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To Everything There is a Season--A Time to Live and a Time to Die: A Case Study of the History, Customs, Emerging Trends, And Market Responses in the Final Disposition Industry

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Cover Page Footnote

An earlier version of this case was published in conference proceedings of the Atlantic Marketing Journal. The authors express their gratitude for the comments made by reviewers of that earlier manuscript as the work was continued to the present version of the case.

To Everything There is a Season--A Time to Live and a Time to Die: A Case Study of the History, Customs, Emerging Trends, And Market Responses in the Final Disposition Industry

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Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and/or Practitioners - The case is appropriate for discussion in courses such as Consumer Behavior and Marketing Management. In strategy classes the case is useful for stimulating thought and discussion regarding how the final disposition and related industries are adapting products and practices as the culture of the US becomes more ethnically and country of origin diverse, older due to the aging Baby Boom generation and, more recently, impacted by the Covid-19 virus pandemic.

The History of Final Disposition

Early History

Final disposition practices are as old as the human race. Researchers have found burial grounds of Neanderthal men dating back to 70,000 BC. Bodies are sometimes found with animal parts on top of them and flower pieces next to them, an indication that some type of ritual or ceremony accompanied burials even in ancient times. Some primitive tribes, believing that evil spirits were the cause of death, buried their dead to protect themselves from evil spirits. Some burned the bodies to destroy evil spirits, while others abandoned the bodies, leaving them to decay. Zoroastrians let vultures eat deceased tribe members since they considered fire sacred and believed burying the person would be an injury to mother earth. In Tibet, people let dogs eat the dead because they believed those who were eaten by dogs would be better off in the next world.

Modern Final Disposition Industry and Practices

Before the Civil War, most Americans believed a corpse should not be tampered with, even for preservation. However, as families lost loved ones in the war and wished to see the body of a loved one last time, embalming became a much more acceptable practice. Northern families who could afford it arranged to have the remains of their fathers, sons, brothers, and husbands shipped home from battlefields in the southern states. They hired specialists who used innovative methods for the times, including arterial injection of preservation fluids, to preserve bodies for the long journey home (Encyclopedia of Death and Dying, 2010). As more and more Americans were willing to pay to have their family members preserved, the final disposition industry began to grow.

It was not until Abraham Lincoln's death, however, that this process became widely accepted. After his death, the body was to be displayed to thousands of people across the country as it moved back to Illinois for burial, and, thus, the president's body needed preservation. Since this

was not common for those times, local newspapers along the route and elsewhere wrote articles about embalming so that Americans would be more familiar with the process.

By the turn of the twentieth century, the growing demand for embalming the deceased sparked the growth of funeral homes as a business. Undertakers no longer went to homes to prepare bodies, but instead, the bodies were sent to funeral homes for preparation for viewing and the funeral service. Furthermore, partnerships with other businesses enlarged the final disposition industry. Related businesses included casket manufacturers, florists, cosmetics companies, automobile companies, cemetery associations, and insurance agencies. As the final disposition industry grew, mortuary schools came into being to teach embalming methods, and embalming companies traveled to cities and communities to inform consumers and morticians about the process (Bendann, 1974). Embalming became positioned as a healthier and eco-friendly choice in the consumer's mindset.

Emerging Trends in the Final Disposition Industry

The two most popular rituals in America are burial and cremation, with burials being the more popular form of final disposition. Cremation, however, has been increasing as a final disposition choice and is projected to become an ever-greater choice as a disposition method. However, embalming and burial will continue long into the future and may never disappear as a method of final disposition. The nature of burial as a practice is changing as some choose to forego the embalming process and as people choose nontraditional funeral rituals when burial is chosen.

The process of cremation became a more common disposition option in the United States during the 1960s. Cremation is the breaking down of the body into compounds--gas, ash, and bone fragments. As a disposition method, cremation began as a religious ritual to honor the dead among the ancient Greeks, Romans, and Hindus as well as a way to expel the person's spirit from the body (Homesley, 2010). Cremation has also been used during times of war and plague to stop the spread of disease and dispose of mass casualties. Today, many in the United States and around the world consider cremation to be more economically friendly to consumers than traditional burial practices as well as a more environmentally friendly method of disposition (Homesley, 2010).

