

**Now That The Legal Stuff is Over With, Here Comes the Flood: Marketing St. Joseph
Abbey's Caskets**

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Introduction

Hurricane Katrina (“the costliest U.S. hurricane, with estimated damage over \$81 billion and costs over \$160 billion (2005 US dollars)” (Hurricanes, 2015)) tore through the pine forest that Benedictine monks at St. Joseph Abbey harvested for self-supporting income. The monks discovered a higher calling: making hand-crafted cypress caskets for sale (Levitz, 2010). However, the state of Louisiana had a different message for the monks. *“It was a cease-and-desist order and came with threats of thousands of dollars in fines and possible criminal prosecution. Before we even sold a casket, St. Joseph Abbot Justin Brown said”* (Barnes, 2012). They overcame that challenge; now their new challenge was overcoming a major flood.

History of the Abbey

Benedictines lived in a community where they engaged in prayer, reading and works (community service). They looked to Saint Benedict as their founder. Their engagement with society often included education, evangelism and health care (Theisen, 2009). A group of Benedictine monks from St. Meinrad in Indiana came down and established St. Joseph Seminary College near Ponchatoula, Louisiana, in 1889. The abbey moved to a location northwest of Covington, Louisiana, in 1902. A large brick and steel building was built in 1908 after a 1907 fire, and the church was dedicated in 1932 (Finney, 2014). Initially, seminar studies included four years of high school and two years of college. After Vatican II, it became a four-year college seminary program in 1964. A youth camp opened on the campus in 1960 followed by the abbey’s Christian Life Center for retreats in 1965 (Finney, 2014).

St. Joseph Abbey provided education of priests for local parish ministry in the Archdiocese of New Orleans, encouraged both secular and religious cultural arts, and offered prayer retreats. The 36 monks operated Pennies for Bread bakery, made Monk soap, hand-crafted cypress caskets and operated a public cemetery (Stroup, 2014; Barnes, 2012; Finney, 2014; Levitz, 2010). The monks engaged in these ministries to generate revenue to help cover the costs of running of the seminary as well as to pay their health care costs. Hurricane Katrina threatened their revenue generation and forced them to find a new source: selling hand-crafted caskets.

St. Joseph Woodworks

St. Joseph Abbey invested in a woodshop on the campus in late 2007 to start making the coffins (Levitz, 2010). Deacon Mark Coudrain “*approached Brown with the prospect of turning the abbey’s occasional coffin construction into a business*” given the loss of timber revenue due to Katrina (Barnes, 2012). After prayer and a vote, the monks bought \$200,000 in equipment to “*establish St. Joseph Woodworks*” (Barnes, 2012). The workshop dedication was in early November 2007; a local Catholic newspaper highlighted the dedication (Barnes, 2012).

Several of the monks worked with Coudrain, a woodworking enthusiast, along with volunteers from the Covington area. St. Joseph Woodworks (SJW) offered two versions, a monastic style model with metal handles that now sold for \$1,700 (originally \$1,500) and a traditional honey-colored cypress model with wooden rail handles that originally sold for \$2,000. Its selling price was now \$2,250. Both models can be modified for the overweight person. Each casket was blessed and marked with a medal of Saint Benedict. SJW also offered a cremation urn at \$350 (Barnes, 2012; <http://saintjosephabbey.com/woodworks-caskets.php>).

“We make every attempt to deliver your casket as soon as possible. If it is within our local area, same day delivery is available. If it is outside of our local area, we can contact different shippers and let you know the cost. We deliver for free to locations within 100 miles round trip of the Abbey. Locations over 100 miles require an additional charge of \$.75 per mile round trip” (Casket Delivery, 2017).

The Funeral Industry

The funeral industry had grown by leaps and bounds over the years. It’s estimated that the U.S.A. funeral market was approximately \$20.7 billion, with about 2.4 million funerals per year (“The Economics,” 2015). A price comparison of SJW’s products with coffins available online from Costco, Walmart and two other firms, plus statistics from the funeral industry, can be seen in Table 1 below. An adult funeral cost \$708 in 1960 (\$5491.64 in 2012 dollars) and \$1,809 in 1980 (\$5040.48) by comparison (Cost, 2015; CPI Inflation Calculator, 2015). “*Over the past decade, the median cost of an adult funeral in the United States has increased 28.6 percent*” (Statistics, 2015). The U.S. national cremation rate for 2014 was projected to be 46.7% and by 2030, it was projected that the cremation rate will reach 70.6% (Cremation Facts, 2015; see also Bond, 2015). “*The national median cost of a funeral with viewing and cremation in 2014 was \$6,078*” (Statistics, 2015). However, a “*total cremation package can run as high as \$11,540*” (Goins, 2016, p. 40).

