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NFDA NATIONAL FUNERAL DIRECTORS ASSOCIATION

IN THIS ISSUE

NFDA First Look: 2026 *Consumer Awareness and Preferences Study*

By Mike Kopczynski and Edward J. Defort

Editor's note: This week's newsletter begins our four-part series on the findings of the 2026 NFDA Consumer Awareness and Preferences Study. *We start here with an overview of the results. In the next three editions, we will present the various sections, accompanied by in-depth analysis and commentary.*

BROOKFIELD, WISCONSIN – No matter how hard we try to stay engaged with the public at large, there is a gap between what we think the public wants and what they actually want. But there always has been one simple approach that takes the guesswork out of the process, and that is to ask.

So, with the tactic of "just ask them" in mind, each year, NFDA presents its *Consumer Awareness and Preferences Study* to evaluate what the general public thinks about funerals and memorialization. And with each annual survey comes another layer of statistical significance and an increased ability to differentiate between real trends and aberrations. Over the past 15 years, the study has tracked changing attitudes, expectations and behaviors, all of which provide insight into what families value and how funeral professionals can best support them.

Generally, these survey results point to areas in which the public is in need of education and guidance on death, ceremony and memorialization by the experts, i.e., funeral directors.

Although there is a margin of error in any survey, with 15 years of remarkably consistent data, we can recognize trends.

As always, the study's main objectives remain the same:

- Gauge consumer awareness and perceptions of funerals and funeral services to help NFDA members improve the quality of services they provide to families
- Track changes in consumer awareness and preferences year over year
- Learn more about consumer attitudes toward new trends in funeral service as well as their awareness of NFDA initiatives
- Compare results to previous NFDA *Consumer Awareness and Preferences Study* results when possible

METHODOLOGY

This year's study was conducted March 4-6. Survey invitations were emailed to an online consumer panel of Americans who are 40 or older. This sampling method was designed to generate a good representation of various racial/ethnic groups:

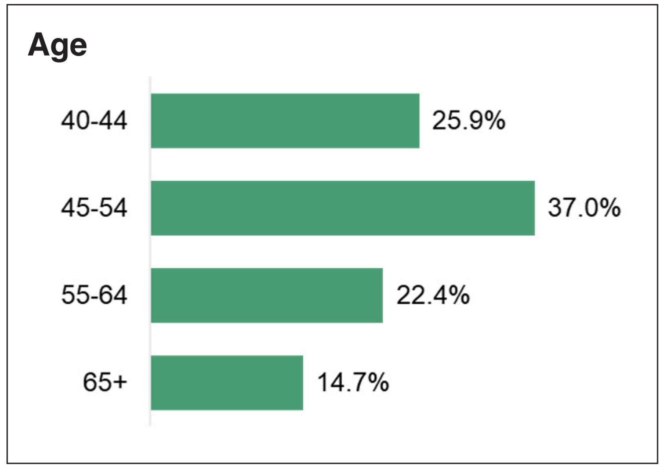
- 861 surveys obtained from the general population (primarily white)
- 107 surveys obtained from the Black/African American population
- 106 surveys obtained from the Asian population
- 107 surveys obtained from the Hispanic/Latino population
- 1,181 total completed surveys obtained

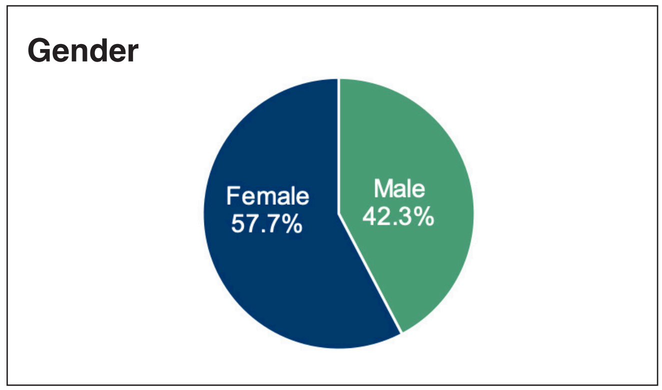
Results for all respondents are projectable within a ±2.8% margin of error at a 95% confidence level. Please note that consumers who participate in online panels are typically higher-than-average internet users with higher income and education levels than the general population.

