

One Ringy-Dingy. . . .

FCA volunteers work hard to respond to inquiries from members and the public seeking guidance on funeral planning. But some outdated, inefficient phone and member response systems are making it harder than it has to be for volunteers to get consumers and potential members the information they need in a timely way. Too often, consumers call the FCA National office to say they weren't sure they reached their local affiliate because the answering system doesn't identify the organization, or calls aren't returned for weeks.

Laurie Powsner, Executive Director of the FCA of Princeton (also a board member of FCA National) has put together a helpful guide to the various phone and answering system options available. Technology has moved ahead — you don't have to chain your phone system to one member's home number anymore. Cheap, flexible plans are out there, and Powsner's rounded them up, along with their pros and cons.

Telecommunications Options

Some affiliates simply list a board member's phone number and that person's outgoing voice mail message is modified, i.e. *Please leave a message for the Smith family or the Funeral Consumers Alliance of Anytown.*

Advantages:

- Free

Disadvantages:

- If the board member is out of town, they have to give their answering machine code to another board member and have that person listen to personal as well as affiliate messages
- If the board member no longer wants this role, moves or moves on – the number has to be changed, necessitating reprinting your literature
- The number cannot be listed in your affiliate's name in the phone book

A slightly better option is the board member adding an additional phone number (uses the existing home phone line) with a distinctive ring.

Advantages:

- It's inexpensive (less than \$5 a month)
- Another board member could check the messages remotely

Disadvantages:

- Getting your home answering machine and the FCA answering machine to cooperate with the different rings requires newer equipment and some skill
- If the board member no longer wants this role, moves or moves on – the number has to be changed
- The number cannot be listed in the phone book other than under the household member's name.

Another option is to order an additional permanent residential line in the board member's home with its own answering machine.

Advantages:

- Calls can be forwarded to another board member
- Adding a permanent residential line has some start up costs but can then be a very inexpensive option. In New Jersey, Verizon charges \$42 (minimum) to install and then \$5.30 a month. This includes 20 outgoing message units (any call from 1 second to 5 minutes = 1 message unit) and 10 cents each after that. Incoming calls are free.

Disadvantages:

- If the board member no longer wants this role, moves or moves on – the number has to be changed
- The number cannot be listed in the phone book other than under the household member's name unless they pay for a business line.

If the board member installed an additional permanent *business* line in their home with it's own answering machine, there are some additional pros and cons.

Advantages:

- Calls can be forwarded to another board member
- A free one-line white and yellow page listing is included

Disadvantages:

- If the board member no longer wants this role, moves or moves on – the number has to be changed
- It's not cheap. In New Jersey, Verizon charges \$105 to install and then \$23 a month. This includes 75 outgoing message units (any call from 1 second to 5 minutes = 1 message unit) and 10 cents each after that. Incoming calls are free. If your affiliate can afford this, consider the **virtual voice mail** option below.

Some affiliates use a cell phone.

Advantages:

- Inexpensive
- Can be passed around among board members to share responsibility

Disadvantages:

- The number cannot be listed in the phone book

Some hospitals and larger businesses will “donate” a number on their voice mail system to a non-profit agency. They can assign you an “outside” number (7 digits) that will go directly into their voice mail system, not ringing on any actual phone.

Advantages:

- Free
- Voice mail can be checked by any board member
- Pretty permanent since hospitals and similar institutions generally stay put

Disadvantages:

- The number cannot be listed in the phone book

Some affiliates use a church or other organization to accept their phone calls. We think this is one of the **worst** options for a variety of reasons.

Advantages:

- Free
- Pretty permanent since religious institutions generally stay put

Disadvantages:

- You give the appearance of being affiliated with that church, which can turn off anyone who belongs to a different religion, denomination, or doesn't want to deal with a religious institution at all
- Calls cannot be forwarded
- The offices are not staffed 24 hours a day, so you are not reachable
- The church is unlikely to be willing to change their outgoing message to include necessary information for your affiliate, so you are not reachable
- The number cannot be listed in the phone book

There is a related option that can work. Some churches and other organizations will be willing to A) place an additional permanent line in their building that you could staff with an answering machine or B) add an additional phone number with a distinctive ring to their account.

Advantages:

- Pretty permanent since religious institutions generally stay put
- An additional number with a distinctive ring is inexpensive
- You pay for an additional listing in the white pages with your FCA name for a minimal charge (in NJ Verizon charges \$1.05/month for this). In addition, you can pay for a yellow pages ad (locally \$6 - \$12/month) if you want.
- Calls from a permanent line can be forwarded

Disadvantages:

- If you go with the permanent line, it is somewhat more expensive but at least it's not in a board member's home
- Distinctive ring calls cannot be forwarded

We think the best option in this category and overall is **virtual voice mail** from your local phone company. The phone company can give you a phone number and voice mail,

with no actual phone line and no need for a phone or answering machine. In NJ, Verizon charges \$21.66 a month for this service plus 6.6 cents per call (under 5 minutes). If you receive 30 calls a month, your total bill will be about \$23.64 a month.

Advantages:

- Inexpensive
- Permanent “virtual” location
- Voice mail can be checked by any board member
- Can be listed in the phone book

Disadvantages:

- Not free

Remember: All telephone carriers offer call-forwarding today, which you can add to your phone service for a nominal price. This lets you transfer incoming calls to another board member’s home. On the downside, ALL of your calls, personal and otherwise, would be transferred.

It is very important that you can be found in the phone book. At minimum, you should be in the white pages. See if you can pay a little extra (usually under \$1) to be printed in capital letters or bold. Also, if you are going to be in the Yellow Pages try to get yourself properly placed. Ask to be under “Funeral Consumer Information.” It comes alphabetically before “Funeral Directors.” But, if they won’t add that category, it’s probably better to be in with the funeral directors and not after in “Funeral Information” and certainly not in “Funeral Pre-planning”. Said one Yellow Pages sales rep candidly, “Tell your people to yell and holler until they get this heading. If enough people request it, they’ll get it.”

If you can’t afford the yellow pages, try to get in the “blue,” “community,” or “resources” pages of your phone book. These listings are free, but you may need to show that you are a nonprofit organization.