

The marketing of an unsought service through an unobtrusive medium: a content analysis of the websites of members of the National Funeral Directors Association of South Africa

ABSTRACT

The marketing of intangible services – particularly of unsought services such as those of the funeral industry – can be said to pose inherently unique challenges to marketers. Because of the unsought nature of funeral services, consumers generally avoid the industry, primarily because the services offered by the funeral industry are associated with death and grief. This article reports on some selected findings of an evaluation of the effectiveness of funeral-home websites of members of the National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA) of South Africa. The focus of this paper is on the user-friendliness of the websites under consideration. A quantitative content analysis of the websites in question was conducted to collect the relevant data. The findings indicate that the majority of the websites may be considered satisfactory in terms of their overall ease of use. As well as some recommendations for improvements to the websites, a few suggestions for future research are also provided.

Mr CA (Cerneys) Coetzee is a lecturer in the Department of Marketing, Logistics and Sport Management at the Tshwane University of Technology. His research interest is focussed on digital marketing. Dr Tania Maree is a senior lecturer in the Department of Marketing Management at the University of Pretoria. Her research interests include marketing communication media, specifically new or online media, social media and social networks. Prof. CH (Neels) van Heerden is head of the Department of Marketing, Logistics and Sport Management at the Tshwane University of Technology. He has an NRF rating (C) with focus area sport, leisure and tourism marketing. His research output tallies in excess of 100 units in peer-reviewed scientific journals and conference proceedings. He is the co-author of nine text books and has contributed over 20 chapters in academic text books aimed at university students.

INTRODUCTION

The marketing of the funeral industry poses fundamental challenges to a marketer. These challenges are ascribed to two main factors, namely the unsought or otherwise referred to as the ‘unwanted’ nature of the funeral industry (Theron, 2011:2) and, secondly, the complexities of applying the traditional components of an integrated marketing communication (IMC) programme to promote the funeral industry.

According to Du Plessis (2010:1–21), effective communication is one of the most important functions in an organisation. Armour and Williams (1981:705–706), though conceding that the funeral industry has, from its beginnings, had a problem with its image, note that the industry has however taken great pains to change how consumers view both funerals and those who provide the funeral service. The actual promotion of the funeral industry nevertheless continues to pose a fundamental problem with regard to Du Plessis’s statement.

How then do funeral homes communicate their product to an audience that is, firstly, forced to make a decision in a moment of immediate need and, secondly, has to make that decision regarding a product best described by Sanders (2009:47) as a “dismal trade”?

The issue is further complicated by the fact that the consumer is most probably – at the time of seeking the services of a funeral home – in a state of bereavement and moreover, in a situation of immediate need and does thus not have time to ‘shop around’ for the best deal (Schwartz, Jolson & Lee, 1986:41).

To date, Armour and Williams (1981) have been the only authors in the literature directly to address the aspects of funeral advertising. There are articles on topics such as funeral-home customer service (Blayac, Bougette & Montet, 2012), the management of funeral homes (Walls, 2012), the generic marketing of funeral homes (Schwartz et al., 1986; Williams, 2012), website design (Waters, 2009) and death and dying (Bailey, 2010). Yet none of the literature focuses on the digital marketing of the funeral industry *per se*. The lack of existing information in the literature on the marketing of the funeral industry points to an unexplored field of study and subsequently to a knowledge gap in the marketing discipline.

Taking into account the statement by Schwartz et al. (1986) that the user of a funeral-home website is most probably in a state of bereavement at the time of accessing the website, this study investigates both the searchability and the existing contact information that is to be found on the websites of funeral homes in South Africa.

1. UNSOUGHT SERVICES






Before unsought services can be defined, they firstly have to be positioned within the realm of services marketing. The broad definition of services implies that intangibility is a key determinant of services, regardless of the perspective from which it is approached (Wilson, Zeithaml, Bitner

& Gremler, 2008:7). Jordaan and Prinsloo (2004:13) further hold that intangibility is the primary source of difference between physical goods on the one hand and services on the other.

Authors in the literature on the topic variously portray the notion of *tangibility* versus *intangibility* as the “tangibility spectrum” (Wilson et al., 2008:7), as the “continuum of the tangibility concept” (Du Plessis, 2009:6) and, as the “goods-versus-service continuum, based on the degree of tangibility” (Jordaan & Prinsloo, 2004:8).

The foregoing however merely represents diverse terminology assigned to one and the same process and they do not indicate any core differences in the differentiation between tangibility and intangibility. The tangibility/intangibility aspect in relation to service classification is not without criticisms in contemporary literature. The “goods-versus-service continuum, based on the degree of tangibility”, as proposed by Jordaan and Prinsloo (2004:8–10), best illustrates tangibility as the primary difference between physical goods and services (as represented in Table 1).

