICCFA Convention in San Antonio. Since then, we've had committees working hard to create a strong foundation for our organization to build on as we bring in new members.

The next few months are going to be very exciting as we talk about where we stand with our work on standards and definitions, and we're going to be working on the legal side of helping our members with sample cremation authorization forms.

We're also working on the next level to which we need to take our businesses through the creation of a Certified Pet Loss Professional program. We need to talk about how to do creative marketing so we can educate pet parents about what to look for when they are choosing a facility to help them with the death of their beloved pet.

It sounds like you're mirroring the human side of death care, with things such as model guidelines.

I was talking to Bill Remkus, the PLPA co-chair, recently about some of the definitions we're working on. And both of us—me from a funeral background and Bill from a pet cemetery background—found that the question we kept asking ourselves was, "What would they do on the human side?" Pets are becoming more and more members of the family, and it just seems natural.

What areas are you considering as you create guidelines and standards?

Some of the main areas involve how a firm should handle its business. Unfortunately,

there are many facilities that deal with pets that are basically disposal facilities, in some cases taking remains to landfills.

We want to maybe shed some light on this practice and encourage people to treat these bodies and cremated remains with dignity and respect, and to let pet parents know that there are options.

We're also working with ICCFA Cremation Counsel Poul Lemasters in the area of disclosures and communication. We want to make sure the cremation authorization forms being used are disclosing every aspect of the process.


An interesting aspect of the pet side of the business is that in many operations, death care is still being sold through the veterinarians, who don't know anything about it. So having proper forms to provide to the family, who may not fully understand what they're purchasing when they're in a state of grief, helps educate and protect everyone.

The third area we're working on is continuing education for people who are dealing with grieving families. Unlike on the human side, there's no licensing required for pet funeral directors, so we're trying to raise the professionalism within our industry by offering education and credentials. This will be accomplished through the Certified Pet Loss Professional program.

Then we need to educate our communities so that consumers and veterinarians know why it's important to look for a PLPA-member firm that adheres to our standards and that has personnel who have become certified pet loss professionals.

I believe we are still in our infancy as far as understanding what the power of the PLPA is going to be and what pet death-care services are going to be. It's a huge work in progress. We want to work for the benefit of our members, of our industry and of families experiencing the loss of a pet.

The PLPA committees have done a great amount of work in a short amount of time, but the industry and the PLPA are going to continue to evolve.

Right now, though 62 percent of people in the United States have a pet, most don't know what they can do to honor a pet who has died. Once pet parents start getting educated, they're going to start demanding more services, and our world is going to get very exciting. We need to be prepared. 

PETS

and no upholstery, either, since you want to be able to allow the animals to sit on the chairs. Any fur or dander left on a chair can easily be cleaned off if the chair is not upholstered.

There will be times when people who aren't really used to pets come in to support a friend or family member who has lost a pet. Even though they're on "our turf," so to speak, you want your pet facilities to be as comfortable as possible for them, which means you don't want fur and dander all over the place.

In any case, you should make sure your facility gets a thorough cleaning every morning before opening for business. Dust baseboards and shelves—every place dust, fur and dander can accumulate.

3. Do hire employees who are pet parents. Don't simply ask potential employees if they have pets; there's a difference between pet owners and pet parents. A pet owner who sees that dog or cat as just an animal is *not* a pet parent. A pet parent has furry children.

People who work at a pet facility don't necessarily have to have experienced the loss of a pet, but they absolutely must understand what it's like to truly love a pet.

If you come to my house to pick up my beloved pet and you're not a pet parent, first of all, you're not going to empathize with what I'm feeling.

You're also going to treat my pet's body differently. If you're not a pet parent, you're likely to see that animal's body as a carcass.

A pet parent will understand the love I had for my furry child and handle the body with dignity, respect and care—the same way I would.

There is a huge difference in the way pets and pet parents are handled when employees are not pet parents.

4. Do remember to treat pets like family. There will be pets as well as pet parents coming into your facility. Just as you would offer the family water or coffee and some cookies, you need to offer pets water and treats.

Always remember that you're trying to create relationships with pet parents, and that means treating their pets right. You want people to feel comfortable bringing their pets in with them just to say "hi," or for a visitation or funeral for another pet.

Pet parents like it when other people find their four-legged children lovable. We like it when other people want to spoil them with

treats or little toys. Keep that treat jar handy and maybe have some little tennis balls or other small toys on hand, too.

5. Do add pet-centric events to your community outreach program and become your community's pet loss resource.

You're trying to reach out to pet parents, and one way to do that is to sponsor pet-centric events such as adoption fairs, pet blessings, pet-food donations for the local shelter, an event for National Pet Memorial Day, pet photos with Santa—the list is endless.

Reach out to veterinarians, shelters and other pet-centric people and organizations to co-sponsor events. Make yourself known to the doggie daycares, the kennels, the doggie bakeries, the grooming businesses.

Staff a booth at pet-centric events held by others. You need to get out there and educate your community about how you can help them when their pet dies.

And don't forget to examine your traditional outreach efforts for ways to let people know about your pet services. See if the Rotary Club, the Lions Club and other groups that look for speakers would like to hear you talk about how people are celebrating their pets' lives and memorializing them.

I'd like to have a dime for every time I heard someone say, "I wish I had known this was available when my pet died." It's our responsibility to get out there and let people know about our services.

Don't forget social marketing. Have a Facebook page. Make it easy for people to contact you with questions, and to see what other people are doing to memorialize their babies.

6. Do offer a wide range of memorialization options. Sometimes I see pet facilities where they're displaying a handful of urns and a couple of necklaces. That's not nearly enough.

Pet parents want to remember and honor their pets, but they don't know what is available unless you show them.

I strongly urge you to show them lots and lots of ways to memorialize. And make sure your offerings are up to the standards you maintain on the human side of the business.

Show them large urns—family urns, if you will—and explain they can use them for several pets. You're likely to serve families who have the cremated remains of

one or more pets at home already, pets they did not have a chance to memorialize. In a family urn, "everybody lived under one roof in life, and now they can live under one roof in death."

Show them cremation jewelry and explain that it can hold either cremated remains or fur or a photo so they can carry their precious pet with them all the time.

Show them lots of personalization.

In the pet world, the dates may be the "gotcha" (adoption date) and the death date, rather than the birth and death date. Regardless, just as in human death care, ask people to tell you about the "dash." "Tell me about your pet. Tell me about his life. If you had to think of one statement that summed up your pet, what would it be?"

I'll never forget one woman saying to me that her little dog Greta was "my little Peter Pan mixed with Dennis the Menace." And that's what we put on everything: "Greta—Peter Pan mixed with Dennis the Menace."

7. Do provide service.

Sometimes I hear people who have experienced the loss of a pet say, "I

won't get another dog (or cat). I won't go through that again; it hurt too much."

What that tells me is that they weren't able to mourn that loss, to memorialize that beloved pet. Maybe their family and friends weren't pet parents and didn't understand what they were going through, didn't validate their feelings of loss.

That's something we can do for pet parents. By helping them mourn their loss, by validating their feelings, we provide a true service, just as we do on the human side. Providing service is what builds relationships, and that's what should attract many on the human side of the business to the pet side: providing additional services to their families and building stronger relationships.

What all of these recommendations come down to at the end of the day is making sure you have the service components in place, you have the value offerings in place and you are really and truly going to help every family have the experience they need to have to honor their pet. □