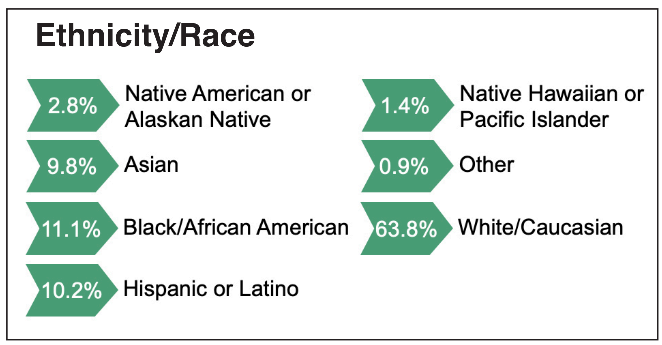
THE OVERVIEW

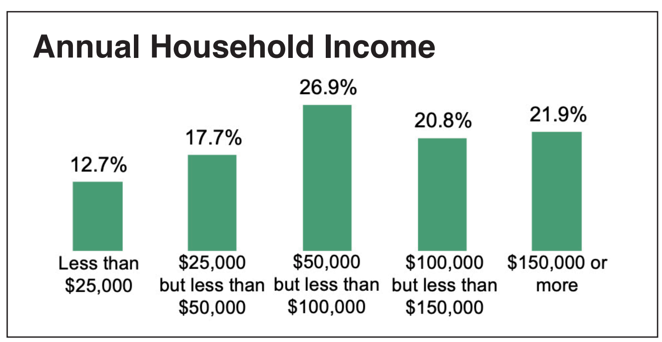
As it has in the past, NFDA queried consumers on a wide variety of topics, including funeral home shopping and selection, funeral arranging, social media, religion, clergy and celebrants, green funerals, preneed, cremation, and memorialization.

The 2026 findings reflect a consumer landscape that is simultaneously evolving and stabilizing, one









that is being shaped by rising digital fluency and an enduring reliance on professional guidance. Consumers are increasingly digitally engaged and transparency-driven; they expect easy access to information across multiple channels, including funeral home websites and third-party platforms. Redefining how families research, compare and initiate funeral arrangements, this shift comes with a greater emphasis on price visibility, online content and peer-informed decision-making. At the same time, expectations surrounding clarity and accessibility are rising, signaling that consumers no longer view digital information as supplemental but as core to the planning experience.

Despite this shift toward self-directed research and comparison, the role of the funeral director remains central and highly trusted. Consumers continue to rely on professionals for emotional support, logistical coordination and decision-making guidance, particularly in moments of high vulnerability. In addition, there is a growing demand for personalized, flexible and hybrid options, including nontraditional venues, celebrant-led services and digital-participation options such as livestreaming. Underpinning these changes is a continued belief in the fundamental importance of funerals, which remain widely regarded as essential for grief support, commemoration and closure.

Overall, consumers are becoming more informed, selective and digitally empowered, yet they consistently return to funeral professionals at key decision points. This tendency reinforces a model where technology expands choice but humans help guide it.

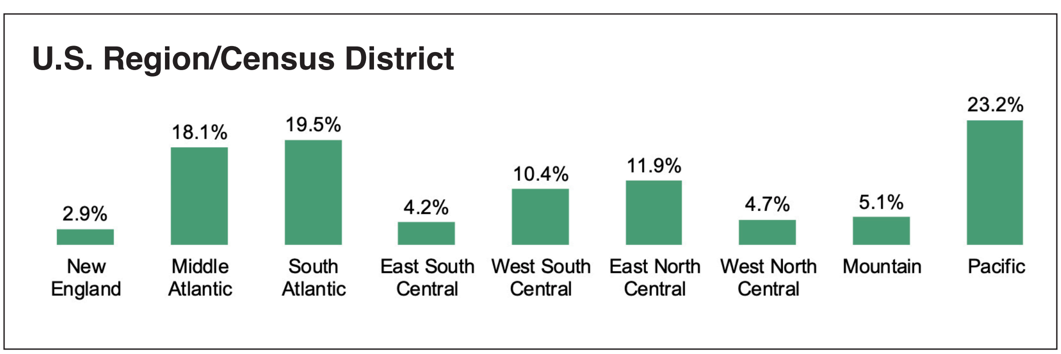
While reading through the numbers, keep in mind the identities of the respondents. Compared with previous years' studies, the 2026 consumer study reflects several demographic shifts. Overall, participants skewed younger, with more respondents ages 40 to 44 and fewer respondents older than 65. More women (and, conversely, fewer men) participated in 2026. Participation by those from higher-income households increased, and Christian respondents were more common than those belonging to other faith groups. Geographically, the sample had higher concentrations in western and mid-Atlantic regions than in prior years.

Diving deeper into demographics, the 2026 sample was broadly representative and skewed toward a younger demographic compared with last year's; however, it was on par with the 2024 sample. This year, 25.9% of respondents were between 40 and 44 years old, compared with 19.5% in 2025 and 21.7% in 2024. The majority (53.8%) were between ages 45 and 60, which is slightly higher than the 48.5% from last year and on par with the 53.6% from 2024. Only 20.3% of respondents were 61 or older, which is down from 32.2% in 2025 and 24.8% in 2024.

