RETHINKING CASKET SELECTION ROOMS
An addendum to REINVENTING FUNERAL SERVICE
An analysis of emerging trends in casket merchandising in Europe and The United States

ALTON F. DOODY, JR.
RETHINKING CASKET SELECTION ROOMS

An addendum to

REINVENTING FUNERAL SERVICE

An analysis of emerging trends in casket merchandising in Europe and The United States

ALTON F. DOODY, JR., Ph.D.
Founder
The Doody Group, Inc.
a subsidiary of The York Group, Inc.

Formerly Professor of Marketing
The Ohio State University
“Things are now changing so fast that we must challenge the base premises about how we do business. We must be especially careful to avoid doing better things that we shouldn’t be doing at all.”

Roger D. Blackwell
Professor of Marketing
The Ohio State University

We’ve known it for years, but we just haven’t known what to do about it!

Consumers don’t like casket selection rooms. In fact, they really don’t want anything to do with them – not even our newest, niched and well-appointed selection rooms. They find the total experience of walking into a showroom of full-sized, open caskets to be a very negative and emotionally debilitating experience.

For a long time this has been the opinion of a few individuals in our industry. But now it is the core finding of extensive consumer research conducted by marketing professionals in the U.S. and abroad. The results of this research are so revealing that one research firm stated:

“We have rarely encountered a more negative reaction to a proposition put before consumers.”

It was the conclusiveness and the persuasiveness of this research finding that prompted The Doody Group and York to reconsider the premise of casket selection rooms, or coffin selection rooms as they are referred to in Europe.

Among the words and phrases used by consumers to describe the experience of going into a casket selection room with full-sized, open caskets are:

“It’s awful.”

“It’s eerie.”

“They’re huge (caskets).”
“They are like open jaws waiting to swallow you up.”

“I wouldn’t wish this on my worst enemy.”

“It reminds me of the Holocaust.”

“All I can think about is an airplane accident with bodies dead everywhere, lined up in a school gym.”

As an industry we have now scientifically documented what intuitively we already knew; consumers really do detest casket selection rooms. They project themselves and their own fear of death into each open casket. At the same time, the open caskets also intensify the pain consumers already feel at the loss of a loved one.

Some funeral practitioners cling to the status quo with a kind of misguided “spare the rod and spoil the child” rationale – that failing to add this casket-selection distress to a grieving family’s burden will somehow short-circuit the healing process.

The Quest for a New Paradigm

Until recently there has been no empirical evidence to establish a “best practices” approach to assisting families in their casket selections. This began to change some six to seven years ago with the advent of professionally planned, higher capacity selection rooms. These professionally planned rooms featured improved layouts, better organization and segmentation of the caskets, larger assortments, better lighting, clearer signing and more pleasing environments.

Unfortunately, substantive consumer research was not conducted to evaluate the acceptance of these selection rooms in comparison with more ordinary selection rooms. Anecdotally, however, it is known that funeral practitioners using such rooms were very high in their praise for them.

Superior layouts, lighting and signing were appreciated by consumers. Larger assortments and better organization of caskets were also appreciated by consumers, and since these assortments produced higher sales and profits, they were appreciated by funeral home owners.

In spite of such success stories, however, this new approach to casket selection room planning was only conservatively adopted by the industry. Of the 23,000 funeral homes operating in the U.S., less than 800 of these rooms have been installed. This is approximately a 3.5% rate of market acceptance.

It would appear that these pioneering efforts to improve the design and operation of casket selection rooms were regarded by the industry as “nice, but not necessary.” Even funeral home consolidators, with sophisticated analytical and financial skills, did not embrace these rooms on a chain-wide basis.

Why not? First, these rooms typically did not free up valuable floor space; in fact, in some cases they required more floor space. Second, the cost of these rooms ranged typically between $50,000 and $80,000, which was regarded as too large of an investment by many funeral home owners. Third, casket manufacturers sponsoring the rooms typically required a full line or almost full line commitment to that particular manufacturer’s brand. Fourth, the commitment ranged from three to five years. Finally, these rooms did not fundamentally change the character of casket selection rooms, which still displayed full sized, open caskets. They did little to alleviate the distress that full-size, open caskets cause for grieving families.

Heading In The Opposite Direction: By The Book

In some cases, the quest for a new paradigm has led funeral home operators in the opposite direction: doing away with the casket selection room altogether. It is an approach that has been tried in one form or another for years.

Some funeral homes, lacking space for a selection room, have always sold “out of a book.” In reality, the “book” has been an album of casket pictures, sometimes with a small amount of explanatory text about product features and benefits. A small number of funeral homes have sold from a book convinced that it produces results as good as or better than a full-fledged casket selection room. A few have used a book in deference to consumer
sensitivity, as captured by the title of a recent article: "Do I Have To Go In There?"1

The use of the casket book does fundamentally change the nature of casket selection. It certainly eliminates the space constraints associated with full-size caskets, and facilitates showing the broadest possible assortment of products. It also offers consumers plenty of aesthetic distance from the caskets, and mitigates their full-casket distress.

