

Looking at some cemeteries you might get the impression that grounds maintenance consists of throwing down some grass seed and praying that it grows. But make no mistake about it: Cemeteries that thrive make it a priority to maintain and beautify their properties.

Grounds maintenance consists of everything a cemetery must do to be inviting. Equipment budgets, outsourcing and a myriad of other variables must be taken into consideration when coming up with an overall grounds maintenance strategy.

“Without proper maintenance, the cemetery will quickly fall into disrepair,” according to Dennis Werner, general manager of St. Michael’s Cemetery in East Elmhurst, N.Y. It’s important to pay attention to it because it ensures peace of mind for families that choose to use your cemetery, he said.

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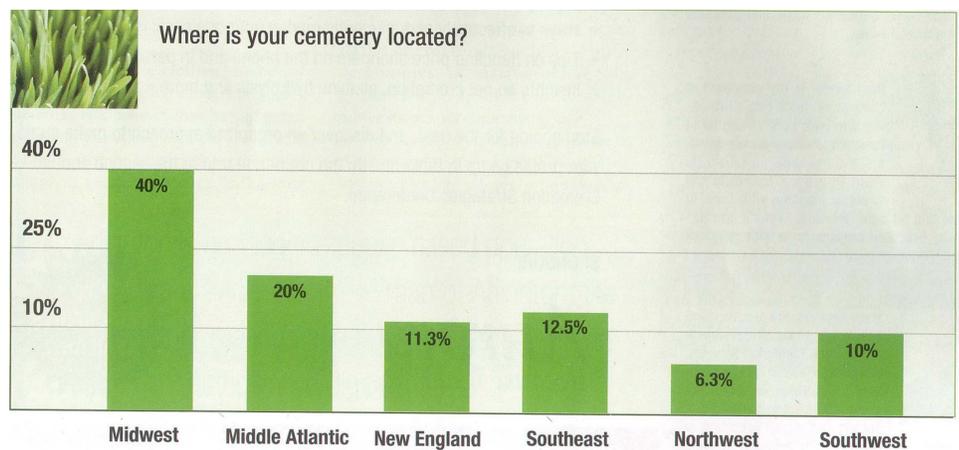
The topic is so important that American Cemetery conducted a grounds maintenance survey so ceterierians could share tips, strategies and equipment and staffing preferences. Eighty-two people responded to the survey, and 64.2 percent said that well-kept grass is the most important aspect of a cemetery’s grounds maintenance. Accordingly, 62.7 percent of respondents plan on buying fertilizer this year, and 36.5 percent will buy lawnmowers. Ceterierians seem to want to keep their grounds natural, with only 4.1 percent of respondents planning to buy artificial grass.

“When you fail to pay attention to your grounds, trouble comes quickly,” Werner warned. “Cutting and trimming the grass around monuments is a labor intensive job. Within two to three weeks, a cemetery can look unkempt if it is not receiving routine mowing and trimming,” he said.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Most respondents (40 percent) had a cemetery in the Midwest region; Middle Atlantic states were also well represented, with 20 percent of respondents coming from the region. Interestingly, 79.3 percent of respondents were mail – however, this is 4.7 percentage points lower than 2011’s grounds maintenance survey results, which suggest that more women are becoming involved in managing cemeteries.

Most of the cemeteries (37 percent) who replied to our survey were from municipal cemeteries; private cemeteries came in second with 25.9 percent. Even with the rough economy and rise in cremation, 34.2 percent of respondents have 11 employees or more at their cemeteries – 7.2 percent points higher than 2011’s grounds maintenance survey results.



Most respondents (32.9 percent) have 25 to 30 acres of developed land, about one percentage point lower than 2011’s developed acreage. Many of the ceterierians who responded to the survey had more than 100 acres of developed land (24.1 percent).

The majority of respondents have put most of their acreage to use, with 51.9 percent of them having fewer than 25 acres of undeveloped land. Larger cemeteries, however, still have room to expand – 15.2 percent of respondents are still sitting on more than 100 acres of undeveloped land.

BURIAL AND CREMATION IN CEMETERIES

Our survey showed that 37.8 percent of respondents handle 51 to 150 burials per year – this is down 4.2 percentage points from 2011. However, according to our survey, 49.4 percent of respondents have done 50 or fewer interments of cremated remains, even though statistics from the Cremation Association of North America show that the national cremation rate is at almost 40 percent.

