Alumni

How to Pay Less for a Funeral

Titan Casket, a direct-to-consumer startup, promises to ease the burden of burial costs.

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Scott Ginsberg and Joshua Siegel. (Titan Casket)

The products come in different shapes and sizes, with a choice of more than twenty colors. Interiors are cushioned and inviting. You can even customize your model by adding special designs or head panels. At Titan Casket, shopping online for an urn or casket is like choosing the car that you will drive forever.

“Our core belief is that a family should plan a funeral at their kitchen table and not with salespeople in a funeral parlor,” says Joshua Siegel ’08BUS, who with Scott Ginsberg ’95BUS cofounded the company to bring the direct-to-consumer shopping experience to casket sales, complete with free shipping. “Having this option gives people some control during a difficult process — and we can help them save a ton of money.”

Many people assume that their casket choices are limited to what a funeral home offers to sell them. But in fact, the Federal Trade Commission gives families the right to buy caskets outside the funeral home and have them sent there. Ginsberg, who had already been in the business for twenty years before cofounding Titan Casket, recalls watching grieving families struggle to afford a burial. “The average casket can cost a family more than $3,000, which is outrageous,” Ginsberg says. “I wanted to provide a less expensive option and a less stressful experience.”

Ginsberg, Titan Casket’s CEO, started the company in 2016 and soon began looking for a partner with expertise in digital commerce. Through the Columbia B-school alumni database, he connected with Siegel, who’d worked in e-commerce for a decade at Amazon. Siegel and his wife, Liz, joined Ginsberg in 2020 as cofounders.

Titan sells caskets (rectangular), coffins (hexagonal, “like what Dracula uses,” says Ginsberg), cremation urns, and related accoutrements on its website and through Sam’s Club, Costco, and Amazon.

For a casket, “our average selling price is around $1,300,” Ginsberg says, which is about the price of a midrange mattress. Most shoppers buy caskets for deceased loved ones, but more and more are ordering for themselves (in advance, of course). You can choose a simple pine box (Eco I or Eco II, both $999) or something as luxe as gold-colored stainless steel (Majesty Gold, $2,999). You can also make your final journey in cardboard (Titan Virtue, $499) or handcrafted wicker (Titan Seagrass, $2,049). And to offset the 250 pounds of carbon that Ginsberg says the average burial puts into the atmosphere over time, Titan Casket plants ten mangrove trees in East Africa for each casket sold. “Ten trees take 250 pounds of carbon out of the atmosphere each year, which is many times the impact of that burial,” Ginsberg says. With their baked-in social concern and rainbow selection, Scott and Josh are pretty much the Ben and Jerry of the casket world.



Pop goes the casket: Taylor Swift in a Titan. (YouTube)

And it’s an ossified world, Ginsberg says — ripe for a shakeup but hard to break into. Marketing is tricky, because caskets are not something most people want to think about. Still, when Ginsberg and Siegel learned last year that a pop megastar had used a Titan casket (Orion Series, copper, $1,299) in the video for her song “Anti-Hero” (the star, encased, lifts the lid to spy on her own funeral), Siegel e-mailed the media with an irresistible subject line: “Taylor Swift used my casket in her funeral-themed music video.” Titan Casket got a lot of press, though this did not immediately translate into sales, given the demographic of Swift’s audience — what Siegel calls “a very long purchase cycle.”

In the meantime, the orders keep coming, and Titan must deliver — quickly. “The funeral might be next Monday and I need to get that casket there,” Siegel says. “It must get there in a timely fashion. It cannot be late. Many things can be late and it won’t make a difference. But with this, you don’t get a second chance.”

This article appears in the Fall 2023 print edition of Columbia Magazine *with the title* "*Death and the Salesmen.*"

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