Table 1: The goods-versus-service continuum

A: Pure goods		Pure services		
				
1	2	3	4	5
Pure tangible goods	Tangible goods with accompanying services	Hybrid offers: equal parts tangible goods and intangible services	A major service with accompanying minor goods and services	Pure services
Services cannot enhance customer value, as the primary purpose of the product delivered to the customer is situated in the tangibility of the product.	An automobile with a service plan	Sitting down for a meal at a restaurant where a waiter serves the customer.	Major service – conducting a funeral; minor tangible goods – casket, flowers, hearse; minor services – organising the venue, the facilitators of the service, registering the death at the Department of Internal Affairs on behalf of the bereaved.	Comprises service only, such as health insurance; There are no tangible aspects related to the product offering.
B: Tangible		Intangible		

Source: Adapted from Jordaan and Prinsloo (2004:8)

So as to differentiate goods from services, the continuum progresses on a simultaneous path

from pure goods to pure services (refer to component A in Table 1) and from tangible goods to intangible services (refer to component B in Table 1). It offers a simplified, yet effective, five-level process of classification. The continuum is able effectively to clarify contentious issues in the classification and defining of services.

It is evident from Table 1 that the funeral industry is positioned as a major service with minor accompanying goods. Although the goods-versus-service continuum is an effective means of positioning sought-after goods and services within an easily comprehensible construct, it fails to address the unsought services component. There is virtually no information available in existing literature on the marketing of unsought services, except for its classification – as part of the product-classification structure – and generic definitions thereof (Theron, 2011).

In order to find a clear definition of what unsought services entail, a definition has been compiled from two different existing definitions:

- **Definition 1:** 'Unsought services/products are consumer products or services that consumers either do *not know about* or that they know about, but *do not normally think of buying or investing in* (Kotler & Armstrong, 2010:250–251; Lamb et al., 2010:242–245; Strydom, 2004:108).
- **Definition 2:** *Unwanted services* refer to services that could evoke strong negative emotions, which could result in an *unreceptive buying situation* (Theron & Ebersohn, 2013:3).
- **An unsought service can, therefore, be defined as:** *A service that does not form part of the consumer's regular spending patterns and which could evoke strong, negative emotions resulting in an unreceptive buying situation.*

Precisely how problematic the marketing of this specific category of service delivery happens to be, is evident from the foregoing attempts at defining unsought services – not only from the funeral-industry perspective, but also from the consumer's perception of such services.

Sanders (2009:64), by illustrating that the funeral industry is situated in both social and economic relations, places the preceding statement into the unsought service perspective. Both these aspects form part of the consumer trends that require novel and engaging stimuli and which would encourage further consumption through marketing communication methods, such as advertising. Thus, like any other industry, the funeral industry should focus on the creation of services, the values of which rest primarily on their symbolic content and on how they stimulate the pragmatic activity of consumers.

The marketing of intangible services – particularly of unsought services – poses inherently unique challenges to marketers in that the product features of a tangible product (e.g. a new design) can easily be copied by competitors. However, copying the quality of a service is not that easy, especially if the services are of an unsought nature (Du Plessis, 2009:6; Lamb et al., 2010:465; Wilson et al., 2008:10).

For the purposes of this study, the client is identified as the person(s) closest to the deceased who solicit the services of a funeral home to conduct the funeral. The client only starts enquiring about the services offered once the need to acquire these arises (when a loved one passes away). It is therefore a complicated process in which the funeral director has to take into account the client's state of bereavement in the process of facilitating the funeral transaction.

2. INTEGRATED MARKETING COMMUNICATION

It was not until the 1990s that integrated marketing communication (IMC) began to gain acknowledgement among marketers (Blakeman, 2007:5). According to Kitchen, Brignell, Li and Jones (2004:20), this was partly due to the trend among organisations to allocate marketing budgets away from mass media advertising because of the following factors:

- Increased media fragmentation and increased segmentation of consumer preferences
- Easier access to consumer databases resulting from technological advances
- A growing importance in reinforcing consumer loyalty through relationship marketing
- The importance of building and increasing a brand's image equity

Although marketing communication had previously been used by organisations as an umbrella term to refer to the various communication functions used by marketers, it is the strategic integration of the functional aspects of IMC that brings it to its full value in an organisation (Kitchen et al., 2004:21). The central idea of IMC is based on the premise that communication does not take place in a vacuum but in a broader context, which includes not only the traditional media, but also other communication efforts, such as digital communication (Finne & Grönroos, 2009:179) (refer to Figure 1).

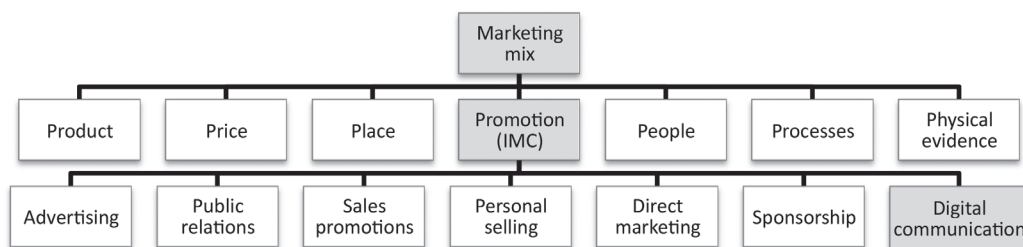


Figure 1: The IMC construct

Source: Du Plessis (2010:4); Holtzhausen (2010:39)

The challenge to marketers therefore is how to use the various components of IMC to communicate efficiently to the targeted consumer. This article proposes digital marketing as the most feasible and unobtrusive means of promoting unsought services, such as those offered by a funeral home.