Directors of traditional funerals took note that cremation was a threat to their business because of the decreased demand for embalming and other products and services they were providing. As a result, many funeral homes began to offer cremation services in addition to the traditional burial. Over time, the process became more readily accepted and cremation rates grew to about 27 percent in the US around the turn of the 21st century ("Cremation and It's All In a Name," 2010).

According to the Cremation Association of North America, Hawaii and Nevada already have cremation rates of over 65 percent. Operators of some final disposition businesses state that about half their clients choose cremation over the traditional burial. Funeral homes continue to adapt by providing their own cremation services or contracting cremations out to independently owned operations and by offering stylized urns and providing rituals and services for those who choose cremation after the death of a loved one. Families have several choices for what to do with the remains of a loved one; some choose to put them in a box and bury them, others choose to keep the remains in a box or urn at home, while some choose to put a small amount of the remains in a locket and wear it around their neck so they feel a closeness to the one that has died.

From a marketing standpoint, there is one overarching component that sets cremation and burials apart--price. Pricing for burials has increased 9.8% from 2014-2019 for the basic services. Burials have an average cost of about \$9,000 for a basic burial. Cremation costs are far lower, averaging from about \$1,500 to \$2,000 for basic cremation services (Homesley, 2010). Typically, accompanying burial and funeral costs are the costs for a head stone, a casket, the use of a hearse, and the cost of a plot in a cemetery. In contrast, all that is needed for cremation is a receptacle to hold the ashes. Families sometimes choose to forego a ceremony to save even more money when cremation is chosen, a far less chosen option when a burial takes place. Another reason many choose cremation is because of its practicality and convenience. Cremation gives families the option to wait for the burial or memorial, which is especially helpful for families with members living long distances apart.

Several factors beyond cost impact the choice of burial vs. cremation. Religion is one of those factors. Since many of the prophets of the Christian Bible were buried, it is often the preferred custom in Christian burials. Another reason that some Christians seem reluctant to accept cremation is that fire is a symbol for Hell. Furthermore, Christians tend to practice burial more than cremation because of the belief in the soul's resurrection and spiritual body. Catholics tend to prefer burial to cremation because they believe the body is the temple of God. However, the top 10 "Catholic states" in the United States are where cremation rates are the highest.

Other religions have different points of view and different disposition practices. For instance, when many Muslims are buried the deceased is placed in the grave, usually without a casket, resting on their right side. The body will also rest along an east-west axis and positioned to face Mecca. Furthermore, a Muslim gravesite will contain no monuments or a tombstone, and family and friends should not place flowers or plants on the burial plot. The grave should never be exhumed or bothered in any way (Maresco & Ahmed, 2006).

Religion, as a belief system, is not the only factor impacting final disposition choices. The "Green Movement" has also had an impact on the final disposition industry. The Green Burial Council (GBC) is a nonprofit organization currently working to find ways to use burials to protect natural areas. They are represented by "approved providers" operating in the United States and Canada. GBC's vision is that it "wants to see eco-friendly end-of-life rituals become a viable option for honoring the dead, healing the living, and inviting in the divine" (Borzykowski, 2009). They want their deaths to make a difference. "Close to 43% of people want a green burial. This is becoming mainstream more quickly than any of us would have anticipated," said Joe Sehee, a member of the GBC (Borzykowski, 2009). The artifacts of "green burials" include coffins made from cardboard, urns that break down in water, and cemeteries that double as parks. Finding greener ways to cremate and dispose of remains is becoming a focus as well. For instance, crematory manufacturers have found ways to reduce CO2 emissions.

Even the place of residence impacts final disposition choices. The attitudes consumers have about different burial procedures can vary throughout the different geographic areas of the United States. In many urban areas, cremation is more popular due to the lack of burial space and the innovative mindset of urban residents. In rural areas, most consumers will choose burial. More land is available for loved ones to be buried close to family. Also, in many rural areas, consumers tend to have a conservative or traditional outlook on certain practices. Many families

have plots of land where the remains of loved ones from many generations lay. In this case, a family will lean toward keeping that tradition and bury loved ones with other loved ones.

The final disposition industry has increasingly adapted to consumer demands, developing ways to adhere various societal groups' traditions. Although many ethnic/societal groups have specific final disposition directors to take care of their dead, the rapidly changing final disposition industry has become more ethnically friendly and can adapt to any burial practice desired ("Funeral Tips: funeral planning, funeral costs & more, 2009).

