

Former banker turned funeral director Sean Martin believes that building strong links with local families, charities, and businesses in life is the best way to earn their trust in death

WORDS: ANDREW COLLIER

Funeral directors are at the very heart of the communities they serve. In dealing with bereavement, respect and trust are vital. Having a genuine and visible empathy with local people is also hugely important, and this is perhaps the independent sector's greatest strength.

One family business in particular has turned this commitment to local involvement and service into a priority mission. Peasgood & Skeates has five offices covering Saffron Walden, Duxford, Cambridge and Haverhill, and spends a significant amount of time providing community support to a range of groups.

The firm, established in 1847, employs 35 people, and now conducts almost 1,000 funerals a year. So its business is strong, but it believes it is also vital to put something back.

Its detailed programme of community support is carefully planned. Each of its branches is expected to come up with a schedule of events every year and these are then incorporated into the business plan.

"We're delighted to be able to do this. We sit at the heart of the community we serve and help people at times of great difficulty," says Sean Martin, Head of Operations at Peasgood & Skeates.

"We don't want to wait for people to come to us. The only way we can own the right for people to trust us and to choose us is to show them that we care about them and the area in which we live. It's about being able to look them in the eye and say that."

The range of activities the company supports is huge, from dignified memorial services through to charity support and assistance to local clubs. Unsurprisingly, Christmas is a particularly busy time, but the programme stretches right through the year.

"For instance, we're strongly engaged with our local hospice, the Arthur Rank in Cambridge, where we have a Light Up

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Your Life initiative every Christmas," says Sean. "It happens over a period of several weeks and we invite 7,000 or so people to come along and remember their families who have been in care."

The company also sponsors a charity banquet and ball every autumn to raise funds for a chosen organisation. This year it will be for the Arthur Rank Hospice. "This year's event is still in the early stages of planning," explains Sean, "but we're looking at the possibility of holding it among the planes at the Imperial War Museum in Duxford, which would be a spectacular setting."

"Another thing we do at Christmas is to host a memorial service of our own in each of the towns where we have an office. They are celebrations of life and we liaise with local churches and invite those who have been bereaved to come."

"We often have to run it over two nights because the churches simply aren't big enough to accommodate all those who want to attend."

A seasonal tree festival in churches at Christmas is organised by the company as another way for people to remember their loved ones by hanging a card with a message on the branches.

Another innovative type of support is provided for those working in the care sector. Peasgood & Skeates runs a programme called 'Talks and Tours', inviting care home and GP nurses, junior doctors, clergy and others in to its premises, offering them a full guided tour and a presentation on how everyone can work together.

"They are often gatekeepers for the bereaved," says Sean. "When someone dies, they may be asked by the families what they should do about a funeral director. We want to show them

around so they can see our hygiene and cleanliness standards. By us being open and transparent, they can have confidence in recommending us."

Support for secular organisations is also important to the business. It sponsors a diverse range of activities, from local under-11 football clubs through to summer flower planters, designed to make towns look more attractive.

"We're also active in the Rotary organisation, especially in Saffron Walden," says Sean. "David Peasgood, the great-grandson of our founder, is still a funeral director and supports the business. He's also a SAIF Quality Assurance Inspector, and is involved with Rotary in the town."

Another staff member, Les Ames, who is now semi-retired, is a bearer for the business and used to be a singer in West End shows. "He's quite happy to go out to our local nursing homes and do singalongs for the residents there," says Sean.

"They absolutely love it - we get so many requests for him now that we're having to limit them to make sure he gets some time off!"

Help is also provided for local bowling clubs and golf tournaments. Sean explains that there is particular value in this. "Bowling in particular is something people enjoy and it can be very good at providing company for those who have recently been bereaved."

Support of a different kind is provided to the Women in Business network, in Cambridge, and engagement with other organisations such as local Chambers of Commerce is growing.

The Peasgood & Skeates community programme is helpful for everyone, as it supports local organisations while at the same time raising the company's profile.

The programme also fits into the business' annual New Year promotion of its pre-paid funeral packages, which include Golden Charter plans.

This is a huge undertaking, with some 250,000 leaflets delivered over the festive period.

"We're delighted to be able to do this work," says Sean. "We feel we have a duty of care to families we have provided a service for, and our community work is a good and sincere way of doing that."

"Events such as the Christmas services help to ensure that loved ones are not forgotten. We're both proud and pleased that we're able to do it." ●

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