3. DIGITAL MARKETING

The 'online revolution' has forced marketers to think differently about marketing communications in a digital world (McDonald & Wilson, 2011:274). The result of the commercialisation and the subsequent growth of the Web has been that both organisations and consumers have gone online in increasing numbers.

Swanepoel and Bothma (2013:31) argue that the marketing aspect of a website centres on the provision of information about an organisation's products and services to prospective consumers. However, if employing the website does not lead to the generation of new business, it might just as well be deemed to be redundant. Waters (2009:4-6), in addition, states that it is imperative for a business, including funeral homes, to have online visibility in the contemporary market.

Although the website of a funeral home does not fulfil an e-commercial function, it can either encourage or discourage the would-be consumer from contacting the funeral home for more information. It is therefore to the benefit of the funeral home to establish an online presence so as not only to provide information on the funeral home, its products and the various funeral packages offered but also for potential clients to be able to contact the funeral home.

4. WEBSITES AS A DIGITAL MARKETING MEDIUM

In essence, an organisation's website is its advertisement. Websites may be considered to be the centrepieces of organisations' online advertising efforts (Shimp & Andrews, 2013:362). One of the most important aspects of a website is the information it provides to the user. Regardless of the technology – computer, laptop, iPad or cellphone – that the consumer will use to access the website, it is imperative that the organisation's website should provide the necessary information required by the user. Ryan and Jones (2012:37) however caution that a website must not be perceived as being simply an online brochure designed to inform the user about the organisation and its offerings. A website is primarily a 'conversation engine' designed to generate traffic through all of the organisation's digital marketing endeavours.

In the consulted literature, there is neither any consensus on website design nor on the evaluation standards of an effective website. Most of the authors who address the topic have their own opinions regarding the characteristics of an effective website (Keller, 2008; Kulkarni, Rajeshwarkar & Dixit, 2012; Landa, 2010; Persaud, Madil & Rubaj, 2009; Shelly & Campbell, 2012; Simmons, Armstrong & Durkin, 2011; Sterin, 2012; Udo, Bagchi & Kirs, 2010; Vu, Zu & Proctor, 2011).

Selim (2011:4-5), who has conducted extensive secondary and empirical research on the evaluation of websites, states three reasons for the diverse opinions on website analysis encountered in the literature:

- Firstly, several studies have developed evaluation criteria applicable only to specific types of websites. For instance, criteria are developed to evaluate a website that is dedicated to English-speaking clients only.

- Secondly, most studies have developed guidelines rather than a complete set of criteria.
- Thirdly, most of the developed sets of criteria have not been empirically validated.

Selim (2011) has subsequently developed a comprehensive set of criteria. These criteria not only validate a website, but can also be used by website organisations to evaluate the reliability and usability of their websites. The criteria used in the evaluation of the websites discussed in this study were extracted from Selim's set of criteria.

5. THE METHODOLOGY

The quantitative, content-analysis method was utilised in this study. Content analysis, as a research technique, is a product of the electronic age. Although content analysis was regularly performed in the 1940s, it only became a more credible and frequently used research method after the 1950s when researchers started to focus on concepts rather than simply on words and on semantic relationships, rather than just the presence of variables in the content analysed (Palmquist, s.a.).

Krippendorff (2013:38) states that traditional guides to research methods tend to insist that all scientific research should test hypotheses with a view to determining whether any patterns are evident in the data. A content analysis addresses prior questions concerning why available texts came into being, what they mean to whom, and whether these texts enable the analyst to select valid answers to questions regarding their contexts. This forms the logic of content-analysis designs and they are justifiable, not only according to the accepted standards of scientific data processing, but also in terms of the context in which the text must be analysed.

5.1 Website-content analysis

Content analysis allows for an unobtrusive appraisal of various forms of communication (Kolbe & Burnett, 1991:244). It furthermore allows the researcher to assess the effects of environmental variables and to source the characteristics of message content. Content analysis moreover provides an empirical point of departure for the generation of new research evidence on the nature and effect of specific communications – as is attempted in this research project – by analysing the websites of the selected funeral homes.

Because content analysis can be utilised to examine any piece of writing or recorded communication, it is used in a large number of communication-research disciplines, among which are marketing and its media-related fields, such as digital communications (Palmquist, s.a.). Content analysis, as a result of its unobtrusive techniques, allows researchers to analyse unstructured data from the perspective of the communicative roles the variables play in the reality of the data sources (Krippendorff, 2013:49).

In relation to websites, content describes the information provided on a website (Hern, 2009:44). However, content-analysis research in respect of websites is still in its infancy.

Simmons et al. (2011:535) note that, despite the existing literature, there have been calls for a closer association between Internet-adoption research and the adoption outcomes related to business processes and growth. The role of marketing has moreover still to be adequately positioned and explained in relation to Internet adoption.

5.2 The coding of website content

In quantitative content analysis, the coding process is determined *a priori* – i.e. it is done before the coding begins (Neuendorf, 2002:11). The coding process involves converting the content that is researched into a format that is suitable for analysis. The recording of data takes place when observers, readers or analysts interpret what is seen, read or found, and then relate their experiences in terms of an analysis (Du Plooy, 2009:17; Holtzhausen, 2010:175; Krippendorff, 2013:127–128; Muehlenhaus, 2011:13; White & Marsh, 2006:31).