Final Disposition Industry Case Examples

As consumers' choices have changed over time, many firms within the funeral industry have had to change their strategies to remain profitable. One such firm is the Batesville Casket Company, the largest casket maker in the United States. The company has been in operation since the late 1800s, has a vast knowledge of the casket business, and knows what it takes to meet the needs of customers. The rise of cremation as a more widely accepted practice has resulted in a decline of casket sales. Since 2000, there has been a decrease of over 200,000 casket sales per year (Mattioli, 2010).

Despite the wish or need to save money, low-cost alternatives are not appealing to all. For example, some wish to have a personal casket made by a carpenter instead of buying from among the standard ones offered by big corporate companies such as Batesville. This gives the customer a sense of individuality and offers more of a personal tribute to the deceased. Artwork, and certain materials that held special value to the person who has died may be used in the custom caskets.

Some choose to blend the old with the new, to maintain a certain degree of tradition while embracing the newer and less expensive alternative offered by those providing cremation services. A popular service that many companies have started to offer is a combo deal where the family can rent a casket for the ceremony and viewing. The body is then cremated afterward in a more intimate setting.

The final disposition industry is looking at an economic boom now that the Baby Boom generation has entered their senior years and the industry has come up with many creative ideas to adapt to the demands of this aging population. Baby Boomers are the biggest consumer subgroup to have adopted the concept of nontraditional final disposition practices just as they have been on the edge of innovation in other areas of their lives. Many of them seek a different kind of final disposition service that involves custom caskets and different kinds of music than has been traditionally used at funerals. To meet this growing demand, Batesville Casket Company altered its production and distribution methods to meet the greater demand for custom caskets. These caskets are needed quickly, usually within 24 hours' notice, so a just-in-time manufacturing process is used.

However, another portion of Baby Boomers is very frugal since they were raised right after the great depression when resources were scarce. This frugality has encouraged them to spend less money on things and get value out of what they buy. This characteristic will continue to influence their behavior when they prepare for their memorial services or that of a loved one. These Baby Boomers tend to spend minimal on funerals because they would rather pass that money on to their loved ones than spend it on an overly luxurious casket or other expensive

funeral related items. The tradition of a funeral and burial is still the preference of this subgroup, but some are beginning to consider the thought of cremation as well (Chadderon, 1999).

Some funeral home owners have discovered that the Baby Boomers are looking for ease, personalization, and uniqueness when deciding on funeral arrangements. Baby Boomers are more inclined to disregard the traditional service and have a celebration of life ceremony. Therefore, funeral home owners are remodeling their facilities by removing pews for a full-service facility hall, offering the catering services of a full course meal and open bars. Another benefit of removing pews and converting chapels into service facilities allows funeral homes to meet the needs of secular, Jewish and Muslim families (Miller, 2007).

The Covid-19 pandemic impacts all businesses in one way or another, including the businesses involved in final disposition of the remains of those that have died. The pandemic has created unprecedented restriction and challenges for families of the deceased and the businesses they turn to for final disposition products. Funeral directors are accustomed to working with families during their worst moments, but the coronavirus pandemic has brought unprecedented challenges to their jobs and the industry as they work to comfort families during an uncertain time.

Rick Prindiville, a funeral director and the treasurer of the Florida Cemetery, Cremation and Funeral Association says “This is something we just never really thought we were going to see in our lifetime. It kind of made everybody take a little bit of a step back” (Rice, 2020).

Amy Cunningham, a funeral director in Brooklyn, NY, is quoted as saying “Everything's touched by COVID-19. The virus has altered the procedures entailed with any death of any cause (Lehmann, 2020).” For families, this has led to choosing graveside services more often than in usual times and to postpone gatherings to remember and honor the deceased loved one. Restrictions on gatherings is one cause, but a shortage of workers and space in the funeral industry is another due to the large volume of remains that are the result of the higher than usual death rates. Some in the disposition industry are being infected with the virus and are having to quarantine, which is a hardship in an industry where many firms have four or fewer employees (Lehmann, 2020). According to the National Funeral Directors Association, there were 19,136 funeral homes in the US in 2019, 89.2 percent privately owned by families or individuals (National Funeral Directors Association, 2020).

Sherry Bensimon, an Orthodox Jew and funeral director who serves mainly Jewish families, says “Burying by sundown is almost impossible now as well as performing the traditional preparation of the deceased. There are hardly any chevra kadishas who are willing to perform taharas on COVID-19 deceased. I am one of the few, but I just honestly don't have time because I am so busy trying to arrange removals and permits [required by most states to dispose of the remains] and burials (Lehmann, 2020).”