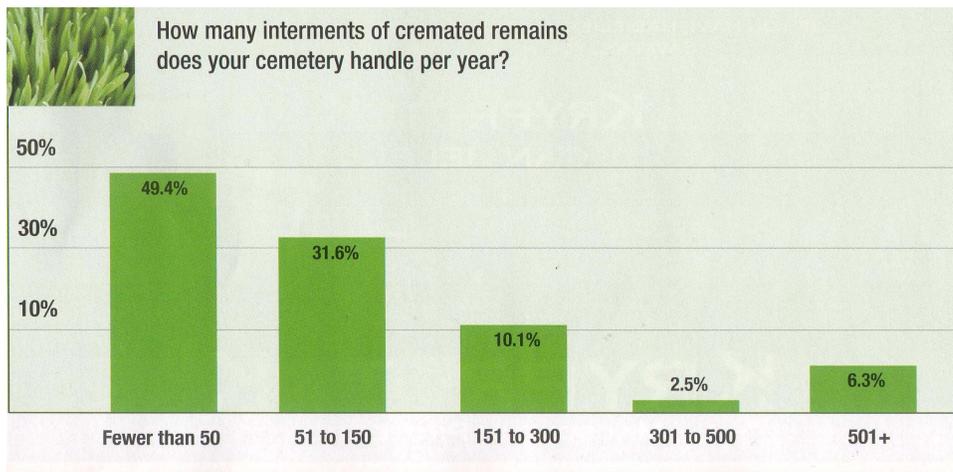
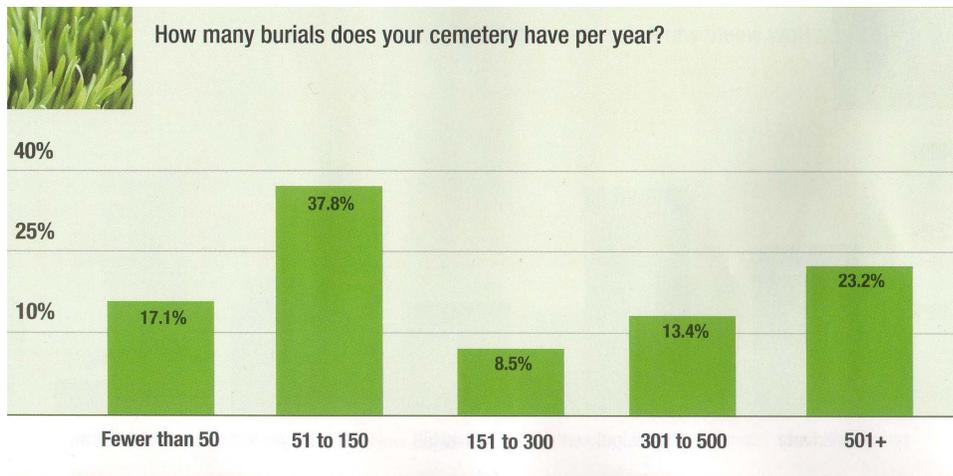
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Shipper said, “For decades, traditional funeral directors have discouraged cremation, hidden cremation merchandise behind curtains and generally taught the public that cremation, at its best, is for people who are concerned about price and who don’t really care about their loved one as much as a family that has a traditional arrangement,” he said. “Naturally, we know that none of this is true, and that people choose cremation for a great variety of reasons.”

Shipper added, “Years of this kind of instruction from traditional funeral directors has resulted in most cremation families not thinking through memorialization and permanent interment options, so the vast majority of cremation families simply put their cremated remains on a shelf somewhere quickly to be forgotten,” he said. “The rest of the world

doesn’t consider cremation to be a lesser option and therefore, interment, entombment and scattering with memorialization are simply part of the process.”

Thomas Alter, director of Cemeteries for the Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend and superintendent of Catholic Cemetery in Fort Wayne, Ind., believes that the lack of cremated remains interred in cemeteries could be because of geographic and religious reasons. “The Midwest is much more conservative. We did 339 burials last year, yet only 18 percent were cremation,” he said. “Catholic cemeteries will be less than the national average. Also, depending on where responses come from the West coast will have high cremation rates and so will the East coast (but to a lesser degree). Also, smaller cemeteries are usually more rural – adding to the conservatism.”