Coding (also referred to as ‘rating’) is the term used by content analysts when the process of recording is carried out in accordance with the coding variables. Those who conduct the recording or coding process are referred to as coders (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013:149).

For a content-analysis study, an efficient code book is developed in order to obtain clear, distinct descriptions of all the variables being considered. With a view to achieving the foregoing, the categories described in the code book must be represented in the coding forms that the coders will be using to code the variables (Holtzhausen, 2010:177). The code book corresponds to a coding form, which provides spaces for recording the codes for all the variables measured (Neuendorf, 2002:132). The code book, together with the coding form, serve as a protocol for the analysed content.

A comprehensive code book and corresponding coding form (refer to Annexure A) was created for the coding purposes of this study. Apart from evaluating the variables, the coders for both the pilot study and the final study were required to provide additional information on the coding form. The information that was required was listed at the beginning of the coding form under Section 1: Demographic data.

The information sought in this section was required for record-keeping purposes. It related to

- the number of the funeral home as it appears on the master list of funeral homes to be coded so as to ensure consistency with the master list;
- the funeral home’s name and website address as it appears on the master list of funeral homes to be coded so as to ensure consistency with the master list; and
- the date and the time of coding, which is important to note on the coding form, since websites are continuously evolving media. Should the study be replicated, and the same data not be found, updates subsequent to this coding should be established on a timeline; and
- the coder’s name and surname, for reference purposes.

5.3 The objectives of the study

The primary objective of the study was to evaluate the websites of members of the National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA) of South Africa. For the purpose of this study, the criteria extracted from the study conducted by Selim were divided into subsets of criteria. The subdivision was done according to the variables listed in the literature pertaining to the effectiveness of a website. When evaluating the effectiveness of a website, several authors list accessibility, usability and searchability as the most important contributing aspects to the success of a website (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2012:386–389; Odom & Habermann, 2013:212; Ryan & Jones, 2012:40–41; Stokes, 2011:88). *Accessibility* refers to the barriers that might prevent users from accessing a website. *Usability* essentially refers to the design element of the website intended to enable users to complete any tasks on the website with ease, while *searchability* refers to how easily the website can be found using a search engine on the Internet.

The secondary objectives were identified in accordance with the information gathered from the existing literature discussed above. These were:

- To determine the accessibility and visibility of each website
- To assess each of the websites in terms of
 - the contact information provided on the website; and
 - the ease of navigability of the website.

The variables that were important in terms of the objectives included:

- The existence of the website that could be traced by means of a basic Google Chrome search
- Accessibility to the website from the Google Chrome search engine results page (SERP)
- Navigation within the website, in order to gain information on the funeral home and the services provided
- The contact and location information of the funeral home

5.4 Sampling

Daniel (2012:1) defines sampling as “the selection of a subset of a population for inclusion into a study”. For sampling to be effective rather than merely efficient, informed knowledge of the characteristics of each data source is required. The same statistical sampling rules applied in survey research would serve to guarantee the statistical relationship between the population and the sampled coded data in content analysis (Franzosi, 2009:556). While sampling may therefore be particularly appealing in respect of content analysis, it could be an expensive, labour-intensive methodology. Figure 2 summarises the sampling delimitation of this study.

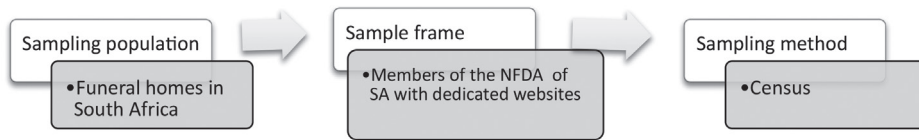


Figure 2: The sample delimitation of the study

A sampling frame is a list used to define a researcher’s population of interest (Currivan, 2012). The sampling frame defines a set of elements from which a researcher can select a sample of the target population. Bradley (2010:154) simplifies the definition of a sample frame by stating that a sample frame should mirror the population of interest in summary form.

The sample frame of this study comprises the members of the NFDA. The NFDA was selected for this study since its members represent all of South Africa and not only a particular component of the country’s population, thereby “mirroring the population of interest in summarised form”.

For the purpose of this study, Google Chrome was used as a search engine to determine which of the members of the NFDA had dedicated websites. In order to ensure the consistent use of technological applications in the study, Google Chrome was also used as the default web browser when the data for the study were collected. Thus, for both the pilot study and the final study, it was required that Google Chrome be used as the default browser.

It was imperative that coders use the same browser, because the interface might be displayed differently when using different browsers (Neuendorf, 2002:137). If this were to occur, it could influence the coding of the variables. The reason for using Google Chrome as the default search engine was that it had globally become the most frequently used and most stable search engine across the globe (Soames, 2012).

