

South Florida Hospital News

October 2009

The Doug Williams Group Helps Catholic Health Services Create the “Ritz Carlton of Cemeteries”

by John Fries

Providing excellent customer service and keeping employees happy are key factors when it comes to achieving success in business. Makes sense in a hospital or corporate environment, right? But how about in an organization that provides cemetery services? Now, that’s the type of workplace where employees have to be ultra-sensitive to the needs of their customers and everything has to be just right, especially in cases where you might only have minutes to make a good impression.

About a year-and-a-half ago, after a long history of working with Catholic Health Services (CHS) on a range of initiatives related to customer satisfaction in their patient and residential care areas, The Doug Williams Group was called upon to help increase customer and employee satisfaction at Catholic Cemeteries; CHS’ cemetery division. Catholic Cemeteries includes two cemeteries—Our Lady of Mercy in Miami and Our Lady Queen of Heaven in North Fort Lauderdale. Both were consecrated in 1959 to provide Roman Catholics in South Florida with services that include burial, offering Remembrance Masses, and cremation, on both a pre-need and at-need basis.

Catholic Cemeteries’ *Vision* is succinct; “To provide a sacred place and peaceful atmosphere that reflects the presence of God’s love. Our community will be served with compassion, dignity and respect.” Its *Mission* is “To bury our dead, comfort the sorrowful, and give hope in the Resurrection, continuing our journey of faith.”

The *Core Values* of Catholic Cemeteries are: Dignity, Commitment, Excellence, and Stewardship, which are the foundation of their *Service Excellence Behaviors*, which clearly describe what is expected of all employees:

- Exhibit a professional and respectful image at all times (attire, vocabulary, and positive interactions).
- Initiate interactions with eye contact, a positive attitude, a professional introduction, and a smile.
- Establish eye contact, listen carefully, and confidently acknowledge that you understand the customer’s needs and expectations. Review your understanding of the customer’s needs and expectations with them.
- Explain procedures in simple language, avoiding jargon.
- Respond promptly to requests or concerns from customers.
- Acknowledge, apologize for, and take responsibility to research, document, and resolve service failures.
- Confidential information or organizational issues should be discussed only with concerned parties, in private.

- Acknowledge and respect the cultural differences (values and behaviors) of others.
- Respond positively when asked to do something that is outside of your role.

How Catholic Cemeteries learned to become highly effective at living these values and behaviors is where The Doug Williams Group comes in, according to Fernando Pimentel, Executive Director of Catholic Cemeteries. A veteran of cemetery administration with more than 20 years of experience, Pimentel first contacted The Doug Williams Group in 2008 when the need arose to develop a job satisfaction program for Catholic Cemeteries' 160 employees.

The Doug Williams Group is a results-oriented professional services firm that specializes in all aspects of performance improvement. The firm works with all industries, helping its clients improve customer satisfaction, increase employee satisfaction and increase profitability. "I knew they would be able to help us, and they did," says Pimentel.

"Our business," he adds, "comes from referrals, both from families we've served and funeral directors who know the quality of the services we provide. We want to maintain the reputation we've earned in this region, so it was important to look at how we work from the inside."

Pimentel says The Doug Williams Group closely evaluated employee performance and satisfaction. "They developed a very specific set of questions. Then, they conducted in-depth interviews with 90 employees, asking such questions as where they saw themselves and the organization in the future. This process elicited a number of interesting responses. Some employees believed that top management needed to be better trained in fundamental employee relations practices, such as how to treat employees. Some said that management should be more sensitive to employee issues. Others felt that Catholic Cemeteries needed a Mission statement."

Following the employee interviews, The Doug Williams Group helped Catholic Cemeteries create an employee task force. This group works with The Doug Williams Group on an ongoing basis to develop and implement initiatives aimed at improving employee satisfaction, while finding ways to ensure that employees live, on a daily basis, the organization's vision, mission, core values, and Service Excellence Behaviors.

One initiative that's been successfully implemented was inspired by the Ritz-Carlton hotel chain's approach to excellent customer service and, unofficially, led some to eventually refer to Catholic Cemeteries as "the Ritz-Carlton of cemeteries." The "Ask Me" program dictates that employees know exactly what the organization's mission and vision are, simply because they can be asked about it at any given time by fellow employees.

"Knowing the answers gets a star affixed to the employee's name badge," says Pimentel. "Knowing the answers on a continual basis means earning more stars and the opportunity to be recognized as a Most Valuable Employee. Employees can also nominate their

fellow employees for MVE recognition.” He adds that senior management also plays a role in the person of Paul Johnson, CEO of CHS, who has launched the “PJ Program,” through which he asks random employees mission and vision-related questions when he encounters them in the workplace.

As a valued advisor and active participant in these and other CHS initiatives, The Doug Williams Group compiles a monthly Net Promoter Score that helps Catholic Cemeteries track customer satisfaction among both pre-need and at-need audiences.

“A representative of The Doug Williams Group calls each pre-need customer by telephone after he or she has been served, and simply asks if they would recommend our services to their friends and family members,” says Pimentel. “For at-need customers, a letter is sent that asks the same question. Each month, the respondents are separated into two groups: the promoters—who would recommend Catholic Cemeteries—and the detractors—who would not recommend us. The Net Promoter score is the percentage difference between the two groups.” **Pimentel notes that Catholic Cemeteries consistently scores a whopping 100 percent.**

Pimentel is thrilled with the initiatives that are underway and the success they’re enjoying. “In our industry, we need to be conscious of the little things and provide excellent service,” he says. “The Doug Williams Group is expert at getting the information that’s needed and developing programs that fulfill the needs of our employees and, in turn, our customers. The most important question we can ask our customers is ‘would you recommend us?’” And they’re saying that they definitely would.”

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