DEATH GOODS: DEATH ANXIETY PREVENTS PURCHASE AND PREPARATION

FAYETTEVILLE, Ark. – As the body count continues to rise at the crematory in Nobel, Ga., many Americans have discovered that they do not understand and are unprepared to cope with the business of death. This doesn’t surprise University of Arkansas researcher Steve Kopp, who has studied the effect of death anxiety on the purchase of end-of-life (EOL) products and services.

Kopp, associate professor of marketing in the Sam M. Walton College of Business, conducted his research with Brian Pullen, a project manager in the department of institutional research. He reported their findings recently at the American Marketing Association Conference in Austin, Texas, where they received the Best Paper Award.

Kopp’s research represents a unique approach to the study of death. It is one of the few projects to examine the relationship between theory and how consumers behave.

While more than 1,000 articles have been published about death anxiety and the fear of death, their focus is primarily on therapeutic issues. Few studies have looked at American consumption behaviors as they relate to death and the ones that have provide little theoretical context. Almost no information exists on the relationship between theoretical constructs like death anxiety and consumer decisions and behaviors related to EOL goods and services such as funeral insurance, caskets, cemetery plots, life insurance and wills.
People often deny the existence of death through psychological and behavioral defenses, which may include attitudes and behaviors related to consumption, according to Kopp. By correlating the psychological and behavioral aspects, he found that death anxiety was strongly associated with EOL goods.

“America is a death-denying society,” explained Kopp. “While some insight can be gained from what people say about their attitudes toward death, their behaviors may tell a different story. We wanted to know the story consumer behavior would tell, since it has not really been studied before.”

When it comes to death, there is frequently a difference between what people say and what they do. For example, 75 percent of respondents in a 1990 survey said that prearranging their own funeral made sense, but less than 25 percent of those respondents actually made, or intended to make, such plans. Although they acknowledge that pre-arrangements are efficient and beneficial, most consumers avoid making the decisions for final consumption and leave the task to someone else.

Kopp surveyed more than 300 adults ranging in age from 23 to 88. They first administered the Templer Death Anxiety Scale, which is the most widely accepted measure of death anxiety. Then they asked the respondents about their purchase or intent to purchase of a wide variety of specific products and services, including EOL goods, computers, electronics, and cable services.

“As the death anxiety score rose, the purchase of EOL goods declined,” Kopp said. “We did not find any relationship between death anxiety and any of the other products, but there was a significant relationship between death anxiety and the purchase of EOL goods.”

All of the respondents had at least a high school education; 72 percent had attended college and 42 percent had a college degree. The median family income was $2,750 per month, 75 percent were married, 61 percent were working and 39 percent were retired or unemployed.

Wills and life insurance were the most popular EOL products, with 63 percent indicating that they had or intended to purchase a will and 61 percent wanting life insurance. Caskets were the least desirable EOL product, with only 20 percent of the respondents indicating they intended to purchase one. They were followed closely by funeral insurance (33 percent) and cemetery plots (40 percent).

“One thing we learned from this research is that there is a lot more that needs to be done before we understand the relationship between attitudes toward death and consumer behavior,”
Kopp said. “There is a large body of death studies literature associated with psychological factors that need to be tested empirically. There are a number of products whose purchase may be affected by death concerns to varying degrees.”

Kopp’s research was sponsored in part by the Center for Retailing Excellence in the Walton College. He is currently extending his work to the national level to look at the relationship between death anxiety and attitudes toward physician-assisted suicide.

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