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Webcasts allow more mourners to watch funerals

By BILL GLAUBER
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When it comes to funerals, James Augustine is a traditionalist.

Advertisement Honor the deceased, comfort the grieving family and gather together as a community.

But what if every relative can't make the funeral? What if illness or a missed flight leaves a loved one, or friend, stranded hundreds of miles away?

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The "death care industry" has come up with another way to bring together mourners — it's called the funeral Webcast.

In February, Augustine's family was able to gather at a chapel at Krause Funeral Home in Milwaukee, and in a few cases, behind laptops and personal computers in other cities, to witness the funeral of his wife's sister.

"I believe very strongly in the value of the funeral and of people being able to attend the funeral for their own benefit as well as to give support to the family members," says Augustine, mortuary science instructor at Milwaukee Area Technical College. "I thought it was a very positive, very enlightening experience."

Over the past few years, Webcasts have been used by funeral homes from Boston to Belfast, even in Waupaca.

In the Milwaukee area, Krause Funeral Home began using the technology late last year, and the firm is handling two Webcasts a week, according to company President Mark J. Krause.

"There is comfort on both sides of the camera," Krause says.

With a camera, a computer, specialized software and a high-speed hook-up to the Internet, funeral homes can now bring funerals right to computer desktops.

Access to the Webcast is limited to those who have a password.

For the February funeral of Augustine's sister-in-law, Mary Grace Kupper, a nephew was able to watch the funeral while in New York, while Kupper's brother watched from his home in California.

Mike Kupper, a former sports reporter and editor for the Milwaukee Journal and the Los Angeles Times, couldn't travel to the funeral because of his wife's illness.

He says he clicked on an Internet link to the funeral, typed in a password and then watched as video appeared on his computer screen.

"I could see my sons, sister, her husband, a lot of people I knew," he says. "I could see them chatting before the service."

And then, he watched and heard the service.

"It was not quite as clear as watching TV because it was through an e-mail on a small laptop," he says. "I was very pleased and happy with it. I thought, goodness, this is almost as good as being there."

An emerging trend

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He likens live streaming of funerals to the early days of television. As technology improves, he says, funeral Webcasts will become much more common.

"I would think there would be a pretty nice market for this, for funerals held a great distance away and you can't get there," he says. "As soon as people learn this is an option, I'm sure they'll make it better and more easily available."

Event by Wire Inc., a California firm, developed the system used by Krause, as well as nearly 100 other funeral homes in 17 states and Canada.

The firm's founder, Dan Grumley, says he discovered a potential need for his service after the death of his father 2 1/2 years ago. Grumley, a former executive with a software company, says he arrived in Los Angeles to handle the funeral arrangements and was eager to know if the funeral could be sent out over the Internet so that his far-flung family could be linked to the event.

He says he explained his idea to one funeral director, who responded, "Oh, you need George."

Grumley says he figured "George" was a software program. Instead, it was a guy named George, a videographer who could tape the event but who was unable to provide a Webcast.

At the time, there were a few mom-and-pop operators in the field, he says, as well as some individual funeral homes.

"I knew there was a problem that needed a solution," he says.

Grumley's firm provides the hardware — camera, wireless microphone and computer — as well as the software to Webcast the funerals. He says funeral homes are charged "as little as \$495 a month" for the service.

Krause Funeral Home charges clients \$195 for Webcasts, which can be received by up to 25 separate mourners.

"I want people to use it," Krause says.

Krause says that initially clergy expressed concerns that Webcasts "would get people to stop coming to funerals."

Instead, he says, the technology can actually enhance the funeral, bring together families, if only online.

"This doesn't replace people coming to the funeral," he says. "It allows people who can't be there to participate. It makes that even have more feeling and value."

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