In Death and in Love: Sacred Trade-Offs in the Death Care and Wedding Industries

A. Peter McGraw, University of Colorado at Boulder, USA
Derick Davis, University of Colorado at Boulder, USA

When making funeral- or wedding-related purchases consumers put a price on products and services that represent sacred values. Consumers are frequently unwilling to engage in such (taboo) trade-offs between the secular (e.g., money) and the sacred (e.g., memories, love, or commitment). We demonstrate how a reluctance to make trade-offs between price and other attributes leads consumers to purchase premium offerings when making funeral or wedding purchases. We debias this spendthriftiness by downplaying the value-signaling role of money in the evaluation of these transactions, which in turn, encourages price-based trade-offs. We conclude with implications for consumer advocacy and public policy.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/14639/volumes/v36/NA-36

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
In Death and in Love: Sacred Trade-offs in the Death Care and Wedding Industries

A. Peter McGraw, University of Colorado at Boulder, USA
Derick Davis, University of Colorado at Boulder, USA

Funerals and weddings represent two of the largest purchases consumers make. In the United States, the average funeral costs $6,500 (and can reach $10,000 with burial costs) and the average wedding costs more than $27,000 (AARP 2000; FTC.gov; Rheault 2007).

Funeral and wedding purchases pose unique challenges: consumers typically have little purchasing experience and make decisions under time pressure, while subject to the scrutiny of friends, family, and acquaintances. Furthermore, the respective industries have been subject to criticism for unscrupulous sales and marketing practices (e.g., Mitford 1998; Boden 2003; Mead 2007).

We examine a particular challenge facing consumers purchasing funerals or weddings. Consumers purchasing products and services in these domains are reluctant to engage in price-based trade-offs, which we contend puts them at risk of overspending. A growing literature examines how consumers are unwilling to engage in trade-offs between the secular (e.g., money) and the sacred (e.g., love and commitment; Baron and Spranca 1997; Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989; Fiske and Tetlock 1997; McGraw, Tetlock, and Kristel 2003). Such taboo trade-offs produce a variety of negative outcomes, including moral distress, moral contamination, decision avoidance, and decision refusal (Tetlock, et al. 2000; McGraw and Tetlock 2005; see also Luce, Bettman, and Payne 1997). We examine how price-based trade-off avoidance leads to non-compensatory decision strategies and spendthrift decisions.

A funeral purchase implicitly requires a price be placed on a deceased one’s memorial. A wedding purchase similarly requires a price be placed on a ceremony that represents a couple’s love and commitment. We argue such purchases are seen as secular-sacred transactions and lead to price-based trade-off avoidance. Consumers do not want to undervalue sacredly held values by trading off price versus other attributes, such as product quality or quantity. Thus, consumers engage in non-compensatory choice strategies and chose premium options rather than balancing price against other attributes.

We present three studies that demonstrate consumers’ greater willingness to pay for death care and wedding products compared to other routine purchase situations. We also show the effect is due, in part, to consumers’ reluctance to engage in price-quality trade-offs.

Study 1 demonstrates that consumers are willing to pay more for products that are associated with funerals and weddings than no specific association, even when those products are judged to be of the same quality. Participants stated their willingness to pay (WTP) for four products (e.g., candles, thank you cards) that were randomly assigned for use in either a funeral, a wedding, or for “any reason” (control). Participants’ WTP for products used as part of a funeral ($M=$31.42) or memorial service ($M=$35.21) were significantly higher than for the control ($M=$18.23). Despite higher WTP values for funeral- and wedding-related products, judged quality of these products did not differ from control.

Study 2 used a matching versus choice procedure (Slovic 1991; see also Luce, Payne, and Bettman 1999) to examine consumer’s unwillingness to make price-based trade-offs in funeral purchase decisions. Participants were randomly assigned to either a control or memorial dinner condition and were presented with two product options for use at the dinner. Respondents were asked to state the missing price (taboo trade-off) or quantity (routine trade-off) that would make them indifferent between low and high quality options. They were then asked to choose between the two matched options.

When faced with a price vs. quality trade-off, participants in the funeral condition chose the high-quality/price option more often than control (68% vs. 51%) and chose more of the same product when faced with a price vs. quantity trade-off (75% vs. 38%). But consistent with our hypothesis that non-price-based trade-offs are not taboo, quantity-quality trade-off choices did not differ between conditions (68% vs. 65% for the funeral and control condition, respectively).

Study 3 examined the effect of different techniques to reduce spendthrift preferences for high-price high-quality goods with sacred associations. Participants were instructed to perform a price matching task between lower-quality/lower-priced thank you cards and a higher-quality option with no price listed (as in Study 2). The cards were to be sent to attendees of a wedding or funeral. Participants in the control condition were subsequently asked to make a choice between either option. The debiasing conditions were designed to encourage price-quality trade-offs by presenting either sacred or economic reasons to make price-based trade-offs. First, the difficult nature of price-based trade-offs in sacred domains was described, and the subsequent inclination of consumers to choose premium options was stated. Respondents in the economic debias condition were told that rational consumers recognize trade-offs are necessary in all situations including sacred events. Respondents in the sacred debias condition were told that no amount of money captures the importance of the situation, and therefore the meaning of the event should not be expressed through spending. In both conditions, participants were then encouraged, in light of this information, to treat the choice between the matched options as they would any run-of-the-mill purchasing decision.

Participants in the control condition chose the high-price, high-quality option 86% of the time, which is consistent with findings from Study 2. Those who read the economic debiasing statement chose the high-price, high-quality option 60% of the time, whereas participants