Several Internet searches were conducted to find members of the NFDA who had dedicated websites. In addition to word searches on Google Chrome, sources such as www.searchengine.co.za were also consulted. Searchengine.co.za is an online search site that minimises the search option to South Africa only. However, if the funeral home is not registered on a website such as Searchengine.co.za, it will not reflect when a keyword search is conducted. Word searches on Google Chrome using words such as ‘funeral homes’, ‘funeral parlours’ and ‘funeral directors’ listed a number of funeral home websites on the Google Chrome SERP. The Google Chrome SERP, however, not only reflected the members of the NFDA, but funeral homes worldwide.

A more focussed approach was subsequently followed to ensure that every member of the NFDA with a dedicated website would be included in the sample. A Google Chrome word search was therefore conducted by entering the name of each of the funeral homes as listed on the NFDA Member Directory. Only 20 of the 191 (10.47%) members listed on the NFDA in South Africa were found to have dedicated websites.

Taking into account that this is a very small part of the funeral-home population, the members with dedicated websites were flagged and each of those funeral homes that had dedicated websites was then used to collect the data required for this study. In effect, this meant that a census of the targeted population was conducted. Based on the complete NFDA member list, members with dedicated websites were identified. The selection can thus be argued from both a population-census perspective and a sampling-frame perspective.

Only certain members of the NFDA have dedicated websites. Thus, from both the population and the sampling-frame perspectives, the units of analysis for this study constitute censuses. Waters (2008:71) argues that, in some instances, it could be difficult to collect data even when the researcher has a sampling frame. If the population is small and the results are important, it is worth conducting a census to collect the data from every member of the population.

6. FINDINGS

Descriptive statistics are used to summarise and describe the data obtained for a descriptive study (Shiu, Hair, Bush & Ortinau, 2009:513), their purpose being to summarise and describe the data obtained from a sample of the respondents or, as in the present study, a census. Measures of two kinds are used to describe the data, namely measures of central tendency and measures of dispersion (Hair, Wolfinbarger, Bush & Ortinau, 2010:249). The measures of central tendency are depicted in Figure 3.

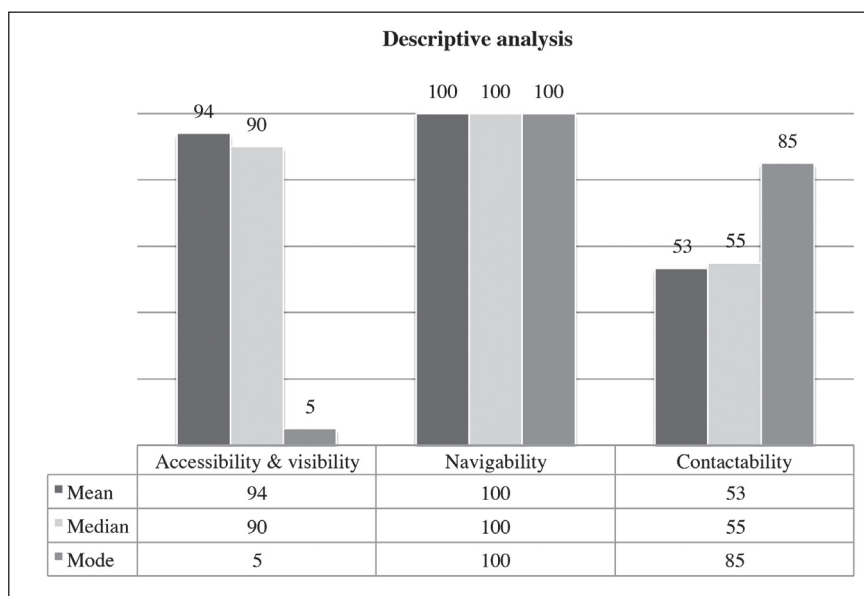


Figure 3: Descriptive analysis

6.1 Accessibility and visibility

Website accessibility and visibility both refer to the process of conducting a search for the funeral home on Google Chrome. The primary aspects evaluated in this objective were to assess whether a funeral home’s name appeared at the top of the search engine results page (SERP) when this was entered into the Google Chrome search option and whether the website could be accessed when the user had clicked on the title tag. The title tag refers to the name of the funeral home that is displayed on the SERP in blue lettering.

Additional aspects evaluated in relation to accessibility and visibility included the presence of the registration requirements to gain access to the websites, whether registration fees were required to gain access to the websites and whether the user had to complete an application form to gain access to the website. A final evaluation assessed whether plug-ins were required for the website to function optimally. The percentage summaries of the findings in respect of the accessibility and visibility objective are presented in Figure 4.

