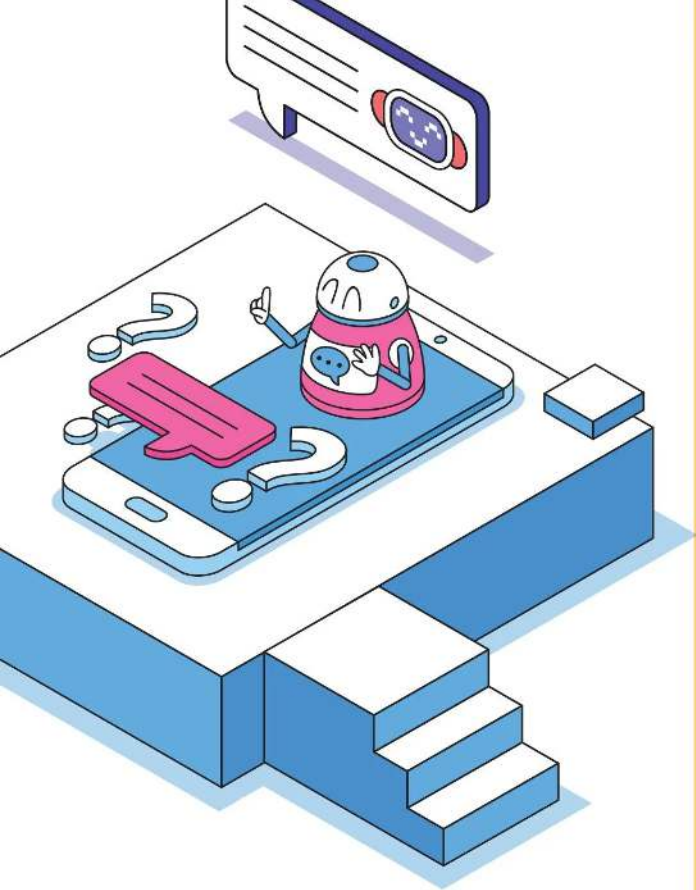


# Artificial



## *Is It the Key to Staying Relevant?*

by Welton Hong

I'M SURE YOU'VE BEEN HEARING LOTS OF BUZZ about artificial intelligence (AI) lately. Just in the past year or so, it's gone from a relatively niche subject among the tech-obsessed to a massive influence over virtually all aspects of life and work.

For example, AI was a big factor in Hollywood screenwriters and actors going on lengthy strikes in late 2023. And if you have students in your household, you're undoubtedly aware of its mind-blowing ability to spit out an English essay in the time it takes a Corvette to reach 100 mph.

But what some of you might not know is that AI itself isn't all that new. It's been around awhile.

The term "AI" was coined in the 1950s, and I'm willing to bet you've been using AI just about daily for quite some time. Googled anything lately? If so, you should know Google Search uses AI-powered technology—along with many resources you've probably discovered to be quite useful in your day-to-day life.

### **Where This Is Leading**

You're probably wondering why AI is such a hot topic right now. It's because the technology has not only advanced significantly, it's also been made far more broadly available—hence why Hollywood creatives have concerns about job security and students can finish their homework in half the time.

The abilities and limitations of AI-powered technology have and will continue to change. But make no mistake: AI is here to stay.

So while the funeral home and cemetery sectors are sometimes perceived as slow to embrace change, now isn't the time for you to conform to that stereotype.

AI isn't just a buzzword in deathcare; it's a valuable tool that changes how you can interact with the families you serve, manage your operations, and plan for the future. And it's a tool you shouldn't be afraid to use—even in a field as sensitive in nature as yours!

# intelligence





Arguably one of the coolest ways AI can help your business—and more importantly, the families you serve—is through virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) technologies.

AI interfaces can handle a wide range of inquiries, schedule appointments, and offer resources for grief counseling. The 24/7 availability of these AI systems ensures support and information are accessible whenever needed—a crucial aspect in a profession that operates far beyond regular business hours.

You can task AI with all the *routine* tasks (*i.e.*, the stuff no one wants to do) to give your human staff more time for complex, sensitive matters that truly require a personal touch.

### What to Watch Out for

While there are many benefits that come from incorporating AI into your business, there remain a few nuances to be mindful of in the transition.

For example, you've probably heard rumors about *hallucinations*, which is when AI generates inaccurate information. (Yes, AI makes mistakes, too—the only difference is that it can't use the "I'm only human" excuse.)

Perhaps you have a few ethical concerns about when it's appropriate to use AI, and whether its use will affect the privacy of your information or that of your clients. Or maybe you're just not sure a robot can (or should) do a job originally intended for humans.

If those sound like thoughts you've had, I don't mind acknowledging that your concerns are valid.

My advice? The way we all introduced social media into our lives and businesses—with lots of experimentation and a good deal of caution—is the same approach you should take with AI.

