Changing the way the UK plans and organise Funerals – One Coffin at a Time

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Steven Mitchell is angry. A shipper has broken the coffin on the way to the funeral, “we can never fail”. Within 5 minutes, he orders another coffin and arranges for express delivery to ensure the coffin arrives in time for the funeral.

Such inadequate service is, Steven says, almost par for the course in an industry in which the “customer” – the bereaved or the person actually about to die – has been ripped off for a very long time.

“People can’t get away with this sort of thing,” he says. “The whole thing about the funeral business is it’s the client that’s dependant. They need the funeral for a good reason.”

If the business is a rip off, one sign is the price of the coffin charged by some funeral directors.

“I’d never planned a funeral before. Now a couple of years ago one of the guys I worked with died – the guy was originally from abroad and so we helped arrange the funeral.

“The family chose a very, very large funeral chain – when we started to look at prices of the coffin, even given the fact he was a big guy, I just thought they were a rip off.

“Look at the coffin, it’s about a 400% to 600% mark up on a coffin wholesale. And then you’ve got things like transport, preparing the body, professional fees, perfumation fees, fees for the celebrant. The objective is to put a mark up on every single one of those.”

Funeral costs can easily leave shocked customers struggling to find change out of £5,000 to £7,000 or more and the cost is rising. Current 6-7% per year according to the ‘Cost of Dying Report’

“I don’t mind anyone making a living as long as they don’t take the ****,” Steven says. “The point is people can’t negotiate because they’re not in a mood to, and of course they don’t want to appear cheap.”

Dead easy

His solution? He believes you should get online with the new business he created after his bad experiences - www.ComparetheCoffin.com - to make sure you get the funeral you, or somebody else, deserve.

The website offers three basic solutions: the coffin shop, immediate plans and future plans. Catchphrases for his business include - “*Go Your Own Way!*”.

The **coffin shop** allows customers to browse and buy the coffin of their choice. Steven offers a key *price promise* – if you find it cheaper anywhere else, he’ll refund the difference.

“We’re on average about half the price of what funeral directors will charge,” he says. “And we are definitely the cheapest on the internet because I know what everyone else is charging.”

Be careful, though, he warns, there is some poor quality out there!

PICTURE HERE EG OF MOURNERS AT A FUNERAL

One of Steven’s key points in the funeral business is that comparing is hard, and this becomes apparent when creating plans for someone who has just died with the funeral director (FD).

“You literally have to get up and go to two, three, four, five funeral directors, sit down, go through the plan with the kind of funeral you want, and then hopefully you get a broken down list of costs that looks roughly the same so you can compare and then hopefully get a choice,” he explains.

He quotes research saying less than one in 10 people ever speak to more than one FD and sometimes it’s just someone they’ve seen on the high street. “Why not compare if you’re going to spend thousands of pounds?” he asks.

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Who's not coming?

He offers his **immediate plan** service to offer such comparison – it is basically a funeral comparison service if a person is about to die or has actually passed.

"I've done some mystery shopping - unless you have a definite plan the funeral director ends up giving you option A, B or C," he says.

The bespoke plan will include details ranging from how will the body be prepared, to the what, where and how of the funeral. Specifics might include: embalming, how will the mouth be secured, the sex of the FD, what music or type of ceremony, possible religious imagery, who's coming or even - who is definitely *not* to be there?

"A good FD should ask you these details, but they tend to just take over," he says. "Sometimes they'll offer you nothing more than a traditional coffin, not even wicker."

The bit no-one wants to do, he says, is put the body in the box or presenting the person for a viewing, which he describes as "a skill and a half".

The immediate plan gets sent to over 400 registered FDs. Those who wish can contact the customer directly offering their services and the user can decide which one to use in a sort of e-bidding platform. Comparethecoffin.com will then send the coffin to the appropriate FD.

Ideal responses number just more than half a dozen. The bereaved can contact the FDs directly as well. The system is fully automated.

The third service Steven offers is **future plans**.

"You can plan your own - it's free, you can update it as much as you want, save it, email it to people, it all gets saved in a clever format," he says. "As part of that we can help with pre-payment plans, getting a will etc, speaking to a financial advisor, that sort of thing."

A coffin to die for

A nice touch in the funeral business seems to be the bespoke coffins now available on the market, Steven explains.

He tell us of Mary from Coventry who ordered a special coffin for her father Dr Hayward who had a particular fondness for a brand of bakewell tarts. They got permission for the design use and even sent a case of tarts to the wake. An extra lid, with the doctor's own best before date for all to see, was made so it could be kept as a memento after the cremation.

One lady with cancer is thinking about her funeral because she doesn't want her family to have to think about it, Steven says.

"She's going to buy the coffin, she's going to arrange which funeral director is going to do it, she's going to plan it out. She's not in remission yet, she's in the final stages of chemo then she'll order the coffin.

"She's already decided the coffin she wants – she's a scuba diver. Look at the fin, it's specially designed!" **(see picture above)**

After the funerals are completed, Comparethecoffin sends the customer a feedback form to collect information both on the coffin and the service they received from their chosen FD.

The future's bright, the future's comparethecoffin.com

Steven is a man of many talents - he works full time in IT but also dabbles in other areas and does some campaigning, as well as spending time with his family. He also has big international plans for comparethecoffin.com but will it take over his day job?

"At the moment we are selling quite a lot but the phone is not continually off the hook," he says. "It's ringing twice a day not twice an hour. We will do publicity and articles. We've got over 3000 people who have already loaded a free funeral plan into the system. "It's a free community resource for anyone to use."

Some TV ads might be in the pipeline. Sound familiar? “Yes, we already bought comparethepuffin.com!” he laughs, comparing with the other big brand.

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