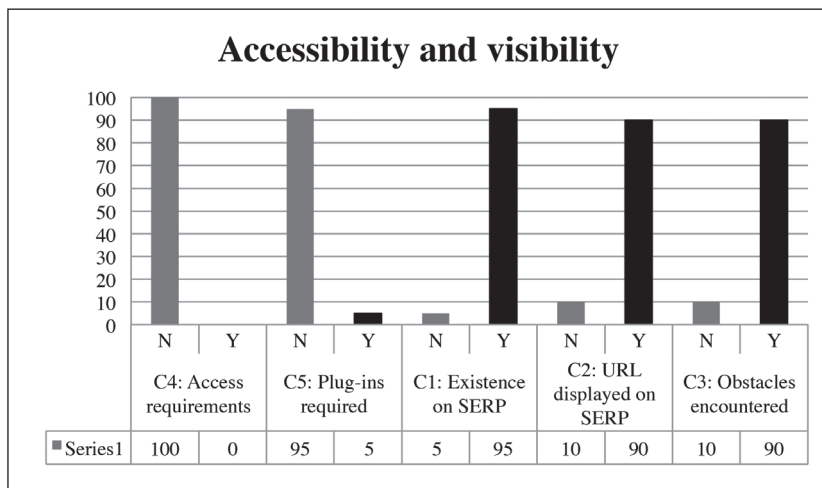


Figure 4: Accessibility and visibility

The accessibility and visibility variable of the evaluated websites produced an overall score of 94%. Figure 4 depicts that 95% ($\frac{19}{N}$) of the websites were reflected at the top of the Google Chrome SERP when the name of the funeral home was typed in the search bar (C1)¹. A total of 90% ($\frac{18}{N}$) of the URLs relating to the funeral homes was displayed under the title tags on the SERP (C2). In addition, 90% ($\frac{18}{N}$) of the websites that were visible on the SERP could be accessed without any obstacles (C3).

¹ C refers to the criterion number as it is listed on the coding form. The criteria numbers are listed throughout the discussion of the data section so as to enhance ease of reference.

None of the websites evaluated (100% ($\frac{20}{N}$)) required any additional processes, such as completing a registration process or owed registration fees to gain access to the website; neither was the completion of any other forms required to gain access to the funeral homes' websites (C4). Only 5% ($\frac{1}{N}$) of the websites needed a plug-in for the website to function optimally (C5). In both instances, a negative score (0=No) in respect of these variables does not indicate a negative result. It is merely an indication that the user is able to access the websites from the SERP without any additional obstacles.

The scores of these variables were converted to positive scores (0=Yes), in order to reflect a positive value for the results of these variables.

The overall score of the variables analysed for this objective indicates that the user would experience a 94% success rate when searching for and accessing the websites of the evaluated funeral homes. The fact that the user does not need to complete additional forms or have to install a plug-in to gain access to the website further contributes to the ease of access (accessibility) of the analysed websites.

6.2 Navigability

The navigability variable evaluated the user's ability to move with ease between the different pages of the website. This required the presence of fully functional navigation tabs on the website. The results of the navigability criteria are depicted in Figure 5.

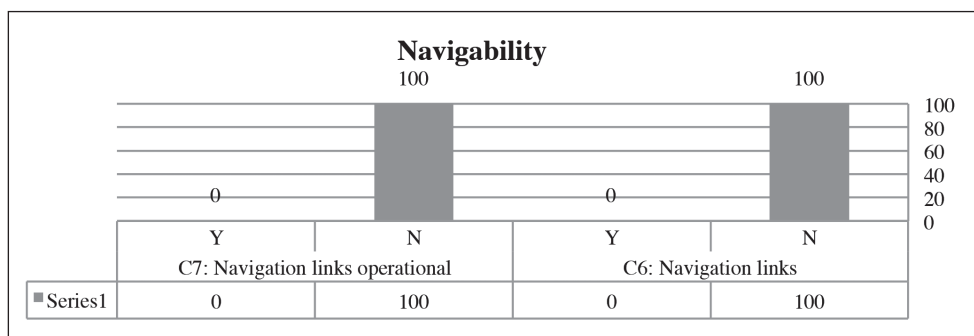


Figure 5: Navigability

All the websites evaluated to assess their navigability indicated a 100% ($\frac{20}{N}$) presence of navigation links (C6). The second step in the evaluation process was assessing whether the navigation links on the websites were operational. Again, the evaluated websites produced a 100% ($\frac{20}{N}$) score. This is an indication that all the navigation links on the websites were operational and that the user could browse between the different web pages on the website with ease.

6.3 Contactability

This objective evaluated whether contact information was provided on the various websites. This resulted in the use of the term *contactability*. The variables evaluated in relation to this objective included the presence of a telephone number, the name and surname of the contact person, an email address and a contact form on the website of the funeral home. Additional factors, such as the presence of the physical address of the particular funeral home on the website, written directions to the funeral home, GPS co-ordinates and an interactive map could also be considered as ‘contactable’ information. Figure 6 reflects the details of the results of the contactability evaluation.

