

Casket Printing

Company creates customized coffins

BY PAULA AVEN GLADYCH



Paula Aven Gladych is a freelance writer based in Denver, Colo. She can be reached at pgladych@gmail.com.

PEOPLE LIKE TO THINK that when they die, they will go out in style. They plan their funerals in advance. They purchase plots in cemeteries and choose caskets or cremation urns that best fit their personality. But thanks to digital printing, post-life planning is taking on a whole new level of customization. Advancements in printing, ink and materials technologies have paved the way for more personalized burial options.

Instead of buying the Cadillac of coffins—made from expensive wood or metal—individuals can now choose from more sustainable and customizable options that tap into more traditional printing and digital graphics processes.

“The funeral industry is so traditional, but it is slowly changing because people are not happy with the options they get,” says Mike Grehan, president and CEO of LifeArt International in Hong Kong, which makes caskets out of its proprietary Enviroboard material, a sustainable product made from recycled wood fiber. “Printed coffins are one of those things. People realize you can have a choice, something that looks very different, yet is dignified and respects the person who died and is much more in tune with today’s world.”





LifeArt

LifeArt caskets are sturdy and environmentally friendly. They are made from 97 percent recycled sugar cane waste and recycled cardboard, but when they are assembled and the chosen graphics are printed on them, it is very hard to tell the difference between wooden caskets and LifeArt caskets, Grehan says.

The entire funeral industry is changing, in large part because younger people, those in their 20s and 30s, don't want to do things the way their parents or grandparents did. "They want to be part of the process. They look at caskets and say they are boring," he says.

Grehan believes that within the next 15 years, traditional caskets will fade away, even though there are 35 million

of them sold around the world every year. Products like LifeArt caskets can be designed in an hour and put together in the same amount of time.

"Our product is not conservative. When consumers get a choice, they will go with our product rather than traditional. I liken it to when the Soviet Union existed and everyone drove the Lada (boxy, Russian-made cars). When the wall came down, everyone bought western cars," Grehan says.

LifeArt caskets can be customized online. People can either pick one of 80 stock designs, like one that looks like solid mahogany or has a cross on it, or customize a casket with their own photos and graphics. Once the design is complete, it is sent to the factory where it

is printed on large flatbed printers. In Hong Kong, Life Art uses many devices from HP, Océ, EFI, Teckwin, Polytype and Inca Digital.

"The process is very similar to what you would use for printing point-of-purchase displays—the same principles—we have to use flatbed, large-scale printers. Everything we do, we are very particular about the inks and glues we use," he says.

Everything has to be environmentally friendly, including the plastic handles and screws that are used to carry the caskets. Over the next year, Life Art will begin using biodegradable hardware on its coffins so that every bit of it will disappear over time.

"What we're doing is very different," Grehan says. "I think 10 to 15 years down





the track most caskets will be manufactured this way.”

He points out that enough metal caskets are buried in the ground to rebuild the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. “There is no logical reason for it,” he says.

He also says that the printed coffins are almost always less expensive than traditional products as well.

LifeArt attends trade shows in America, Europe, Australia and Asia.

“I am constantly amazed. We are disintegrating forests to build caskets. It is mad. I don’t understand it. You can buy caskets in Europe made of solid timber from Romania and Bulgaria. They are taking forests out to do it. It is mad, absolutely mad,” Grehan says.

“We use recycled fiber, sugar cane waste. Our board is incredibly strong and can hold a lot of weight. They are light,

only 30 pounds, whereas a traditional casket will be 120-odd pounds. I just shake my head. I’m not an environmentalist, but I believe in what we do. It seems crazy that we chop a tree down to burn it or bury it. It doesn’t make sense. Environmentally we are doing the right thing and it gives consumers ultimately what they want. Choice is very important,” he says.

When they are assembled correctly, coffins made of Enviroboard can hold a 600-pound person, says Eckhard Kemmerer, head of technology at LifeArt International in Australia and one of the founders of the company.

About a decade ago, Kemmerer and Natalie Verdon, who came up with the idea, “set out to tackle the problem of using burial caskets for cremation. Burial caskets are built to last a long time and to resist crushing by the earth that is piled on top. This means that they are heavy and when you use a burial casket in a cremation, the casket produces more greenhouse pollutants than the body it contains. This is clearly unacceptable in a warming world,” he says.

LifeArt designed a cremation casket that performs all the functions of a regular burial casket but with only 1/7th of the global warming impact of existing caskets, Kemmerer adds.

“As it turned out, we can make the caskets in an hour, compared to days for burial caskets. That then created the opportunity to offer custom caskets that can open the meaningful conversations that LifeArt caskets are renowned for,” he says.

People can purchase matching containers to hold their ashes and programs for the service.

America is the next market where LifeArt would like to stake a claim. The company is looking for a company that already knows printing and digital graphics that it could partner with to make more customized caskets locally, Grehan says.

“The challenge for us is on the customization side. We do all the printing in Australia or China. We would like to partner with someone in America to do overnight printing. We do the design work, they print it and we specify the board they have to use,” he says. “We would like to do that this year.”

He adds that there are really no competitors in America. “There are other types of products out there, but they are not what we do.”

LifeArt caskets are getting quite a reputation. They are so unique in the marketplace that there is now a demand for them in movies and TV shows where coffins are needed because they are lightweight. A LifeArt coffin was featured in an episode of the popular British show *Top Gear* and in Billy Connolly’s *Big Send Off*, a television documentary where Connolly explored global customs about death.

“Everyone’s got a story. If I die, I don’t want what everyone else has got. I want to be an individual. The beauty of our product is a family can literally make the casket reflect that individual,” Grehan says. **SDG**