Unfortunately, recent research2 indicates that selling from a casket book also produces three unhappy side effects. First, the professional photographer’s skill often flatters low-end products, concealing the distinctions between caskets. This can often lead to consumers buying a less desirable product, and sometimes to their being dissatisfied with the product once they actually see it.

The second unhappy effect the research showed is the demand the book places on the funeral arranger. In the recent research, participants who saw quarter-casket displays felt they had much more information to use in their buying decisions. Since the signs in the display actually carried the same information about materials and finishes as the pages in the catalog, the extra information could only have come from actually seeing and touching the product, instead of simply seeing a photograph.

Without the actual product to show the customer, an arranger working from a catalog faces the difficult necessity of explaining all of the differences between products, including the intangibles of "look" and "feel." To a much larger degree, the success and profitability of the funeral home are then dependent on the communication talents of the arranger. If the arranger makes an effort to lead the consumer past the low-end products it can often be perceived as "high pressure", and can lead to decreased customer satisfaction.

The final drawback the research showed is the negative effect the casket book can have on the customer’s perception of the funeral home. Asked to describe their first impressions of funeral homes that sold exclusively from catalogs, some research participants used phrases like "fly-by-night" and "less financially secure." They also reported less confidence that they would be happy with the final outcome. This is not the impression most funeral home operators are trying to make in their customers' minds.

In the long run, one more catalog-related problem is likely to appear: the catalog positions the funeral home as a middleman who sells products that are readily available elsewhere. By breaking the link between the funeral home and the products it sells, the catalog weakens the funeral home’s relationship with the customer. The casket becomes more of a commodity, subject to comparison shopping and price competition.

The Need for a Strategic Breakthrough In Selection Room Planning

A strategic breakthrough in a business is one that has two essential characteristics:

• It creates greatly enhanced customer satisfaction and
• It changes one or more of the key profit variables to produce dramatically improved results.

A popular example of a strategic breakthrough was the introduction of commercial jetliners. In terms of customer satisfaction, the jetliners were twice as fast as the planes they replaced. In addition, they were quieter, more comfortable and greatly more reliable. In terms of key profit variables, jetliners carried twice as many passengers in half the time, which significantly reduced operating costs and dramatically increased profits.

1 "Do I Have To Go In There?,” International Cemetery and Funeral Management, July, 1997, pp. 15-17

2 Focus group research on catalogs in casket selection, September-October 1997, conducted by Competitive Resources, Inc., a market research firm studying various types of casket selection environments.
In funeral service, the York Merchandising Systems™ approach is a strategic breakthrough in funeral product merchandising. It is a system with proven benefits for:

- the ultimate customer
- the funeral arranger
- the funeral home company

This is a classic “win-win” situation. As such, it has the potential of revolutionizing the way caskets are purchased, assorted, displayed and sold to consumers around the world.

The York Merchandising Systems™ approach departs radically from the conventional selection room. Instead of showing full sized, open caskets in a typical selection room of 1,000 to 1,500 square feet, the display features a balanced assortment of wood and metal caskets in less than 500 square feet. The key to the system is the display of fractional casket profiles in specially designed fixtures. The fractional profiles show the details of the casket, including contours, materials, finish and hardware, while the display fixtures also show interior colors and fabrics.

In a room using the York Merchandising Systems™ program, the consumer enters a well-appointed environment that is fundamentally less traumatic than a conventional selection room. This is because the fractional casket display is perceived by the consumer to show “models” or “samples” of caskets rather than the real thing.

Extensive research³ has shown that consumers have no trouble making a selection from the fractional caskets and that they overwhelmingly prefer to choose in this environment. As noted earlier, this is no longer a contentious issue. It is factual, based on surveys and installation experience in various parts of the world.

Users of the York Merchandising Systems™ approach report the following benefits:

- Greater total customer satisfaction
- Enthusiastic support from funeral arrangers
- Increased sales and profitability

GREATER CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

J. D. Power and Associates has developed an international reputation for its customer satisfaction surveys of automobile, airline, computer and other products and services. The size and prominence of this organization is a reminder of how important customer satisfaction is in today’s marketplace. Once ignored by G.M, Ford and Chrysler, the J. D. Power surveys have gained such consumer acceptance that it has forced these huge corporations to restructure significant parts of their businesses to be sensitive to the real product and service demands of the consumer.

Recent research suggests that this may in fact happen in funeral service. As funeral homes become aware that casket selection is an area of considerable consumer dissatisfaction, they may feel a similar need to restructure this area of their businesses. The York Merchandising Systems™ program is proving to be an effective way to do this.

In research sessions, when consumers were asked to describe the overall business practices of firms using the YMS™ displays with those using a conventional casket selection room, the results were revealing. Typical comments were as follows:

"I would say that these [YMS™ users] are thinking people. If they thought enough to show caskets this way, they have probably thought about every other part of their business."

In contrast, firms operating with conventional casket selection rooms tended to be regarded with greater wariness. In focus groups, typical comments included:

"It’s confusing, and overwhelming. All they want to do is sell me something."

