

by Robbie Tarpley Raffish

# Licensing's Final Frontier: Eternal Image Puts its own Brand on the Funeral Industry

While the old adage “you can’t take it with you” remains the ultimate truism, Clint Mytych is betting that more and more people – especially rapidly aging “Me Generation” Baby Boomers - will want to leave a little more of their legacy behind. With 62% of Americans saying they expect to prefer personalization of their funerals when their time comes (according to a National Funeral Directors Association [NFDA] study), Mytych, age 26, is the unlikely young pioneer of a dramatic new industry approach: licensed brand funeral products.

Mytych’s idea was to design an entirely new line of urns and caskets from the ground up. They would feature popular and meaningful licensed brand logos, applied in a similar way to how they are employed on autos, home furnishings and sporting equipment. The approach is revolutionizing the funeral industry.

At the 2006 NFDA Expo in Philadelphia last October, Mytych and his management team showcased the first, licensed-image funeral products. To many a surprised attendee, these included urns and caskets featuring Major League Baseball®, Precious Moments™ and the Vatican Library Collection™, as well as pet urns featuring the American Kennel Club™.

The attention was instantaneous. From reporters calling Mytych on the show floor

for interviews to distributors and funeral homes filling the voicemail in the Michigan office requesting materials, it seemed that he had struck a nerve.

“It may not be PC to say in a funeral publication, but my goal was not to change the funeral industry, per se, but rather to find an industry where licensing had yet to be applied,” said Mytych. “After a ton of research, we isolated the funeral industry as one of the last frontiers for marketing innovation – a business virtually unchanged for centuries.”

According to Beth Cooper, vice president of P&J Cooper Supply of Barrington, NJ, Mytych had tapped into a mother load of potential.

“During the last five years the call from consumers to customize their funerals has risen exponentially. People are planning their own funerals and adding their favorite music from Gershwin to the Grateful Dead. They are adding readings, program booklets, even tokens of remembrance to be handed out to mourners.”

She added, “Families are creating photo displays, slide shows, even video compilations to memorial services. Eternal Image’s introduction of brand image funeral products was a very logical next step, and the consumer is embracing it.”

The acceptance became apparent in the first quarter of 2007. EI VP of sales and marketing, Nick Popravsky, recalls receiving a call from a distributor requesting a mix of Major League Baseball® urns (there are eight teams represented in the first “wave” of production – all 30 teams will be represented by the end of 2008.)

“I had to tell him (the distributor) that he would have to wait about six

weeks – we had sold out our entire first order.” Popravsky immediately placed another order for product: doubling the size of the first.

At press time the company had sold out more than half of its first Vatican Library Collection™ urn order and two-thirds of its initial AKC™ pet urn order (which had been pre-selling on AKC.com, Cherrybrook.com and Dog.com.) Precious Moments™ urns are expected this summer.

“We are ramping up everywhere,” said Donna Shatter, VP of operations for EI. “It’s going to be a crazy summer because we will also deliver our first Major League Baseball®, Vatican Library Collection™ and Precious Moments™ caskets this fall.”

Shatter will spend some of the second and third quarters traveling over seas to manage quality control on these new additions. And just to keep it even in the pet world, the company will introduce cat urns branded by the Cat Fanciers’ Association™ this fall.

## The Big Idea

The idea for licensed-image caskets and urns had been brewing within Mytych for some time. He had the inspiration for EI in 2000, when he was just 20 years old. Two years later, he was helping to manage a luxury car rental company called, Driven Image, with Popravsky. The pair, with Shatter, began seriously considering seeking funding to launch the venture. It took nearly two years to get the seed money they would need to acquire licenses and begin designs and tooling.

“Instinctively this idea was a no-brainer,” recalled Bob LeRea, an investor in Eternal Image since the company’s start. “I think what held people back from investing in it was not whether it would sell, but having confidence that the first licensors would be credible enough not to be laughed out of the door. It was going to take serious strategy to make sure that did not happen.”

In 2004, Mytych and Popravsky approached Woody Browne, a licensing industry veteran and founder of the marketing and licensing



*The second half of 2007 and much of 2008 will be focused on producing and delivering complementing caskets for the Major League Baseball, Precious Moments and Vatican Library Collection urn lines.*

# EI ETERNAL IMAGE



The first Vatican Library Collection™ urn.