Funeral homes used to be the only source for coffins and other funeral services. “*The field’s Big Three companies—Hillanbrand [Batesville brand], Matthews International, and Aurora Casket—controlled 70 percent of the market*” (Herbert, 2015). However, caskets began selling on the Internet in the 1990s; Costco started selling them in 2004 [followed by Walmart a few years later], and now funeral homes were importing caskets from China (see Herbert, 2015). Over the first 70 years or so of the 20th century, funeral services were sold for one price (casket plus other services) with no breakdown of costs provided. In 1972, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) began an investigation into the funeral industry. “*In 1984 the FTC passed*

the Funeral Rule, which ended prepackaging and forced funeral homes to provide price sheets and offer services and products a la carte” (Herbert, 2015). It was estimated that the typical family in mourning would spend between \$10,000 and \$12,000 on a funeral. “*Caskets range in cost from \$795 to \$9,595. And the costs of ‘outer burial containers’ ranges from \$1,495 to \$18,995*” (Goins, 2016, p. 40). A breakdown of the costs, based on prices charged by a group of Louisiana funeral homes, was provided in Table 2 below. Funeral home marketing included local newspaper advertising, websites, and occasionally, television advertising.

Table 1: Cost Comparison (in US dollars)

	SJW	Costco	Walmart	Funeral Industry*	Trappist Caskets (Peosta, IA)#	Overnight caskets.com
Casket (metal unless wood noted)	2250.00 (wood)	949.99	888.23 (sale)	2395.00	1,200 to 1,500 (wood, shaped)	1050.00 (sale)
Compete Funeral	---	---	---	7181.00		---
Vault	---	---	---	1327.00		---
Cremation Urn (wood)	350.00	119.99	132.19	---	350.00 to 450.00	400.00 (wood casket, unassembled)

Price comparisons done online on July 21, 2016. *Median Cost, 2015; Statistics, 2015. #<http://trappistcaskets.com/>, July 21, 2016.

The Lawsuit

“After a local Catholic newspaper publicized the effort, the Louisiana State Board of Embalmers and Funeral Directors slapped the abbey with a cease-and-desist order” (Levitz, 2010). The state board decided to enforce a Louisiana law that mandates that only a licensed funeral parlor can sell “*funeral merchandise.*” The board hired an investigator who did catch Deacon Coudrain in the act of delivering a Woodworks casket to a funeral home in southeastern Louisiana (Levitz, 2010). The monks sought help from area state legislators between 2008 and 2010, lobbying for them to pass legislation that would broaden casket distribution (Levitz, 2010). In 2010, two abbey officials were subpoenaed by the state board to a hearing; they could have been fined up to \$2,500 per violation. The hearing was postponed due to a tropical storm (Levitz, 2010). Over the three years the monks had only sold, quietly, around 60 caskets (Levitz, 2010). Darin Bordelon, a Ville Platte funeral home owner, said the state’s funeral board was “*making us all look greedy*” (Levitz, 2010).

Table 2: List of Set Prices

Services	Price
Basic services of funeral director/staff & overhead	\$3,195
Preparation of the body	1,195
Dressing & casketing of the deceased	195
Bathing & handling of unembalmed deceased	195
Refrigeration	295
Restoration (per hour)	100
Use of facilities/staff services for visitation	430
Additional Fees	
Use of facilities/staff services for chapel funeral service	695
Use of facilities/staff services for chapel memorial service (no remains present)	695
Transportation of remains from place of death to funeral home	595
Hearse	395
Forwarding remains to another funeral home	3,495
Receiving remains from another funeral home	2,795

Source: Goins, B. (2016, September 1). Rest in peace. *Lagniappe*, pp. 39-40.