This year, the survey had slightly more female respondents. Women accounted for 57.7% of respondents, compared with 55.4% last year. Broken down by race, 63.8% of respondents were white, compared with 61% last year; 11.1% were Black/African American, compared with 15%; 10.2% were Hispanic or Latino, compared with 12.4%; 9.8% were Asian, compared with 12.1%; 2.8% were Native American or Alaskan Native, compared with 2.4%;

Religious Preference

4.0%	Buddhist	3.9%	Muslim
66.8%	Christian	16.8%	No Preference
2.0%	Jehovah's Witness	2.0%	Other
2.7%	Jewish	1.8%	Don't know/Refused



and 0.9% identified as "other," compared with 2%.

In terms of religious preference, 66.8% of respondents identified as Christian, which is up from 60.6% last year. Consequently, other groups were less represented. Those with "no preference" accounted for 16.8% of this year's sample, compared with 18.3% of last year's; 4% were Buddhist, compared with 3.3% last year; 3.9% were Muslim, compared with 3.6%; 2.7% were Jewish, compared with 3.7%; 2% were Jehovah's Witness, compared with 1.4%; and 2% identified as "other," compared with 5%.

> Funerals continue to hold strong emotional and cultural significance. More than 86% of consumers agreed that funerals help with the grieving process, and 81.1% considered funerals important for honoring loved ones.

Consumers surveyed in 2026 were geographically diverse. The highest concentration (23.2%) lived in the Pacific, compared with 17.5% last year; 19.5% lived in the South Atlantic, compared with 19.2%; and 18.1% lived in the Middle Atlantic, compared with 15%.

Most significantly, this year's respondents were more affluent than in previous years. Nearly 27% of respondents reported a household income between $50,000 and $100,000, compared with 21.8% last year. What's more, 42.7% reported a household income above $100,000, compared with only 22.7% last year. Correspondingly, 30.4% of this year's group reported earning less than $50,000, compared with 55.4% last year. In terms of how these demographics reshaped the survey results, stay tuned.

THE ROLE AND MEANING OF FUNERAL SERVICES

First, some good news: Funerals continue to hold strong emotional and cultural significance. More than 86% of consumers agreed that funerals help with the grieving process, and 81.1% considered funerals important for honoring loved ones.

The perceived importance of funerals has strengthened over time, with the "very important" response rising to 55.1% from 47.4% in 2025. This reflects a shift toward more firmly held beliefs about the role of funerals in grief support and remembrance.

Attitudes remain consistently positive and increasingly conviction-driven. Overall, attitudes about the role of funerals are deep-rooted.

A growing majority of consumers reported having direct experience with funeral planning (81.0%). Among these respondents, perceptions were overwhelmingly favorable. In fact, 93.6% said the experience met or exceeded their expectations.

Respondents' verbatim feedback highlighted opportunities for improvement in terms of organization, personalization and communication, while acknowledging that many services effectively reflected family wishes and honored loved ones.

RESEARCH AND DISCOVERY

Research is increasingly multisource and digitally influenced. Surpassing even local funeral homes (40.8%), friends and family (54.5%) were cited as the top source for information. Use of funeral home websites (39.2%) and national funeral sites (33.4%, up from just 12.4% in 2024) continues to grow. Meanwhile, reliance on traditional search is declining. Said David Nixon of Nixon Consulting: "The increase in the number of consumers seeking a national consumer website was distressing, as it appears funeral directors are being edged out across many fronts."

Funeral home websites are evolving into multipurpose planning hubs. Consumers are using them for burial options, cremation options, pricing and contact information, signaling a shift toward transactional engagement.

THE ROLE OF PRICING

Pricing discovery is diversifying. There is a declining reliance on local funeral homes (44%, down from 64.3%) and a rising reliance on funeral home websites (43.3%). This reflects the expectation of online transparency.

Although 73.7% reported that pricing is easy to locate online, 57.2% of consumers said they still rely heavily on in-person interaction to make sense of it. This indicates that access alone is not enough. Direct guidance is needed for understanding.

CHOOSING A FUNERAL HOME

Consumers are becoming increasingly selective and comparative, with fewer choosing a funeral home based on a single interaction. Decisions are driven primarily by affordability, service type, relationship and location. Additionally, more than 81% visited a funeral home before making arrangements. This reinforces the importance of direct engagement in final selection.