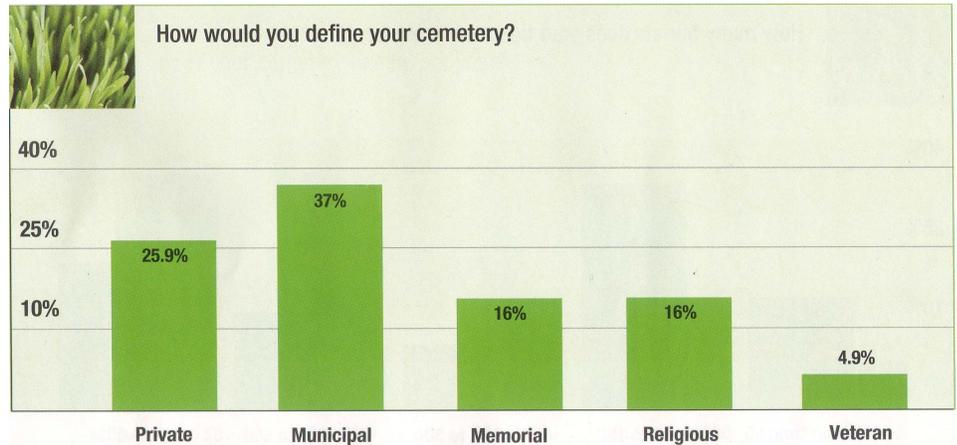
The small number of cremated remains interments might also be because the cremation consumer isn’t looking for the traditional niche or columbarium or cremation space that every cemetery has developed. Robert Boetticher Jr., managing partner for Cloverdale Funeral Home, Cemetery and Cremation in Boise, Idaho, believes that the cremation con-

sumer is looking for something special, unique and personal. "This basic knowledge of today's cremation consumer I why many of the progressive cemeteries are embracing cremation options and investing in developing cremation gardens that address this need for something special, unique and personal," he said. "Finally, I believe there is a disconnect between the funeral director and the cemetery professional.

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Funeral directors have done a great job of offering many options to client families like personalized urns, keepsakes and ceremonies; however, they are forgetting the final part of serving a family, and that is the final place of rest and the memorial – which is the final tribute to a life lived."

Werner is shocked that less than 50 percent of respondents have done 50 or fewer interments for cremated remains, but he said this does show the need to inform the public of the importance of memorializing cremated remains. "It has become popular to scatter (cremated remains) in memorable places, or at sea, or just leave them at home on a shelf, but if that is not accompanied by a record of that person's existence and a permanent memorial, what happens to that person's memory?" he asked. "The public is losing sight of the fact that cemeteries are a great source of lasting memorialization." According to Werner, St. Michael's is making some progress with cremation – niche sales are trending upward, but grave and crypt sales are stagnant or dropping.



GETTING THE MOST OUT OF YOUR BUDGET

According to our survey, 53.1 percent of respondents have a cemetery equipment budget of \$25,000 or more.

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However, most cemeteries, especially ones with fewer than 200 interments a year, are just scraping by with their budgets, Shipper said. "It's not that they don't need more equipment – it's that they can't afford it," he said.

Boetticher said that besides cemetery staffing, equipment is usually one of the largest expenses. "When a cemetery does not have the proper revenue, the first thing most cemeteries do is adjust their total maintenance spending," he said, but he warned that this decision might not always be the best.

"For example, many cemeteries have older equipment and staff members work very hard at keeping it operational; however, this could prove to be a very delicate balance because many times the old equipment may be more expensive to maintain and repair than it would be to purchase something new," Boetticher said. "Another way to stretch your maintenance budget is to be sure you are using and purchasing the right equipment for the right job. Many times you hear 'bigger is better,' but this isn't necessarily true."

Boetticher suggests looking at less expensive alternatives in order to save some money and keep within budget. "As an example, you may be in the market for a new dump truck that will have a cost of over \$40,000, but you can do the same job with a dump trailer for \$8,000, and you don't damage the turf," he said.

Another way that cemeterians are getting by with their budgets is by outsourcing work. According to the survey, 24.4 percent of respondents outsource their cemetery's grounds maintenance. However, many cemetery industry experts, including Boetticher, believe it is not a decision to be taken lightly. In order to successfully outsource work, you need to have a complete understanding of the costs and rewards.

"The benefit (of outsourcing labor) is the cemetery is not paying benefit costs, and you do not have to worry about managing staffing when someone is ill or doesn't report to work," Boetticher said. "The downside of this is potential high turnover and continual training of new people. (Even though) the employee is working for an outside vendor, the cemetery is still responsible for the safety training and proper use of the equipment."

He added, "Many cemeteries are outsourcing the basic grounds maintenance activities like mowing and weed eating. This may be a viable solution, however you need to keep in mind, when you outsource grounds maintenance and you need additional skilled cemetery experience crew, you will find you are limited."

Alter, on the other hand, is against outsourcing cemetery labor. "I would never do it because, in talking to those who have, they admit it was a mistake," he said, and suggested listening to other professionals and their suggestions.

