

Offering Homegrown "China Prices"

By Jeremy Haft



Here's a little corporate kung fu: using China to compete with China. Savvy companies today are importing goods from China to defend their markets from Chinese competition. A midsize Long Island wholesaler of medical dental products was facing Chinese heat on its low-priced products—the "film mounts" into which dentists slip their tiny X-ray photos before placing them on the backlit screen. In order to defend these product lines, the wholesaler turned to a U.S.-based China sourcing firm.

These products look pretty simple, but they require three different manufacturing processes. The paper and plastic sheets must be rolled, then stamped, then printed with the client's logo. They might not require the precision of surgical equipment, but they definitely require competence on the part of the factory.

It took the sourcing firm some time to get its bearings. It hadn't produced this kind of product before, and had to go searching for factories. It bid out the job among five suppliers, and was enticed by the especially low price point of one particular China shop.

The reason the price point was so low was because the factory intended to use human stampers instead of machines to save money and free up their stamping machines for other jobs. Linemen took the large sheets of rolled paper and plastic and cut them by hand out of stencils with large knives. The technique was slow and rife with human error. First articles did not pass inspection. Neither did the second batch. Or the third. Finally, the sourcing firm realized it had enlisted the wrong sort of supplier and turned to slightly higher-priced, but competent, firms that had the necessary equipment and trained personnel to make the film mounts according to client specifications.

Despite losing some time, the Long Island importer was able to keep its current customers in tow by offering them "China prices" that matched or beat

With all the challenges obese people face throughout life, there is now one more difficulty they can add to their checklist—death. Standard coffins simply cannot fit seriously overweight individuals. With demand, though, has come supply: The funeral business has followed the lead of other industries moving to accommodate the needs of an increasingly larger population. As people have expanded, so have caskets.

And so has business for Julane Davis, who, along with husband Keith, runs Goliath Casket Co. The small company, based in Lynn, Ind., has been building coffins for those "with oversize needs" since 1985. "Before we came along," Davis explains, "overweight people had no choice but to be buried in some unattractive wooden box. Our goal is to give them a more dignified death."

Twenty-three years ago, the standard coffin was 24 inches wide. Unlike the average waistline, that number has not increased since then. Though Goliath was making 33-inch-wide caskets by 1990, that measurement remains the widest most manufacturers will produce due to technical

problems involving production lines and shipping crates. Today, Goliath's widest coffin, the "Homestead," is 52 inches, about the size of a double bed—which still pales in size to the company's biggest-ever custom-made casket, a 7-by-7-foot crate for a 900-pound Alaska man.

Meanwhile, Americans aren't the only ones dying fatter—obesity is a worldwide epidemic. Even the Swedes are straying from their traditionally healthy Nordic image. According to Statistics Sweden, one in ten Swedes is now considered obese—double the number of two decades ago. As a result, more Swedes are being buried in extra-large coffins such as those pictured above, at a Fredahl AB factory in the southern town of Asarp. Swedish authorities and Julane Davis agree on what's driving this trend: As Davis says, "People are overeating." But even though overeaters translate into greater sales for Goliath, she notes regretfully that "the average age of people who are buried in our coffins is fortysomething. I'd sooner prefer that they live healthier and longer."

—VADIM LIBERMAN