SERVICE PREFERENCES AND PARTICIPATION

Religious and faith-based elements remain highly significant, with 54.2% rating them as "very important" (up from 44.6%) and 80.5% rating them as at least "somewhat important."

Generally, services are becoming more flexible and personalized. Of this year's sample, 62.1% had attended a nonfaith-led service, and 48.0% were open to celebrants (up from 36.3%). Digital participation is expanding, as well. More than 73% supported streaming.

More than 73% had attended a memorial without the body present. Meanwhile, 48.0% still emphasized the importance of the physical presence of the deceased, underscoring a balance between innovation and tradition.

COMMUNICATION AND OBITUARIES

Communication around death is increasingly multichannel. Phone calls are still the leading communication method (54.9%), but digital platforms, including funeral home websites, national obituary sites, text messaging and social media, are experiencing strong growth. Overall, 77.4% of respondents had published an obituary in or on the following: print newspapers, websites, memorial platforms, funeral homes and social media. This underscores the continued importance of structured public notification, even as communication channels diversify.

Obituaries remain a widely adopted practice. More than 82% said they would publish one. The leading distribution methods are local newspapers (63.5%), newspaper websites (40.9%) and memorial/tribute websites (34.6%).

The funeral director remains central to coordination, guidance and facilitation, even as consumers increasingly access information independently and across various channels.

DISPOSITION PREFERENCES AND EMERGING CHOICES

Cremation and memorialization preferences continue to veer toward greater flexibility and personalization, including celebration-of-life formats and nontraditional memorial settings. This reflects a broader shift toward personal expression and away from standardization.

Motivations for cremation continue to evolve. The most common are convenience (43.3%), cost (34.4%) and sustainability (23.2%).

PREPLANNING AND FINANCIAL PREPARATION

Engagement with end-of-life planning is rising. There has been increased participation in educational events and a growing willingness to engage. Reinforcing the enduring role of funeral professionals as trusted guides and coordinators, three-quarters of respondents said they still would contact a funeral director when planning a service.

Key barriers to engagement among consumers include cost concerns; independence preferences; and, in some cases, emotional, cultural or situational reasons.

Next week, we begin our deep dive into the numbers.

MBJ

Mike Kopczynski is NFDA research manager.
Edward J. Defort is editor of NFDA Publications.

Mental Health in the Workplace

By William E. Ford

BRISTOL, TENNESSEE – In the past three years, our practice has seen a significant increase in workplace mental-health concerns from clients. We will not delve into the many reasons for this unfortunate increase, but we all have family, friends or co-workers who have suffered or are suffering mental-health challenges.

From an employer standpoint, managing mental health within the workplace is rather complicated – in terms of both employment-law compliance and the balance of productivity and concern.

In the past, we have assisted clients with employees who engaged in workplace violence; threatened suicide; completed suicide; experienced a mental breakdown; and shut down completely with co-workers and customers. These are all difficult to address, but our most important recommendation is not to avoid a mental-health issue and hope it goes away.

There are many resources available to those experiencing challenges, including thoughts of suicide. What we feel is potentially lacking, however, is resources for those who have lost a friend, family member or co-worker to suicide. It is very devastating for these individuals, as well. They need assistance as much as the people experiencing mental-health challenges firsthand.

For those who have been affected by mental health or suicide, we strongly recommend *Little Boy Lost: A Story of Hope and Redemption, Set Amidst the Backdrop of a Mother's Suicide.* This is the true story of one boy's heartache and hope while coming of age in small-town Tennessee in the 1970s. Author David Peters thought having a mother who spent months at a time in a psychiatric hospital was normal. Then, on St. Patrick's Day 1974, his world shattered when she completed suicide.

He was left to make sense of his mother's death and other significant family challenges. In the end, Peters discovered that if you look hard enough for the light, even in life's darkest moments, the sun will rise.

Peters hopes his story helps readers learn how to find optimism and healing after family trauma from mental illness and suicide.

Little Boy Lost has been a bestseller three times and has 4.8 stars on Amazon.

We recommend this book for your own use or as a gift for friends, family members or co-workers. It may be a source of much-needed help.

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William E. Ford is president and CEO of SESCO Management Consultants, an NFDA Endorsed Provider for human resources.

The Notebook

SCOTT JENSEN and **TREVOR BROWN**, co-founders of **FIRSTCALL MARKETING**, have published a book on how to become a funeral home that ChatGPT recommends. *Getting More First Calls in the Age of AI: Digital Marketing for Funeral Homes in the World of Google and AI* provides a practical road map for funeral directors looking to grow at-need call volume.

The book, written specifically for funeral professionals, examines both the opportunities and challenges funeral professionals face in today's digital landscape. It includes real examples, data visualizations and actionable strategies that funeral homes can implement regardless of their budget or size.