Donna Shatter, vice president of operations, manages quality assurance on each of the company's lines.

firm Building Q (Medford, NJ.) Browne immediately saw the potential and signed on to help EI set a strategy for acquiring licenses.

“We were very selective about who we approached. We knew the first licensors had to be trusted names – leaders in their own industries that other companies already perceived as wise,” said Browne.



Nick Popravsky, vice president of sales and marketing, is working to assure distribution of EI products nationwide, and beyond.

“At first companies were incredulous,” he continued. “You could see it on the faces of the licensing executives. The idea of putting their brand image on a casket or urn was in turns astounding, amusing and amazing. But, once prospects recovered from the shock of the idea, many saw the benefits of allowing their most devoted fans to extend their relationship with a team or company through the funeral process.”

Some of the interested companies saw the tremendous potential, but were concerned with being the first to commit. Mytych and Popravsky solved that problem by launching the first four licensors as a group.

“Our first four licenses were household names,” said Mytych. “As a group they conveyed that this was not some hair-brained idea – it was good business sense.”

According to Howard Smith, SVP Licensing, MLB Properties, the time was ripe for the

idea. “Major League Baseball has the most unique relationship with its fans, as they are closer to baseball than any other sport. Year after year, we are approached by our Clubs asking for approval to allow a departed fan one last opportunity to demonstrate their passion for their favorite team. Our relationship with Eternal Image provides our fans just that opportunity.”

And, to prove the point, fan response was overwhelming. “The day we made the announcement in Philadelphia we got more than 100 calls from fans wanting to know where they could buy the products,” remembered Popravsky. “Our waiting list for individual teams grows daily.”

### Expanding the Offerings

Mytych and Popravsky are constantly asked, “What’s next for EI?” Obviously there are more licenses out there, and the pair is always looking for the next “right” partner – companies strong enough to see the possibilities and take the leap.

There are also other roads to be traveled.

“This is only the beginning. Nearly 500,000 vaults and a million monuments were sold in America last year, and we are working to capitalize on these opportunities,” said Mytych.

The company is also turning its eye overseas – discussing a partnership with a major European manufacturer to market products in Europe.

“There is tremendous potential in Europe, particularly for the Vatican Library Collection™ line,” said Popravsky. “Consumers in Europe are catching on to the customization of funerals, and the time is ripe for branded funeral products worldwide.”

Hearing that, Mytych just sits back and smiles a little. No matter how old you are, when you are right, you are right.

**For more information on Eternal Image and their products, call 888.622.7538, or visit [www.eternalimage.net](http://www.eternalimage.net).**

### Nine Ways to Make it Personal

Your customer wants to personalize a funeral, but does not know where to start. Clint Mytych of Eternal Image would (obviously) tell you a licensed-brand image casket or urn is one thing to consider. He also offers nine other good ideas that can help your customer tailor the day to reflect a life well-lived:

1. Use a consistent theme that represents a love of the person’s life for the casket or urn, decor and music. For example, if the person was a baseball fan: place memorabilia from a favorite team around the room; display photos of the person at the ballpark; play the instrumental of “Take Me Out to the Ballgame” and consider using an official Major League Baseball® licensed-image casket or urn.
2. Gather photos and quotes (or lyrics) that were loved by or exemplify the person. Display the photos and quotes as a slide show on a continuous loop.
3. Frame baby pictures and place them around the room during the viewing.
4. During the viewing, play a song, band, or genre of music that the person loved.
5. Display awards and honors won by the loved one during the viewing.
6. Create a flower arrangement where each flower represents a person or memory. For example, display a bouquet of ten small flowers each representing a grandchild. The grandchildren can then each take a flower home with them after the ceremony.
7. Hold a balloon or butterfly release at the grave, and suggest in the service that each one represents a memory of the deceased.
8. Hold a short, candlelit ceremony. Give each guest a small candle. Say something about the person being remembered as each candle is lit.
9. Display a complete family tree, or have family members fill-in their names as they arrive. This can substitute a guest sign-in. Non-family members can be on their own “branch” or on a list to the side of the tree. **FBA**