The largely Catholic community in New Orleans, with many churches closed, can't hold the traditional Mass for the deceased and receive Communion with family, relatives, and friends. Boyd Mothe Jr., president and CEO of Mothe Funeral Homes, which has three locations in Orleans and Jefferson parishes just outside New Orleans, says, “The community support that we all need and desire is missing. My funeral director standing at a distance, many people wearing masks, it all feels very odd because we're used to shaking hands, and in Louisiana we hug and kiss (Lehmann, 2020).”

The Future of the Funeral Industry

Technology is advancing every day and many of these advances are used to make life more convenient in all areas of life, including the times when death intrudes. For example, funeral homes have started to incorporate the internet in funeral services. With families spread all over the world, it can be hard for everyone to attend the service, so funeral homes may incorporate a service like Skype to allow people to visit the family and friends that are at the funeral home. This makes it much easier for people to stay connected to the deceased's family and allows them to send their condolences from far away (Funeral Home Online--Funeral Home Goes High Tech, 2000).

In addition, there has been a significant rise in the in-home funeral business. Not all customers want their funerals to be at the funeral home or in a church. Some wish to have the service at their house, or even just a graveside burial. Funeral businesses are taking advantage of this rising trend and are offering full funeral services to those who choose to have their funeral away from the funeral home. With this, the business can still make money from the offsite funeral and have empty halls for customers that want a traditional funeral.

The "Green Movement" in our society has opened a final disposition market that many are still exploring. Since this a relatively new concept, competition is low, and there is a large target market. The final disposition industry has a marketing opportunity to offer environmentally safe final disposition arrangements. As mentioned earlier, funeral homes offer caskets made of biodegradable material, such as wood or cardboard. By offering these types of caskets, funeral homes can serve the environmentally conscious, who are negatively disposed toward cremation and a traditional funeral service and burial. Funeral homes are also marketing the idea of planting a tree, shrub, or plant over the site where a loved one is buried (Smith, 2003). In 1998, Billy and Kimberley Campbell opened Ramsey Creek Preserve, a 34-acre nature preserve in South Carolina (Stewart, 2008). Their purpose for this property is simple: to conserve land and provide a place for friends and families to naturally bury their loved ones. This method is also cost-effective when compared to traditional funeral burials.

Planet Green (a part of the Discovery corporation) encourages people to add a clause to their will to have their bodies disposed of sustainably (Grover, n.d.). Seventy-nine percent of people in the UK are cremated each year, which represents about 470,000 spread across 300 crematoriums (Pharos Statistic Issue 2019). Approximately 134,000 acres of trees would need to be planted to offset the impact of these 300 crematoriums (EPA.GOV Carbon Calculator, 2020). An article from "The Independent" in the UK states that the energy and emissions involved in cremation are comparable to that of the energy and emissions from driving across America (Hammond, 2019).

Other entrepreneurs are taking advantage of this "green" opportunity. For instance, a company in the Netherlands known as Ibis produces innovative bookshelves meant to be broken down into a coffin at the time of death. The "green" movement in final disposition doesn't always require spending a lot of money. Many websites suggest adding flower and/or tree seeds to your loved one's ashes if you plan to spread the ashes and having invitations and programs printed on recycled paper.

A new green option that also is friendly to all faiths is "bio-cremation." According to the Catholic Register, bio-cremation uses a technique known as alkaline hydrolysis to break down

the body chemically. This process has a carbon footprint of times less than that of standard cremation. A casket isn't required for this process, which results in the saving of trees.

Conclusion

The final disposition industry, “one of the world’s oldest professions,” is currently entering a new season based on changes in American society (Choi, 2008). As previously mentioned, one of the most influential factors affecting the industry in coming years will be the wave of baby boomers growing older and eventually dying. In 2018 the death rate in the United States rose to 8.6 people per thousand, from 8.1 in 2006. This rate has been increasing since 2009 where the US saw a record low of 7.9. This means there will be a significant boom in the industry as the need for disposal will increase. While many funeral homes are independently owned by families and private companies, big corporations like Service Corporation International have begun buying up these companies in preparation for the surge of baby boomers, changing the way funerals will operate for decades to come.