Meanwhile, the monks were busy seeking legal assistance from the Virginia-based Institute for Justice. On August 12, 2010, the St. Abbey monks charged that the state Board of Embalmers and Funeral Directors [BEFD] were attempting to maintain a casket cartel, and that board members were mostly engaged in the industry they regulated (“Benedictine monks,” 2010). “‘A casket is just a box and you do not even need one for burial,’ said Institute for Justice senior attorney Scott Bullock. ‘There is no legitimate health or safety reason to license casket sellers’” (Drake, 2010). In the suit filed with the U.S. District Court in New Orleans, the abbey’s attorneys stated that, “under federal rules, funeral directors must accept a casket that a family has purchased elsewhere” (Barnes, 2012).

In July 2012, U.S. District Court Judge Duval “ruled Louisiana’s restrictions unconstitutional, saying ‘the sole reason for these laws is the economic protection of the funeral industry’” (Barnes, 2012). BEFD promptly filed an appeal with the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in New Orleans. On March 19, 2013, the Court of Appeals “upheld a lower-court’s decision to strike down a state law limiting casket sales to licensed members of the funeral industry” (Sayre, 2013). Abbot Brown said, “We’re just really thankful we can continue, because it means a lot to people” (Sayre, 2013). The decision of the three judges was applauded by the editors of *The Washington Times*, who noted the law “was such an obvious case of economic protectionism that the monks turned to the courts for relief” (“Editorial,” 2013).

BEFD made one last appeal, to the U.S. Supreme Court. However, on October 15, 2013, the court refused to consider the appeal. The justices decided not to review the lower court decision; by doing so, a national legal precedent was not set. They did confirm that the “*Benedictine monks ... were not breaking the law by handcrafting plain cypress caskets and selling them to Louisiana residents*” (Finney, 2013; see also Savage, 2013).

The Aftermath

The case worked out better than the monks had hoped. *“I was hesitant at the beginning to file the lawsuit. But it’s the best thing that could have happened to our business,”* Abbot Justin Brown was reported as saying. Brown also said that after this excellent publicity, they were selling more caskets than they had ever expected. Brown concluded that *“I think a lot of people heard about our case against the funeral directors and decided to buy one of our caskets”* (Savage, 2013). Coudrain noted that the legal fight had gone viral, generating lots of publicity which *“doubled’ casket sales”* (Finney, 2013). He also said, *“Now we can begin to think about advertising and things like that”* (Finney, 2013), in order to generate revenue after Hurricane Katrina.

The success of St. Joseph Abbey over the BEFD led to the opening of a new business in Lake Charles, Affordable Caskets, owned by Kit Kittrell (Goins, 2016). Kittrell had tried starting his business in 1996 but got shut down by BEFD. He offered fiberboard and hardwood do-it-yourself casket kits for \$550 or more (Goins, 2016, pp. 38-39). His website offered various types and colors of caskets from infant size at \$297 to the Everest model for \$4,170.50, among others (Affordable Caskets, 2017a). Urns range in price from the Blue and White model at \$49.84 to the Butterfly model at \$290.72 (Affordable Caskets, 2017b).

The 2016 Flood

On March 11, 2016, the abbey’s campus suffered a historic flood that resulted in almost two feet of water in most of the buildings; all buildings had water. Cleanup began; the Woodworks shop was getting back to operational status roughly three weeks later as machinery had to be dried out and tested. Thankfully, the monks had stored their caskets out of the way of the floodwaters. SJA lost their beehives; honey made was sold in the gift shop, which was also lost (Hasselle, 2016; Canulette, 2016; About Woodworks, 2017). *“When the water receded, it left in its wake about \$30 million in damage and a challenge unlike anything the seminarians and Benedictine monks have ever faced”* (Canulette, 2016). Several fundraising efforts were underway since the Abbey did not have any flood insurance. They were also hoping for financial assistance from the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) (Canulette, 2016; Hasselle, 2016).

James Shields, communication director, noted that *“the monastery makes about 250 caskets a year, with the help of 23 volunteers and one monk”* (Hasselle, 2016). The legal challenge, after Hurricane Katrina, had been met; now the monks were faced with recovering from the massive flood and keeping the casket building and marketing on track to maintain revenue generation.

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