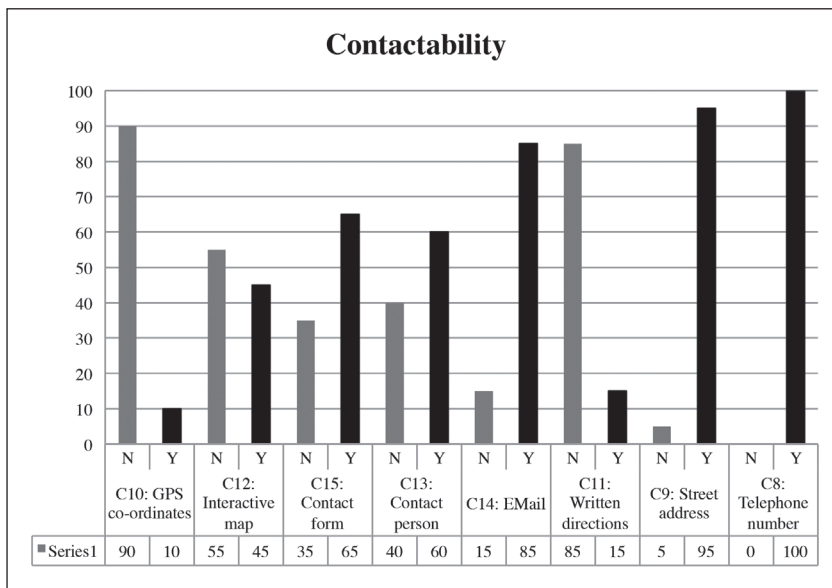


Figure 6: Contactability

The contactability of the websites delivered a 53% overall result. The highest scoring criteria were the existence of telephone numbers, physical street addresses and the presence of an email address.

A 100% ($\frac{20}{N}$) of the evaluated websites contained telephone numbers by means of which the funeral home could be contacted 24 hours a day (C8). A total of 95% ($\frac{19}{N}$) of the websites provided the physical street addresses of the funeral homes on their websites (C9), while 85% ($\frac{17}{N}$) of the websites provided written directions to funeral homes (C11). As many as 85% ($\frac{17}{N}$) of the websites contained email addresses as an additional contact option (C14).

These criteria indicate that the user should be able to contact the funeral home either by telephone or email or be able to locate the funeral home by using the written directions provided on the websites. This resulted in an average of 91% contactability in relation to these criteria.

For the remainder of the criteria evaluated, 60% ($\frac{12}{N}$) of the websites provided the name and/or surname of a contact person at the funeral home (C13). A total of 65% ($\frac{13}{N}$) of the websites provided a contact-form option on the website itself from which the user could contact the funeral home should any additional information (C15) be required.

While only 45% ($\frac{9}{N}$) of the websites provided interactive maps (such as Google Maps) to the premises of the funeral home on their websites, only 10% ($\frac{2}{N}$) of the funeral homes provided GPS co-ordinates in addition to the physical addresses on their websites.

7. DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

7.1 Accessibility and visibility

The variables that were evaluated in relation to this objective related to the visibility of the websites' links on the Google Chrome SERP. Additional variables evaluated the accessibility of the websites from the SERP to the actual funeral-home websites, which indicated how easy it would be for the user to access the website once a Google Chrome search had been conducted.

The accessibility and visibility variables achieved an overall score of 94%. The majority of the websites (95%) reflected on the SERP when a search was conducted with the Google Chrome search engine to locate the funeral home online. As many as 90% of the websites' URLs depicted the correct names of the various funeral homes. Only 10% of the evaluated websites did not open directly to the website of the funeral home when the link on the SERP was selected.

The lower score overall of the objective was attributable to the high negative scores of two of the variables evaluated, namely whether there were any additional requirements to access the websites and whether any additional plug-ins were required for the website to operate optimally.

From a managerial perspective, this indicates a positive result. Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2012:490–491) state that it is vital for any business to generate quality visitors to a website. Users (searchers) use search engines – such as Google Chrome – to find more information regarding the business in the business's website by appending qualifiers like a product name to the brand name or the site name. Taking into account the user's ability to access the funeral homes' websites from the SERP, the overall results for this objective indicate a 94%

possibility that a user, in order to obtain more information on the funeral home – would be able to proceed from the SERP to the actual website of the funeral home in question.

7.2 Navigability

Swanepoel and Bothma (2013:52) define a website's navigation as "the system that allows the user to move (navigate) through a website". The ease of navigability of a website relates directly to the accessibility of the website. Once the user has accessed the website, the user must be able to navigate effortlessly between the different options displayed on the website with a view to gaining as much information as is needed. The navigability of the websites evaluated delivered a 100% result for both the variables evaluated, thereby indicating firstly, that all the websites evaluated contained navigation links, and, secondly, that the coders were able to navigate with ease between the different navigation options on the websites.

From a managerial perspective, this indicates that because of the ease of navigation, the user would, without any difficulty, be able to find more information on the funeral homes and its products, and on the services offered.

7.3 Contactability

The contactability component of the research project relates to different alternative contact options present on the websites of the funeral homes. These contact options are provided to users should they wish to contact the funeral home itself. According to Swanepoel and Bothma (2013:32), organisations pay a great deal of attention to optimising conversations between website users and the organisation. The authors recommend that organisations should provide additional contact details on their websites – over and above online enquiry forms – in order to encourage extended communication between consumers and organisations.

This factor extends even further in the case of a funeral home: users might have to call a funeral home to remove the bodies of deceased persons and, in the days leading up to the funeral, might need to visit the funeral-home premises in order to finalise funeral arrangements.

The contactability objective in the present study achieved an overall score of 53%. The majority of the evaluated websites contained telephone numbers (100%), a physical street address (95%) and an email address (85%). These scores indicate that users would be able to call the funeral home when needed, be able to locate the funeral home and be able to communicate with funeral homes via email. The telephone numbers listed on the websites included Telkom landline numbers, cellphone numbers and/or toll-free numbers.

The type of telephone numbers that were provided on the funeral-homes websites differed from funeral home to funeral home. The assessment here was not to evaluate which type of telephone number was provided on a website, but rather whether a telephone number was provided from which the funeral home could be contacted.