The industry is also experiencing changes due to some forward-thinking entrepreneurs reevaluating the industry’s long-standing traditions. The trend of environmental consciousness has already started to affect the industry and firms are taking note of this trend in American society. Some have begun making environmentally friendly caskets and incorporating other “green” strategies into their businesses (Choi, 2008). Choi mentions Kinkaraco Green Burial Shrouds as an example, which produces burial shrouds that can be personalized to honor the loved one who passed away. Other companies in the industry are discovering ways to revolutionize the process from the traditional funeral and burial, offering themed funerals and even decorative caskets. Some companies even offer funerals at home, where loved ones would be more comfortable than at a funeral home. Although they have been met with some criticism, these nontraditional organizations are doing what they can to stay afloat as cremations and alternative burial methods increase in popularity.

Funeral service firms are dealing with more competition now. New competitors are entering the marketplace. This increased competition has resulted in the loss of profit for many firms. For example, Wal-Mart is targeting funeral service customers. Wal-Mart is offering steel caskets for as little as \$895, urns as low as \$30, and Wal-Mart is becoming a threat to some funeral service industries.

It is said that there are two constants, death and taxes. It would be hard to argue that death shouldn't be listed alongside taxes as a constant. That being said, it is not the case that the means for the disposition of the body of one who has died is either constant or standard. The final disposition industry is in the time of greatest change since the first funeral homes were opened. The wise final disposition entrepreneur will meet the emerging demands of current society for new funeral services and products. Those that do will also seize the profits to be made as the United States culture enters a period when death will become a more frequent visitor. Just as there were industries that profited from the births of the Baby Boomers, there will also be industries that profit from their deaths.

Suggestion for Instructors

The case is appropriate for discussion in courses such as Consumer Behavior, Marketing Management, and strategy courses that have other names. It can be used as a basis for students

to produce a written case analysis, individually or as a group assignment. Alternatively, it can be an assignment that leads to a class discussion or the presentation of conclusions reached by individual students or groups of students. The questions posed in the next section, or some subset of them, can be assigned as guidance for the activities of students. The primary purpose of the questions is to direct student efforts to take what is presented in the case and to do research to discover more and current information for consideration in formulating marketing strategy recommendations. The goal is to help students understand that information is needed for making good decisions rather than jumping to conclusions that are not fact based. The questions, in some cases, are intended to lead students to cast their minds toward strategy recommendations for situations and matters not discussed in the case. For example, one question deals with how the final disposition industry will have to deal with increasing obesity in the US. Another question deals with a final disposition that is totally different from that discussed in the case, i.e., how to help people with the final disposition of a beloved pet. A final purpose of the case is to get students to consider just how many types of businesses are being impacted by the ever-changing environment in which the final disposition industry operates. For some, the changes are bringing difficulties that must be managed while, for other businesses, the changes may bring opportunities. The event planning industry is an example of an industry that may have an opportunity for expanding their business as families opt for a different memorial service than a religiously based funeral. The technology industry should be explored to determine what opportunities are there for what the Covid-19 pandemic is bringing to the process of final disposition. A final example is the charter boat industry where a business might find an expanded market by providing a way for the burial-at-sea of cremains.

Questions for Class Discussion

1. Only a few religions and other subcultural groups were mentioned in the case. What are some of the unique final disposition practices of other subcultures, and how do these practices further impact what final disposition businesses must do to serve all their customers' needs?
2. Obesity is an issue of frequent discussion in the United States. Will the rising number of obese people in the United States have an impact on final disposition businesses? If so, how?
3. More and more obituaries state "in lieu of flowers, donations may be made to . . .", the result is that the floral industry has experienced a sharp drop in demand for flowers for funerals. How should this industry respond to this trend?
4. With more cremations taking place, there are more people seeking ways to dispose of cremains. What are some innovative ideas that businesses could implement to seize this business opportunity? There are legal considerations concerning the disposal of cremains. How can member of the final disposition industry and other businesses help consumers to dispose of cremains in the way they wish to that is within the legal restrictions?
5. More families choose to forego the traditional ceremony or funeral service for a loved one and hold a celebratory event instead. What business opportunities does this create?
6. The body is mainly composed of carbon, the element of diamonds. How can the companies who offer a service to transform cremains into diamonds for the family of one who has died effectively market their service to these consumers?

7. Pets are being elevated to a position in the family above that ever seen in the United States' culture. How should the final disposition business react to this development?

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