

CEMETERY COMPUTERIZATION

Is It Necessary?

by Frank Cardon

I can answer this question quickly with a resounding “Yes” but I would like to ask you, “Why not?” There are a number of benefits to computerizing your records and here are two of the most important:

- The first and probably the most important reason is that computerizing your records provides you with a backup system while paper systems cannot provide this security.

With all of your burial records in an electronic format, you have the ability to make back-up copies and easily store them offsite. You still have access to your files in case your records are destroyed on site. And yes, we’ve all heard the horror stories of computers crashing and data being lost; with a proper backup routine, all of the data will be able to be restored with minimal data loss (depending on how old your last backup was).

At our cemeteries, data is backed up daily so in case of disaster we would lose one day’s work. Additionally, I don’t know what kind of condition your paper records are in, but I know ours were worn, difficult to read and brittle. The cemetery industry is one of a few that must retain their records forever. “Forever.” That’s a long time. Paper may last 100 years, maybe more ... but not forever.

In case you think the impossible won’t happen...read the following:

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NORTHBRIDGE – A two-alarm fire heavily damaged the Pine Grove Cemetery storage garage and workshop yesterday morning. Fire Chief Gary Nestor said there were no injuries, but firefighters worked fast to save the adjacent office built in 1942, where all the records were stored for the 1878 cemetery. Four minutes after the call to the blaze at about 8:15 a.m., firefighters were already battling the fire and smoke. The fire is believed to be of accidental origin, according to the fire chief.

- Another important aspect of computerization is increased productivity.

You may not initially notice an increase in productivity, but in time you will find that even routine tasks such as location look-ups or verifying ownership rights will be easier and faster. Depending on the size of your operation, you may find it advantageous for more than one person to have access to your records. This can be accomplished with multi-user software. Two or more computers can be searching or entering data simultaneously thus saving time and further increasing productivity.

Computerization, done correctly, will eliminate many of the redundant and time consuming tasks that are inherent to a paper system. A computerized relational database system has the ability to tie various features of a computer system together, reducing the repetitious tasks associated with paper.

Efficiency is doing better what is already being done. – Paul Drucker

Now that you are aware of the most important reasons for computerizing your records, I would like to offer some suggestions as to “How to Computerize” your records.

I was hired by the Diocese of Youngstown for one major task (as well as a lot of little ones). My main function was to assist the diocesan cemeteries in the computerization of their records.

Keep in mind, at the time I was hired (2001); the four cemeteries owned a total of two computers between them. Neither of which was used on a regular basis for cemetery business. The employees at the time were not what you would consider computer savvy, a few owned personal computers at home while others had never operated one at all.

The cemetery staff had looked into computerization many times. A number of software companies provided demo disks and proposals. Yet, without knowing exactly what they were looking at or what they needed, neither the disks nor proposals provided the staff with much information.

I was familiar with various forms of software, having worked for two computer companies and a software developing company over a period of thirteen years. At that time, I understood the information on the demo disks yet, I knew nothing about the cemetery business. Over the next two months I functioned more as a consultant than an employee, I observed everything that went on at the cemetery and asked a lot of questions. The question I most often asked was, “*Why are you doing that?*” The answer most often given was, “*Because that’s the way it’s always been done.*”

I began to discover patterns in every step that was used. Many of the same tasks were repeated to create a system of checks and balances. Often, the same information was written in two, three, or four different places. This type of activity creates an environment conducive to a tremendous amount of human error. I was able to convince the “powers that be” to eliminate some of these repetitious steps and was able to show everyone a better way.

Once I felt I had an understanding of the office procedures, I began the monumental task of finding the right software to fit our system. My understanding was that all cemeteries operated in the same way when in fact, I found many differences across our own four cemeteries.

The information one cemetery felt was important to document, another didn't bother with it. So I was looking for software that was flexible enough to work with each of the cemeteries needs. After evaluating several software systems priced from a few hundred dollars to tens of thousands of dollars, I made the decision to develop my own system that could be easily adjusted to fit the needs of each cemetery.