"We're seeing a divide emerging," said Scott Jensen, co-author. "Funeral homes that understand how families search today are doing quite well. They're capturing more market share than before and generating more calls. Meanwhile, many funeral homes relying solely on traditional approaches are gradually losing ground – not because their service declined but simply because they're not showing up online when families are actively looking."

Data from NFDA consumer surveys shows that the number of families exploring multiple funeral home options increased roughly six times between 2018 and 2023, and the trend shows no signs of slowing, either. This shift extends beyond Google to include rapidly growing AI-powered search tools such as ChatGPT, which now has more than 1 billion regular users.

The book is organized into four practical sections:

Part I: Mastering Google – Understanding Google's search results page and how to appear in the AI Overview, Local Services Ads, paid search ads, the Map Pack and organic listings

Part II: How to Be Recommended by ChatGPT – An AI-adapted "Know, Like, Trust" framework that positions funeral homes for recommendation by ChatGPT and other AI search tools

Part III: Measuring What Matters – Using AI to move beyond vanity metrics to track qualified leads, cost per case, and actual ROI

Part IV: Taking Action – Practical next steps for implementation, whether a funeral home chooses to handle marketing internally, work with an existing partner or explore specialized support

"We wrote this book because hundreds of funeral directors have told us that they feel lost when it comes to ChatGPT, parts of Google and knowing [whether] their marketing is working," said Trevor Brown, co-author. "We've worked with more than 200 funeral homes across the country, and we've seen what works. Our goal was to provide a practical road map that any funeral home can follow to generate more at-need and imminent-need calls."

The book is now available, and the company is offering free copies during this initial release at *FirstCall.marketing/Book*.

FOUNDATION PARTNERS GROUP – one of the nation's leading providers of funeral, cemetery and cremation services – announced the appointment of **JIM EVANGER** as CEO and president.

Evanger succeeds John D. Smith, who led the organization through its recent ownership transition. When making the announcement, Chairman Ray Wallander expressed appreciation for Smith's leadership, commitment and service during an important chapter in the company's growth.

"Foundation Partners has a strong foundation, a talented leadership team and an extraordinary group of professionals serving families every day," Wallander said. "Jim brings extensive operating experience and a proven record of building high-performing, customer-focused organizations. We are confident he is the right leader to build on our momentum and guide our next phase [of] growth."

Evanger has more than three decades of leadership experience across consumer services, healthcare, retail, franchising, manufacturing and private-equity-backed businesses. Throughout his career, he has led large organizations, strengthened operations and delivered sustainable business growth.

Evanger will work closely with the executive leadership team to advance the company's long-term growth strategy while maintaining a strong focus on supporting team members, serving families, and strengthening industry and community partnerships.

"Foundation Partners is well-positioned for the future," Wallander said. "We have a clear purpose, a strong team and a shared commitment to excellence. Jim's experience leading complex service organizations makes him uniquely qualified to lead the company forward."

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From the Editor's Desk

15 Years Later

This week brings us to our four-part analysis of NFDA's 2026 *Consumer Awareness and Preferences Study.* When setting the stage for the first survey in 2012, we reasoned that if we wished to know what consumers thought and wanted, then we would have to ask them. So we did, and we continue to do so.

Now, nearly 15 years later, the pages of this issue are filled with the overall 2026 survey findings, and subsequent issues will delve deeper into the numbers. Expanded analysis of the survey also will be included in the August issue of *The Director*.

With each subsequent survey, trends have been reinforced, and the picture of what consumers know about funeral service and what they want out of memorial services has been filled in. Although there are a few blips or aberrations in the data – some a result of survey-question wording – the historical data tells us that the information gleaned has been consistent and accurate and that it does, indeed, paint a picture of consumer preferences, just as we had hoped and anticipated.

Funeral service professionals' feedback and observations of the 2026 survey have been particularly interesting. From every set of eyes reviewing the statistics comes a different perspective and different read on what the numbers mean. As we ask observers for their thoughts on the complete study, or key segments therein, their observations and suggestions help create a road map for dealing with today's consumers.

NFDA has taken great care in preparing this survey to present information that helps you meet the needs of families, improve overall service and, by extension, grow your business.

Each year, we ask questions and build a database of statistically significant research, augmented by new questions that incorporate the evolving challenges faced by funeral directors.

When statistical data is published, responses are typically along the lines of "that's interesting" or "I wasn't aware of that" or, even, "tell me something I don't know."

There's a fine line between giving people what they want and giving them what they need. And the two categories often do not have much overlap.

Ed.

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