Mark Lucas, manager of The Brickman Group in Gaithersburg, Md., agrees that word of mouth is powerful, but he added you must also do your own homework. According to Lucas, cemeteries come with a unique set of circumstances, and cemeterians need to look for a company that has experience with cemetery maintenance and preferably dedicated crews that only work on cemeteries. "It's difficult changing the mindset of mowing a shopping mall on Monday and a cemetery on Tuesday and expect the same crew is going to treat everyone the same," he said. "Because of peak trimming periods around Mother's Day and Memorial Day, the company should be large enough to comfortably be able to double or triple the crew size at these periods to complete the necessary trimming."

BRAND AND DEALER LOYALTY

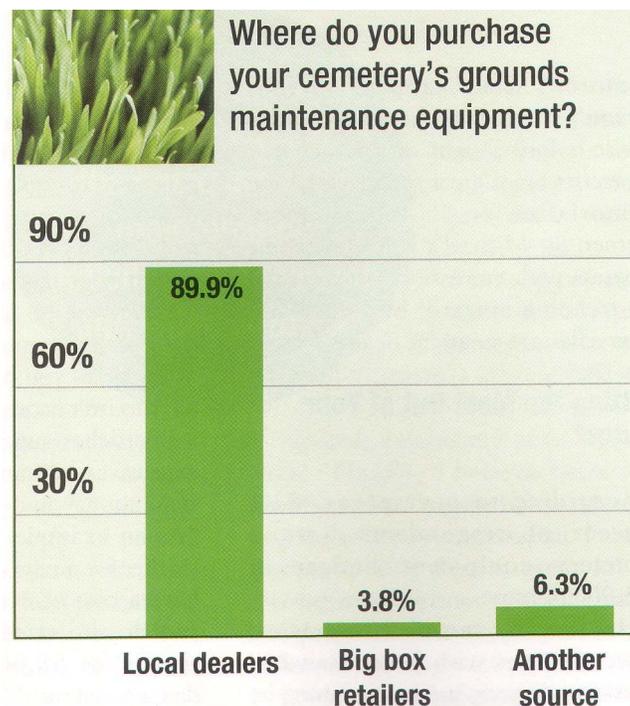
Brand and local vendor loyalty is important in the death-care industry. The survey showed that 89.9 percent of respondents purchased their grounds maintenance equipment from local dealers.

Alter believes this is because local dealers can be very helpful if something goes wrong with the equipment – especially with costly purchases like backhoes and tractors. "It is also more convenient to buy smaller items locally because they are convenient and usually can be received the same day," he said.

Shipper also believes it is because "business is still, and will always be, about people." He added, "Someone local will give you the kind of service that you may not be able to get anywhere else, and in our business, service is essential to the smooth running of our operations."

Robert M. Fells, executive director and general counsel for the International Cemetery, Cremation and Funeral Association, doesn't find it surprising that cemeteries generally shop at local dealers, instead of bigger retailers like Lowe's or Home Depot. "Cemeteries serve the communities where they are located, so it is understandable they would patronize local businesses for their supplies," he said.

Werner also agreed that purchasing equipment from local vendors could be more convenient for repairs.



"This type of equipment will often need repairs, and a local parts and service area is very important when purchasing equipment," he said.

And cemeterians aren't just loyal to their local dealers – brand loyalty is also important. According to our survey, 63.8 percent of respondents said that they prefer to buy a specific brand for their cemeteries; the brand that leads the pack is John Deere, which is preferred by 70.4 percent of respondents.

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Steve Wilhelmi, tactical marketing manager for John Deere Commercial Mowing in Cary, N.C., said that cemetery maintenance can be very demanding. "John Deere commercial mowers are known for their maneuverability, durability and reliability, which is needed every day in cemetery applications," he said.

Wilhelmi believes that John Deere is one of the most popular equipment brands for cemeterians because of color-coded and easy-to-use controls. "This allows operators to more easily switch between machines, and speeds up the training process for new operators," he said. "The John Deere dealer network plays a critical support role for our customers. They provide outstanding product support after the sale; that translates into more up-time and longer machine life."

Other brands that showed popularity with the survey respondents were Stihl (38.9 percent), Kubota (35.2 percent) and Toro (24.1 percent).

More than anything, however, Boetticher said that as a cemeterian, you need to be aware of anything and everything that's going on within your cemetery – every visitor coming to your cemetery will be keenly aware of every movement and action that you take on your cemetery grounds. Small investments and improvements in a cemetery's grounds maintenance will not be forgotten by families, he said. "Never forget: The cemetery grounds crew has a stronger relationship with a client family than a funeral home does, due to the fact that a cemetery crew member will interact with the client family on every visit, versus a funeral director who interacts with the family over a few days," Boetticher said.

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