To help you navigate this gray area, I've outlined the multifaceted ways AI is the key to staying relevant in deathcare, as well as how to tread carefully around its limitations and drawbacks.

### Enhancing Not Replacing

In deathcare, compassion and empathy are critical to helping grieving families. That's why it might seem a tad off-putting to use AI-powered customer service tools, such as chatbots and virtual assistants. After all, they're not real people. How can they *really* help the families you serve?

What these tools offer isn't *replacing* human interaction; it's *enhancing* it.

### A Marketing Game Changer

In the realm of marketing (especially for deathcare), AI is a game changer.

Through sophisticated algorithms most of us will never truly grasp, AI can analyze consumer behavior and preferences, enabling your business to create highly personalized marketing messages. This means each family will receive only information and offers that resonate with their specific needs and circumstances.

For example, if a family is exploring options for a green burial, AI systems—having identified this preference—can ensure the family receives information pertinent to eco-friendly services, rather than generic information on all available services. This tailored approach respects the family's wishes and provides them with relevant, valuable information.

This level of personalization is not only more helpful to the families you serve but also markedly improves the effectiveness of your marketing campaigns.

### Saving Time in Sales

AI-driven customer relationship management (CRM) systems can streamline sales processes by predicting customer needs and automating follow-up communications. This means AI can optimize the sales funnel, which your sales staff will appreciate, and create a smoother, more personalized customer journey, which your clients will appreciate.

Another way AI can lend sales a hand is through predictive analytics in CRM systems, which can anticipate a customer's needs even before they fully articulate them.



For example, if a customer has shown interest in specific types of memorials or services, the CRM can suggest these options proactively, facilitating a more intuitive and responsive customer experience. Neat, right?

### Virtual Services, Real Feelings

Arguably one of the coolest ways AI can help your business—and more importantly, the families you serve—is through virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) technologies.

You might even already be using it! I'll explain.

VR and AR afford families the opportunity to explore funeral homes or cemeteries without actually being there. Families can take virtual tours of facilities, view selections of caskets or urns, and visualize memorial services for their loved ones without physical visitation.

This technology is more than just convenient for you; it's a bridge for emotional connection and informed decision-making for the families you serve. The ability to virtually experience a funeral home or cemetery can provide great comfort and a sense of familiarity and preparedness in a time when they need it most.

### Staying Relevant

Deathcare is constantly changing, and you don't want to be left behind. The neat thing about AI is that it's not only part of those changes but also acts as a helpful tool to keep up with them.

By analyzing vast data sets (so thankfully you don't have to), AI can identify emerging trends and help your business stay ahead of the curve.

So as societal attitudes toward death and memorialization evolve, AI can help you adapt quickly. For instance, if there's a growing trend toward eco-friendly burials, AI can help you understand this shift and adjust your offerings accordingly.

### AI with Caution

AI doesn't have feelings.

It doesn't "think" either, at least not in the same way humans do. And one thing I know for sure is that you can't take emotion or humanity out of deathcare.

Deathcare is fueled by empathy, compassion, and deep relationships, making maintaining the delicate balance between technology and humanity a legitimate concern with using AI.

Because AI doesn't have feelings or the ability to form meaningful relationships, you should never completely remove humans from the processes of customer service, marketing, or sales.

While AI is undoubtedly a valuable resource to check off tasks from your to-do list, real employees should always have the final say on your customer service, customer relations, and messaging.

### On Ethics and Privacy

AI's rapid rise has prompted concerns about ethics and privacy. Both are obviously critical in deathcare, where you're dealing with emotionally vulnerable families and highly sensitive information. Trust and integrity are critical to your business's success.

The best way to mitigate these issues is through ensuring AI systems are used responsibly and transparently.

You can do this by implementing an internal policy with guidelines for using AI-powered technology to guide your staff members. In addition, you might even implement a customer guarantee regarding your use of AI to reassure families you'll maintain a high ethical standard, protect their information, and keep their best interests at heart.

**If it isn't obvious, the integration of AI in deathcare is an opportunity to level up, from improving customer service and personalized marketing to providing predictive analytics and virtual experiences.**



### Adaptation as a Necessity

The same way AI adapts to the information it's given is the same way you'll have to adapt to its constant changes. Be prepared to shift accordingly as the technology not only advances, but also comes to a halt—reaching the inevitable limitations all technology has.

Your business should be capable of operating with or without AI—ideally made a little (or a lot) easier with it, though.

If it isn't obvious, the integration of AI in deathcare is an opportunity to level up, from improving customer service and personalized marketing to providing predictive analytics and virtual experiences.

However, you must tread carefully, ensuring the use of AI enhances rather than detracts from the compassionate service at the heart of deathcare.

By embracing AI, your deathcare firm will not only stay relevant in a rapidly evolving technological landscape, but also discover new ways to support families during one of life's most challenging times. ■

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