



Customers Commend Dignity Memorial(TM) in Survey

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HOUSTON, April 19 /PRNewswire/ -- Exceptionally high approval scores marked the first year of a North American Customer Satisfaction Survey of Dignity Memorial funeral and cremation services, with 98 percent of survey respondents willing to recommend such services to others. Ninety-five percent also ranked Dignity Memorial funeral and cremation providers as "excellent" or "very good" in terms of the "dignity and professionalism in which the ceremony was conducted" and "the attitude and respectfulness of the staff." The costs of goods and services were "lower than expected" or "about as expected," said 83.5 percent. Surveys are mailed to families three weeks after funeral or cremation services have been conducted; nearly 50 percent respond. Principally owned by Service Corporation International (NYSE: SRV), Dignity Memorial is a network of funeral, cremation and cemetery service providers.

"We are pleased with the results of our survey, which reflect the excellent caliber of those professionals we are fortunate to have as Dignity Memorial representatives throughout North America," said Robert L. Waltrip, SCI Chairman and Chief Executive Officer. "Although Dignity Memorial providers received high marks throughout the survey, the complete satisfaction of everyone we are privileged to serve is a primary Company focus. We continually strive for 100-percent approval," he added.

Implemented in February 2000, the Customer Satisfaction Survey is conducted by Init Conseil, an independent French company that also directs surveys for other global corporations. Minnesota-based Data Recognition Corp. manages North American survey administration. An estimated 150,000 families have responded to the survey since its inception. The survey asks families to measure the service they received from Dignity Memorial providers as excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor, and invites written comments.

Ninety-four percent of survey respondents gave Dignity Memorial staff "excellent" or "very good" marks in "courtesy and politeness," having a "kind and caring manner" and appropriate dress. Dignity Memorial providers were also "excellent" or "very good" in terms of professionalism, helpfulness and execution of service plans, according to 93 percent of survey respondents. Physical surroundings were agreeably viewed, with 93 percent rating the appearance of viewing facilities as "excellent" or "very good" and 90 percent responding the same when asked about the comfort of facilities.

Positive Industry Polls

While Dignity Memorial providers have indeed earned distinguished marks among consumers, the general public appears to also favorably view the entire funeral, cremation and cemetery industry. In a 2000 Wirthlin Worldwide survey, for example, 69 percent of the 1,000 adults polled gave the industry positive ratings. The McLean, Va., polling organization noted in its related report that a 3:1 ratio of positive to negative comments is considered healthy for a typical industry; in contrast, ratings for the funeral and cemetery industry equaled a 5:1 ratio of positive to negative comments. Funeral directors also received commendatory marks in a 2000 Gallup poll, where they ranked among the top 15 professions in terms of honesty and ethics. According to 1,028 adults surveyed late last year, funeral directors possessed higher standards of honesty and ethics than business executives, building contractors, journalists, real estate agents and insurance salesmen.

The BBB: A Dearth of Complaints

The industry also shines in the area of consumer satisfaction, as evidenced by the 1999 ranking of Better Business Bureau complaint statistics, which encompasses all complaints lodged during the year with the 130 bureaus of the United States. Franchised automobile dealers accumulated the highest number of complaints, with 17,686 grievances reported in 1999. Computer dealers were the subject of the second-highest number of complaints, followed by home furnishing stores, auto repair businesses, shopping services, general contractors, used car dealers, telephone companies, business opportunities and banks. "Funeral-related services" appeared way, way down the list -- a total of 197 complaints placed them 298th in the ranking, reflecting fewer complaints than hunting clubs, retail pet suppliers, video production services and pet grooming services. "Funeral directors" received a total of 149 complaints, which placed them 345th in the ranking. To put it in perspective, funeral directors across the United States were the subject of fewer BBB complaints in 1999 than drywall contractors and consignment shops. Finally, 65 cemetery-related complaints and two complaints regarding "cremation services" were lodged with the BBB that year. Total industry-related complaints equaled 413 for 1999, a year when nearly 2.4 million deaths (2,396,000, to be exact) were reported in the United States. Statistically speaking, that equals approximately one complaint per 5,800 deaths.

What the U.S. Government Says

Consumers may complain to organizations other than the BBB, however, a fact that was considered in a 1999 U.S. General Accounting Office report about funeral-related industries. GAO, which functions as an investigational arm of the Congress, nevertheless reported, "... the number of complaints about the funeral industry was generally low compared to complaints about other types of consumer issues." In reference to FTC Funeral Rule compliance, an area that holds potential for customer dissatisfaction, the GAO noted: "A GAO analysis of a limited sample of funeral homes found that compliance was indeed high for the rule's core requirement -- giving customers itemized price lists early in their meetings with funeral home staff ..."

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