

# Ask The Expert

[Industry leader]

## Taking Technology to the Next Level

### ■ Summary

Since its founding in 1979, Pontem Software has been providing clients large and small with flexible, full-feature software that is optimized to work with the latest technology. Pontem designs and develops its own software but also combines forces with some of the most innovative companies in the business to provide its customers with software solutions to meet their unique and ever-changing needs. Such was the case last year when the company teamed up with Cemetery360 to offer cemeteries the ability to provide “street level” views of their properties. Pontem’s president, Sherry Hood, and vice president, Karina Kimbell, discuss the growing role technology is playing in the cemetery industry and why it is important for companies to continually evolve.

*Patti Martin Bartsche reports.*

### Was cemetery management always a part of the company’s focus or did it evolve over time?

Our company was incorporated in 1979 as a software development firm focused on developing software for local government.

As we engaged more and more with local government clients, it became clear we could serve our clients by developing software for management of their cemetery records. Our first cemetery management system was introduced to the industry in 1985. In the mid ’90s we introduced the first version designed for Windows, which included both image/document management and integrated mapping.

Over time the product suite has continued to evolve as technology has changed. In addition to basic core functionality, the product has evolved with new and more powerful enterprise-class features.

The addition of integrated GIS mapping and automated publishing to public facing online burial search allows Pontem customers to build a solution that will keep pace with their changing needs and project goals.

### Why was it important to provide ceterierians with a management tool of their own?

During those early years of software



Sherry Hood



Karina Kimbell

development, our municipal clients began to understand the impact technology had on their internal efficiencies as well as the ability to serve the public in new and better ways.

As we worked with more users, we felt the needs for affordable technology for cemeteries was not unique to local government. Rather, it was a universal need for any organization dealing with the managing of decades of important historical documents.

### How have you seen the cemetery industry change over time?

At first, many cemeteries that were seeking software were doing it mainly as a way to protect their records from loss from fire or flood. Our municipal clients also wanted to reduce vulnerability and liability from errors caused by conflicting records.

Now, however, using the computer to gain efficiency is standard operating procedure. Today’s clients

are looking to leverage the data stored in their software to serve their communities in new ways. Offering records that can be searched online, with mapping available to the public, is the most obvious. However, our clients now are thinking beyond convenience to changing the sales experience for both their counselors and customers with custom-branded mobile apps and innovative new technologies, such as 360-degree imagery and virtual reality tours.

### The death-care industry has been slow to change. How can technology help ceterierians do their job better?

While it is true the industry has been slow to change, we find now many are trying to make up for lost time. We feel the basic efficiencies and opportunity to create an accurate property inventory and records database is a no-brainer for most ceterierians. The greatest way technology helps ceterierians do their jobs better is through saving time that can be better spent building relationships with families.

### What are cemeteries that use Pontem Software able to provide to their families?

Pontem provides real-time publishing

of data for a variety of online services. Embedded in many client websites is our popular online burial search. This service allows cemeteries to provide additional services, such as integrated mapping, giving the public not only the ability to locate loved ones on up-to-date maps, but also to see what property is available near family already interred. More and more cemeteries are including personalized memorial pages, and 'virtual' visits to the actual grave location through an embedded 360-degree ground view.

These online solutions have been developed with MobileFirst technology and respond to the device from which they are accessed. With Pontem's Online Burial Search or integrated mobile apps from our best-in-class partner group, smartphones are quickly replacing expensive outdoor kiosks and bringing much sought-after information into the hands of families.

### **Has this resurgence in searching for our roots made it important for cemeteries to offer more and better ways for individuals to search for their roots?**

Absolutely. With the web becoming mainstream, and many baby boomers retiring, cemeteries are under increasing pressure to provide easy and accurate information about the decedents interred in their care. And, with almost everything else being just a Google search away, cemeteries are expected to make this information available online or through a connected mobile device.

### **Nearly two-thirds of cell phone owners now use their phone to go online. How important is it for cemeteries to meet individuals where they are?**

The number of smartphone users in the United States is estimated to reach 207.2 million in 2016, and more than 50 percent of Americans over the age

of 65 will own some sort of connected device. It is absolutely essential for any modern business – including cemeteries; their customers are increasingly expecting to find information about deceased loved ones online as well as shop online for properties and services offered by their local cemeteries. Increasingly, this means meeting them online – especially with a device-responsive website.

### **How is Pontem Software helping cemeteries interact with families?**

Our popular online burial search automatically publishes data from the data manager to the web for an easy-to-use public-facing service that is fully integrated with the cemetery's website. An interactive map allows friends and family to locate their loved ones in the cemetery.

Pontem's automated integration with services from our best-in-class partners, webCemeteries.com and Cemetery360, provides an individual personalized memorial page for each burial as well as the ability to virtually visit the grave.

Best of all – it's easy for the cemetery to get up and running. Pontem does all of the setup and custom branding. All the cemetery needs to do is enter their burial information into their software as normal. Technology does the rest.

### **Last year, Pontem Software announced a partnership with Cemetery360. How did this come about and why is the partnership important?**

The products from Cemetery360 are enhanced by linking to records maintained in Pontem's data manager, which include the GPS coordinates for each property. With Pontem's focus on serving their clients with data management and integrated mapping, and Cemetery360's sole focus on sales and marketing tools for the industry, the two combine to provide one of the

industry's most powerful and complete software solutions.

Cemeteries using Pontem's online burial service can provide an immersive experience for people to virtually visit loved ones. With one click, users can zoom directly to a ground level 360-degree image of the grave.

Cemetery360 can also focus on mapping ground-level 360-degree images of the cemetery's most active and featured locations using the CemLS lead generation tool. This gives cemetery sales staff the ability to take their cemetery with them and showcase available property for sale, virtually anywhere.

Without having to focus on mapping and data management, Cemetery360 is able to spend focused time on new innovations like their 360 Ground View technology, virtual reality and, most recently, the new CemLS listing service – all of which have a narrowed focus with cemetery sales and marketing software solutions while complementing all the Pontem Software solutions.

### **Is there anything you can share about new technologies you may be developing?**

Currently we are working to integrate our data management platform with Cemetery 360's new CemLS product, which will be a revolutionary new sales tool.

Additionally, we are working on the next generation of our core product offerings, which will have more deployment options. Cemeteries will have the ability to work on the web solely. Or, for those who have enterprise-class performance needs, we will have some hybrid options that offer the convenience of online access, with the power and security of a local installation.

Finally, we are optimizing for larger organizations that need to have a centralized administration and widespread deployment such as a diocese or management groups. •