



From time to time, Intuit Inc. profiles accountants making the most of its software products in providing high quality service to their clients. The following article is one in a series.

## Accounting Six Feet Under

### *The Business Side of Funeral Home Transactions*

Scott Cytron, ABC

*“In this world, nothing is certain but death and taxes.” When Ben Franklin wrote this in 1789 a year before his own death, he could not have imagined how true this statement would be, and how much it would resonate, for the accounting profession. Today many accounting professionals earn their bread and butter doing taxes; fewer work as closely with that secondary certainty, death. Scott Cytron profiles one accountant, Ron Cooper of Cooper & Schoff, CPA, whose firm specializes in working with funeral homes.*

With specialization of services and industries more popular than ever, accountants who work with funeral homes find this arena immensely challenging, always interesting and usually lucrative.



**Ronald H. Cooper, CPA**, a shareholder at [Cooper & Schoff, CPAs](#), PA, in York, Maine, brings special credentials to his current niche specialty. Ron specializes in helping funeral homes with their business goals.

What gives him real credibility is that Ron is also a former funeral home owner, licensed (now inactive) funeral director and an embalmer.

Over the years, Ron figures he has embalmed over 3,000 bodies. With this unique background from working in the business at an early age, he turned to accounting services to funeral homes in the late 1970s after a six-month internship with Peat, Marwick, Mitchell & Co.’s Miami office. At the time, he was a senior at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton, where he later graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in Accounting.

## **Outreach**

Now a full-time CPA with partner Larry Schoff, a fellow CPA, he spends about 70 percent of his time with his funeral home practice, working with more than 50 privately owned and operated funeral homes throughout the country. Ron also offers continuing education to funeral home directors and travels across the country teaching this content.

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Ron's continuing interest in and comfort level with the industry may be extra keys to his success. "It is not unusual for me to talk with my funeral home clients once a week or more," says Ron. "On more than one occasion, I have discussed their tax planning while sitting in the front seat of a hearse headed to a nursing home or hospital to pick up a deceased person."

## **Full-Time CPA, Part-Time CFO**

It helps that Ron continues to appreciate the people who work in that industry. "Funeral directors are hardworking, dedicated professionals who have a very demanding and stressful job," says Ron. "I have found that by being one of them and understanding their needs, I am able to communicate with them and provide a unique perspective. As a group, I enjoy working with funeral directors the most."

Currently, Cooper & Schoff does not represent any public companies (and does not do any Sarbanes-Oxley work, as a result), so the firm prefers to work with privately held homes – hence the need for a full complement of accounting services in addition to mainstays such as tax – and the need for homes to outsource services to a professional like Ron who combines his knowledge of accounting with his expertise of the funeral industry.

"Like most small business owners who cannot afford to hire a full-time CFO, funeral directors need an accountant to provide services that go well beyond completing tax returns," he says. "For many, my role or function is more in the line of part-time CFO."

Services include operational analyses, overhead and pricing analyses, succession planning and banking relationships. With overhead and pricing, for example, Ron works with funeral homes to make sure their General Price List is not only current, but fiscally sound.

"Given today's competitive environment and changing consumer trends, the funeral home owner needs to understand his/her overhead," says Ron. "We work with our clients throughout the entire year, not just at tax time, assisting them in determining their actual overhead and adjusting their General Price List accordingly, which involves much more than just raising prices. It involves analyzing consumer trends and purchasing patterns."

## **Balancing of Business-Sense and Compassion**

Ron says part of his job is to help the funeral director find the right balance between their natural sympathies and the right kind of business savvy. “Funeral directors are compassionate people by nature,” Ron says, “but they sometimes make not-so-great operational decisions that do not necessarily enhance their bottom line.”

Because he has acted in that role before, Ron understands the unique dilemma of the funeral director. “It is an emotional time when a client seeks out the services of the funeral home,” he says. During that time, all parties can sometimes fail to understand that the funeral home is still a business too.

## **Demand for QuickBooks and QuickBooks ProAdvisor Support**

“Typically, our clients use QuickBooks for their primary accounting software, along with a funeral home proprietary software package to maintain their funeral home records,” Ron says. “Within QuickBooks, each accounting system and chart of account is tailored for the client and provides pertinent information to determine overhead.”

That QuickBooks component is driven in part by the demand from the funeral homes. The firm meets that demand with the help of one of its associates, Pamela S. Cooper, the firm’s Certified QuickBooks ProAdvisor. Also in charge of training, she begins the training process with a review of the funeral home’s accounting systems, controls, current chart of account, tax returns and financial statements, then looks at the background and education of the trainees.

He notes that “Training can be done in person, through the Internet or telephone, or most often, a combination of all three. We also have several clients using the QuickBooks Online Edition, and find that they like for us to monitor their record keeping, making adjustments when needed.”

## **Part-Time CFO**

Ron’s QuickBooks practice is also an entrée into the part-time CFO work.

“Through the Internet we are able to perform complete CFO services without leaving our office. We also play a major role in training our clients on using QuickBooks, Excel, Word and proprietary funeral home software packages.”

## **Model Chart of Accounts**

Although each client is serviced to meet their specific needs, Ron says the firm has developed a model Chart of Accounts that emphasizes current and accurate financial information. The model may be further customized for each client.

“Over and above tax planning and preparation, we deal with items like 1099 reporting for cash advances, which are monies paid to ministers, organists and grave diggers on behalf of the

family of the deceased. We also offer consulting in mortuary trusts and even on the depreciation for hearses and livery.”

Because Ron and his firm work in an industry that is always needed, he feels he has security for the long haul, but also recognizes that he must evolve as his clients’ businesses continue to change. Not one to be complacent, he enjoys the challenges presented in customizing his services to meet a need.

“Our ultimate goal is for our clients, no matter how small, to have accurate and up-to-date financial information that will enable them to manage and operate their businesses as efficiently as possible,” he says.

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