

Where Do the Families You Serve Buy Their Shoes?

Have you ever purchased a pair of hand-measured, hand-sewn, custom-made dress shoes? Not specialized devices designed for medical conditions, mind you, but normal shoes made for typical feet. Would you even know where to get measured for a pair if the desire suddenly hit you?



How many of your consumers buy custom-made shoes that could cost anywhere from \$500 to a \$1,000 per pair or more? Any? If you can honestly answer “yes,” then congratulations, you probably live in a rarified part of the country and maybe you get to perform those \$30,000 hyper-personalized funeral extravaganzas that funeral thinkers have dreamed about for years. I honestly hope you exist and hope you have a very profitable business. Again, congratulations.

So what about the rest of us – the 80 or 90 or perhaps even 99 percent of us who wouldn’t spend half that much on a pair of shoes for ourselves and whose consumers shop to cover their feet at places like Marshalls, Payless, Walmart, even the Salvation Army Store? Could our consumers afford a \$30,000 funeral with all of the bells and whistles – without going hungry for the next five or 10 years?

Look around. How do your consumers dress? Where do your consumers

shop? Haven’t thought about it? Well, according to one source, 138 million people visit Walmart every *week*, and some 84 percent of Americans have shopped at Walmart in the last year.

That’s a lot of people shopping for a bargain, and that’s only one type of store. So let’s face facts: The Walmart, Staples, Chili’s, McDonald’s, Marshalls, Home Depot shopper is the kind of person most funeral directors serve every day of the week. These consumers live in a prepackaged, fast food, do-it-yourself – dare I say “cookie cutter” – sort of world. They aren’t tuned and primed to appreciate extraordinary levels of personalization, and they certainly aren’t prepared to pay for it. Just ask a typical Payless shoe store customer if he or she would pay \$500 for a pair of shoes or try to get a full markup on custom casket panels (admit it, you usually give those away because it feels good) when you offer them to families.

During my 20-plus years in funeral service, I’ve heard numerous industry pundits, leaders, consultants and sales representatives try to teach me the supposed necessity of personalization and customization. I’ve heard the jargon our industry has created, such as “personalized legacy celebrations,” and I have bought into the hopes that accompanied the words. Yet all the while, the local cobblers and tailors and butchers and bakers and florists have all but disappeared, replaced by corporatized facsimiles or “departments” in Walmart or the grocery super store. In other words the consumer world has become less and less customized while we in funeral service were too busy to notice. And all the while consumers continue to put less time, energy and money into funerals, not more.

So what comes next? To be honest, I’m not quite sure. I have barely begun to experiment and I have yet to find a vendor or thinker who understands the direction I’ve begun to take. But the more I look around and acknowledge the consumer world in which we operate and how families more quickly transition to cremation, the more I think of Target and Panera Bread as potential examples, rather than Saks Fifth Avenue and the hand-made-shoe makers of the world. In other words, Target makes money in my neighborhood. Saks? Not so much.

We need to make our families feel important and comforted – that part hasn’t changed. At the same time, we need to remain in business, and as margins shrink, we need methods and resources that let us serve people appropriately while consuming less time and less money. We need thinkers and, more importantly, vendors who can help us learn the lessons of the modern consumer world. And we need associations and leaders who more quickly adapt to our 21st century challenges. ✦



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