In summary, consumers are not only emotionally disturbed by conventional casket selection rooms, they perceive that funeral homes operating such rooms lack sensitivity and progressiveness.

³ Approximately 20 focus group research sessions were conducted in January - May, 1997 by Competitive Resources, Inc. with participants from various parts of the U.S. and various demographic segments.
contrast, consumers perceive that funeral homes operating York Merchandising Systems™ selection rooms are more forward thinking; honest and sensitive to their needs. The YMS™ system appears to directly affect these consumers’ satisfaction with the casket selection process, with a spillover effect on their perception of the funeral home as a whole.

**Enthusiastic Support From Funeral Arrangers**

There is a widely held view in funeral service that one of the great challenges in the industry is the training and motivation of funeral home arrangers. Conventional wisdom holds that, as a group, arrangers are conservative and that they are slow to change. Further, there is the belief that they have their own prejudices or favorites with regard to caskets and that they often prejudge family needs and wants.

Perhaps this is so, perhaps it is not. Perhaps the real problem has been in the assortment and configuration of the selection room. Perhaps we have asked arrangers to do an impossible job: namely, helping families choose a casket in a fundamentally confusing and bewildering environment.

Funeral arrangers probably are no more or no less flexible than other service providers. It’s just that they have been given an almost impossible job to do — to explain in a matter of a few moments a very complex product with deep emotional overtones. They have been asked to do this without the proper tools to do the job effectively.

What we need is a system to bring order out of chaos. A system that takes pressure off of families buying caskets and arrangers selling caskets. A system that instantly explains to the consumer that there are wood caskets and metal caskets. A system that makes it possible to show a wide assortment of caskets. A system that instantly makes it possible for the customer to comprehend value progression and integrity in pricing. A system that shows design, color, finish and hardware in a straightforward way. And, most importantly, a system that reduces the anxiety and emotion on the part of the consumer and the arranger.

The York Merchandising Systems™ room provides the missing link. It provides the environment, the assortment, the display, the interior, the photos and the signage to help the arranger communicate more effectively with the customer. Equally important, it permits both the arranger and the consumer to play their roles in an atmosphere that is substantially less threatening than a conventional casket selection room.

**Increased Sales and Profitability**

It is estimated that casket manufacturers in the United States offer funeral homes some 3,000 different casket models. With such a vast array available, it should follow that funeral homes would offer consumers an extensive choice of caskets, reflecting differences in material, style, color, finish, hardware, interiors and price points.

Ironically, this is the not the case. The typical funeral home still offers only fifteen to twenty caskets in its selection room and, by professional merchandising standards, the typical assortment is out of balance.

A large part of the “out of balance” problem is simple arithmetic. Full sized caskets, displayed individually on pedestals, require approximately 60 square feet each, taking into consideration aisle space, corners, and entry space.

Full sized, double tiered caskets require approximately 35 square feet each. Double tiering does not double capacity owing to the fact that the space in corners is lost in this configuration. Also, with double tiering, it is necessary to provide for wider aisles, so that the bottom caskets can be pulled out.

**A Simple Analysis**

In most retail businesses the evaluation of a display system boils down to two simple questions. First, does the display efficiently and attractively present the optimum assortment of merchandise? Second, does the display create an environment that encourages the consumer to shop, to learn and experience the benefits of our products?
By these measures, the latest research shows that full-size casket selection rooms, even the professionally niched and enhanced ones, fall short of the mark. The space requirement (30-60 square feet per casket) is far from efficient, and prevents many funeral homes from showing the most profitable assortment of merchandise. Limiting the range of features and price-points on display deprives consumers of buying opportunities, and leaves money on the table unnecessarily.

The same can be said for the buying environment created by these rooms. Despite their recent aesthetic enhancements, the full-size, open caskets still cause consumers genuine distress. If our customers cannot tolerate spending time with our products and displays, then they are not likely to see the benefits, or buy the best product they can afford.

In contrast, York Merchandising Systems™ selection rooms do a better job by both measures. The efficiency of their design (15 square feet per casket) lets us offer a broader range of products, and creates additional buying opportunities. Freeing customers from their full-casket distress encourages them to spend more time and appreciate our broader selection.

The York Merchandising Systems™ program also overcomes some of the drawbacks of catalog sales. Consumers can see and touch the products, and perceive the differences between them for themselves. They can appreciate the true value of the product from inches away, without the distortions introduced by professional photography. Most important, the fractional casket display keeps the caskets from becoming a commodity product, and protects the funeral home’s relationship with the customer.

In the final analysis, until now our industry has been doing exactly what Dr. Blackwell said we must avoid. By enhancing the full-size casket selection room the industry is doing better something it shouldn’t do at all. We can (and indeed must) realize the truth of what consumers are telling us in the current research. Our customers want to see and touch the products, but in a less painful environment. If we give it to them, they will reward us with greater loyalty and profitability. If we don’t, they will simply reward someone else who will.