In terms of the other criteria evaluated as regards contactability, 60% of the websites provided the names and surnames of contact persons at the funeral homes and 65% of the websites provided the contact-form option on the website itself from which the user could contact the funeral home. Although these percentages provided a lower score, a factor such as a toll-free number should also be taken into account. It is often difficult to list the name of a person who would be answering a toll-free number, especially in the instances of the corporate funeral homes where the call is most likely to be answered by a call-centre agent.

Another factor that might contribute to the absence of a contact person's name on the website is the fact that different employees of the funeral home could be on duty at different times or after hours. The funeral home might therefore list a roaming cellphone number on their website, which would be rotated between the employees on duty after hours.

Only 45% of the websites contained GPS co-ordinates to the physical locations of funeral homes and only 10% of the websites contained interactive maps. From a digital perspective, a lack of interactive maps on websites poses a fundamental managerial problem to the user in terms of being unable to locate a specific funeral home's premises. Google Maps have become an integral part of many business' online location identifiers. Williams and Crawford (2012:55) note that Google Maps have become the predominant location-based search tool for online users who want to locate a specific location.

Google Maps comprise an application that communicates from the Google server to the businesses' websites, constructing an embedded map into a web page that is returned to the user. It is a medium that is an effective and useful means of conveying and analysing spatial information in the form of maps (Petersen, 2008:9–10). According to Petersen, "hundreds of millions of map users" have been introduced to interactive maps through the Internet since its inception.

The use of Google Maps provides a very efficient mechanism to deliver digital cartographic information to Internet users with a fast response time and user-friendly interaction (Hu & Dai, 2013:107). It is noteworthy that the majority of the websites did not contain the interactive map feature.

The inclusion of an embedded, interactive map of the location of the funeral home could be to the benefit of both the users and the funeral homes. The inclusion of an interactive map and/or GPS co-ordinates to the physical location of the funeral home could add to the ease of locating the funeral home online without having to leave the website of the funeral home and consult a different website for directions to the funeral home or, alternatively, to have to consult a printed map.

8. CONCLUSIONS

The study has focused on the current content of NAFDA websites. Although the results of this study only offer evidence relating to the websites at the time of data collection, the study was conducted in an attempt to provide marketers with information on the digital alternative to the marketing of an unsought service (the funeral industry).

It is the researcher's opinion that the funeral industry provides plenty of opportunities for further research. Ongoing research of the digital marketing of the funeral industry could yield many new and innovative approaches to the services of an industry that largely provides unsought services.

Through continuous research, a comprehensive profile of the consumer of an unsought service – such as those provided by a funeral home – could be compiled. This, in turn, could result in the acquisition of valuable information that could be applied in the digital marketing strategies for unsought services. Aspects such as the type of technology used by the consumer, the devices used to access the Internet and the cultural factors that influence how consumers approach funerals, could provide additional insights into the profiles of the online users of funeral-home websites.

In addition, by pursuing the digital marketing of funeral homes, both marketers and consumers' attitudes to the industry may be positively influenced. Although the aspects of death and dying, and the aftercare of the deceased remain a dismal prospect to consumers, the funeral service remains an unsought service to which all consumers must eventually subscribe.

By creating a positive online experience for the consumer, the funeral industry could enhance its competitive positioning within the market. It is also my opinion that by creating a positive online experience of the funeral industry, the perceptions of consumers and marketers alike can be positively influenced in respect of what is currently perceived to be a "dismal trade".

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ANNEXURE A: FUNERAL WEBSITE CODING FORM

Funeral website coding form			
Section 1: Demographical data			
Number:			
Funeral home:			
URL:			
Date of coding:		Time of coding:	
Coder:			
Section 2: Content analysis of the website			
Objective	Criteria	Yes (1)	No (0)
Accessibility and visibility	C1. Is the <u>existence of the website</u> made known through the Google Chrome <u>search engine</u> ?		
	C2. Is the <u>web address (URL) of the funeral home displayed below the name of the funeral home</u> on the search result page of Google Chrome?		
	C3. Can the website be <u>accessed publicly without any obstacles</u> ?		
	C4. Are any <u>fees, registration or application forms required to access</u> the website?		
	C5. Does the website <u>need plug-ins for full functionality</u> ?		
Navigability	C6. Does the website <u>contain navigation links</u> ?		
	C7. Are <u>navigation links</u> provided <u>to and from all pages on the website</u> ?		
Contactability	C8. Does the website provide a <u>telephone number</u> on which the funeral home can be contacted?		
	C9. Does the website provide the <u>physical street address</u> of the funeral home?		
	C10. Does the website provide <u>GPS co-ordinates</u> to the physical location of the funeral home?		
	C11. Does the website provide written <u>directions to the physical location</u> of the funeral home?		
	C12. Does the website provide an <u>interactive map</u> to the physical location of the funeral home?		
	C13. Does the website provide a <u>name and/or surname of a contact person</u> at the funeral home?		
	C14. Does the website provide an <u>email address at which</u> the funeral home can be contacted?		
	C15. Does the website provide a <u>contact form</u> through which the user is able to submit a written enquiry to the funeral home?		