I am by no means suggesting that you hire someone to develop a system for your cemetery, but I am proposing that you think about the following before you buy:

- *Consider the size of your cemetery and the number of burial records on hand.* I've worked with small parish cemeteries with maybe one hundred burials overall, to those larger cemeteries that do nine hundred burials a year. Though they are in the very same industry and for the most part are doing the exact same thing, their software needs are different.

Smaller cemeteries do not always need all the features a more robust software package offers. Many software companies developing cemetery systems offer different versions of modules that can be purchased separately and added on as the need arises.

For instance, a large cemetery may find mapping to be of utmost importance while the small parish cemetery does not. Mapping may be a great feature but for one hundred burials and burying two or three parishioners per year, it may be cost prohibitive and unnecessary.

- *Establish a budget for a project of this magnitude.* This will eliminate many of the software systems that are well beyond your financial means. By narrowing your search, you will save time for yourself and the software companies that exceed your budget. Consider your human resources or cost of outsourcing as well.

- *Ask around.* Most cemeteries have relationships with other cemeteries; ask what system they run and how they like it. See the system in operation so you can judge for yourself if the system will work for you. Many software companies will furnish you with referrals in your area and provide contact names and numbers to cemeteries of similar size. It only takes a minute to call and ask a few questions.

- *Review the software.* Companies who want to do business with you will furnish a demonstration CD or the ability to download a demonstration of their product. Either way, take the software for a test drive. Don't be hesitant to push buttons and try things. It's only a demo; you can't break it. Ask if they will provide you with an on-line demonstration so you can see the software work in their hands. Ask plenty of "How do I...?" questions to answer any concerns you may have.

- Find a system that is flexible so it *fits* the way you do business instead of *changing* the way you do business to fit the software. Something as simple as the way you identify your burial spaces may cause problems. For example, the software may identify a particular grave by the "Section," the "Lot Number" and the "Grave Number"

whereas your cemetery may use those along with “Row Numbers” or “Blocks” to distinguish certain areas of your cemetery.

If there are differences ask if modifications are available and how much they will cost. If modifications are necessary ask what effect this might have on future updates after modifications are made.

■ *Customer service is also important.* Make sure you know how to contact the software company if you should have questions or concerns. Ask if training is included with the software. How is customer support handled? Is a software maintenance agreement available and if so how much does it cost? Are there any other charges or fees involved?

■ *Take your time.* Don't jump into the first thing you see. Make sure the product is easy to learn and adapt to. Computerizing your records is a time consuming job. It won't be done in a day, a week, a month or maybe even a year. On day one of the computerization of our cemetery, we started out inputting new or “live” information.

We didn't worry about inputting anything that happened before day one. We still had our paper system to handle that. As we found time, we went back and started to input all of the records from our paper system. Initially, we input the names of the deceased, the date of death and their cemetery location.

Once we had all of the names and locations entered, we went back through the paper to double check our work and to insert any other pertinent information that may have been missed. At the same time we were entering our live data and no longer creating paper records.

Entering all of the 90,000 plus names took close to a year and the entire project took nearly three years to complete. Was this time consuming and at times maddening, perhaps, but if you ask any of our office or sales personnel if they would go back to a paper system they would all say “No.”

■ *Many of the software companies have different versions of their software.* Ask if it is possible to start with a low-end system and then upgrade to a more sophisticated version if you need to. Make sure to ask what the price for any upgrade might be and if all of your data will import into the upgraded version. This will provide an opportunity to use the software and become familiar with its functions. You may find that upgrading isn't necessary at all.

Frank A. Cardon is director of computer operations, Calvary Cemetery, Diocese of Youngstown. He has helped a number of cemeteries, both large and small, in computerizing their records. According to Frank, if anyone should have questions or concerns he would be more than happy to help. Frank may be reached at 330.792.4721 or by email at fcardon@sbcglobal.net.