Casualty Business
Product Centric

Continental Computer Corp. tops in death care profession.

By John P. Desmond

Being the first player in a defined market segment, is an enviable position for a software company, and that's the position Continental Computer Corp. found itself in at the outset of its journey in 1985.

In this world, nothing can be said to be certain except death and taxes, said Benjamin Franklin.

Plenty of software has been written around taxes, but not so much around the business of death.

A funeral director asked a college professor in the 1980s, about software for the funeral industry. Nothing existed to the professor who wrote the first package in 1985, at first for MS-DOS and later for Microsoft Windows. "Initially, there was no competition," says Wes Johnson, president/CEO, Continental Computers Corp.

The company with the package for funeral directors advertised for an accountant, and Johnson applied. He had completed years of active duty military service, and obtained degrees from Arkansas State University, and was working in accounting for a manufacturing firm. He got the job and worked on customer service and accounting for Continental, gaining a range of experience. In 2000, the professor sold the business to investors, and they hired Johnson to run the company.

Vertically Focused
Today, Continental has competition in the market for funeral director packages, also called the death care profession. "We have seen competition come and go in the years I have been here. We probably have 36% of funeral homes, cemeteries and crematories in the U.S. They also have a presence in Canada, Hawaii and the Virgin Islands, and have plans to expand globally.

The privately held company, based in Jonesboro, AR., ranks number 497 in the 2013 Software 500.

The company sells a basic package for approximately $2,500, for perpetual license plus annual maintenance, and adds modules as the customer prefers. Now it's a .NET and SQL Server-based application set that includes financial management covering payroll and account management.

Some U.S. states are now requiring online death certificate tracking, so Continental is offering that integration as well.

"But our bread and butter is the funeral home business itself," says Johnson.

Continental's packages include: Crematory Manager, Cemetery Manager, Leads Manager, Aftercare Manager, Pet Crematory Manager, and Continental Accountant. The firm also offers development tools called Directors Assistant.

Continental works with a number of partners, and expresses no preference for which ones its customers choose. "You run your business the way you want," says Johnson.

Partner FrontRunner, for example, offers tools to help funeral directors build websites. FrontRunner has used Continental's Director's Assistant tool to integrate to its own products, which offer personalization, revenue generating ideas and strategic marketing initiatives. FrontRunner President Kevin Montroy was

quoted as saying, "This single-product approach will provide the greatest value to clients and a much tighter user experience. Director's Assistant is clearly the independent leader in the space with over 8,000 users. I think it speaks volumes to their superior software model."

The Future of Death Care
Continental is planning a new release in October, called ArrangeOnline™, for funeral homes to use to work directly with customers online. Using the package, "Families can make their funeral arrangements online with the funeral home they choose, from the comfort of their own home," says Johnson.

The business has been steady, and has seen ups and downs that track the economy. Cremation rates are on the rise, as many find it more difficult to pay for more costly casket and burial alternative. The number of funeral homes has declined in the last 10 years, owing partly to consolidation, but still new ones do open up. Service Corp. International may own the most funeral homes, several hundred.

"But no one is as large as us in the funeral software business, and we are still getting new clients," adds Johnson.

That is one steady niche.

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