Connecting the dots...

Volume 55

15 July 2022



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Riding a horse with reins in our hands...

After opening our doors to the public in March 2001 and as we grew into a sizable funeral assurance company, the elephant in the room became standardised service provision. We were still a small start-up with very little capital to enable us to compete favourably with the established players of the time. We started off by outsourcing the all important service provision to these established players who were by all accounts, competitors. Once we started honouring the claims of deceased customers on our books, we soon realised that there was a yawning service delivery gap between the high levels of service provision we had promised and expected to deliver to our customers and that which was provided through outsourcing. We were frustrated as we had little control once we surrendered the remains of our deceased clients. We were blinded by the thought that we needed to raise sufficient capital to establish our own service centre. Little did we know that there was another way to controlling the service value chain.

Each time we processed a claim and contracted third parties to provide services, reports would come back to me about how the service did not go according to plan, from a deceased not properly washed and dressed to missing clothing, jewellery, blankets and other possessions of the deceased. We would make follow-ups to the third parties about the missing possessions without much success. As I was agonising over how we could get out of this rut, a solution came from an unlikely source.

Ballantyne Rupande – one of our pioneering Sales Agents, now working as an Administrator at Fidelity Funeral Assurance – a unit of Fidelity Life Assurance of Zimbabwe Limited, barged into my office one day. He like other members of staff, knew about the challenges we faced in maintaining funeral service standards provided through third parties. He also knew how agonising it was for me to hear the stories of poor service delivery and unending customer complaints. On this day, Ballantyne said he too had had enough, and wanted us to take matters into our own hands. He disclosed to me that although he had a Diploma in Marketing from the Institute of Marketing Management of South Africa, his real calling was that of washing and dressing the deceased. To follow his passion, he had completed a Mortuary Science course. To deal with our achilles heel, he suggested that we approach the City Fathers to request use of the Wilkins Hospital mortuary and wash and dress facilities.

In the event they accepted our proposal, we would offer a seamless service to our customers and also control the service standards as he offered to be transferred from Marketing so he could become our first mortician. Whilst the prospect of being in control of our service value chain and doing away with customer complaints was attractive, I was initially unsure of how this would pan out given this was new territory for me. To his credit, Ballantyne insisted and having convinced me, I rallied other members of the team to run with the project resulting in the City Fathers agreeing to our proposal.

The leasing of the Wilkins Hospital mortuary and wash and dress facilities constituted our first step towards creating an end-to-end service that would enable Nyaradzo to maintain the highest quality standards, improve customer satisfaction, achieve competitive pricing and improve efficiency in order to meet the business's growing demands. On the side of the City Fathers, our proposal fitted perfectly well with the Public Private Partnership framework, which the City of Harare (CoH) was promoting to keep the city's infrastructure in shape and fully utilized while generating income. In no time the deal was signed and sealed.

Named after Dr. Arthur James Walker Wilkins, who was an outstanding Medical Practitioner in the subregion, the hospital had operated as a mortuary since its establishment during the colonial era. Within its ten-kilometre radius lie several private and public hospitals, amongst them the main referral hospitals of Parirenyatwa, Harare Central and Beatrice Infectious Disease Hospital. Its central location made it easily accessible for us to move bodies from the place of death, usually from one of the surrounding hospitals, to our leased mortuary facilities.

Together with Beatrice Infectious Diseases Hospital, Wilkins Hospital formed part of the CoH's healthcare delivery system, which included polyclinics and satellite clinics dotted across the length and breadth of the capital city.

Our partnership with Wilkins Hospital meant that we were now able to provide mortuary services, which included arranging for the retrieval and transportation of bodies from hospitals or homes to the morgue, performing body transfers from other mortuaries, embalming bodies for viewing, and filing death certificates and other legal documents as is required by the law. The quality of our service shot through the roof overnight to our relief and to the delight of our customers.

Buoyed by the positive feedback we were now getting from satisfied customers, we wanted more control over the funeral service value chain. When Newton Madzika, who was the owner of Doves at the time, came calling offering to sell us his 120 Herbert Chitepo funeral services centre, it was an answer to our prayers.

When we acquired Number 120 Herbert Chitepo Avenue in 2003, thanks to Newton Madzika, he gave us the option to take over the existing staff complement of fifteen employees. We would have been able to accommodate all of them had they opted to stay with us since we did not have many people working for us in the funeral services department that Ballantyne had been instrumental in establishing. Only one out of the fifteen chose to stay with us, and that was Lazarus Tendayi Bvuma, their Branch Manager.

Having settled for a change of ship, effective from the 1st of November 2003, Lazarus had been motivated by the vision I had shared with him and the thrill of joining a start-up business, despite the potential risk of failure.

Born on the 4th of December 1968 in Gweru, affectionately known as the City of Progress, Lazarus had been with Doves for over twelve years. He had started with them at their Gweru branch in January 1991, before being transferred on promotion to the Sunshine City of Harare where he was made Branch Manager of 120 Herbert Chitepo. Twenty-one years on – and still counting – I am happy that Lazarus is still with us. A hard-working, focused man who is married to Motsi (nee Mudzami), with whom he has six children – three girls and three boys – Lazarus is our Services Manager right where it all began at 120 Herbert Chitepo.

Having joined Nyaradzo with six "O" Level passes, including English and Mathematics, as well as a qualification in Mortuary Science, 'Chihwa', as he is affectionately known, has been able to develop himself professionally and has since attained several other professional qualifications, amongst them certificates in Business Management and Executive Development Programme from the University of Zimbabwe (UZ); an Embalmer Certification with the National Funeral Directors Association of Southern Africa and a Certificate for International Civil Aviation Organisation Security Programme for Human Remains Repatriations and Expatriations.

With Lazarus as part of my team, it became easy for me to build a supportive structure of men and women around him who were geared to translate my vision into reality. Having invested in a funeral parlour, one of the stark realities that we had to accept was that we needed to continue expanding our horizons towards end-to-end service provision so that we could become a one-stop shop and be competitive on all fronts.

Even though our clients were enamoured with our services, amongst them the conventional bus, mortuary services, tents, chairs, water bowsers and other conveniences, there was legroom to do more. We could not provide customers with in-house coffins and caskets, yet these are a must-have at signing up for our policies, which became a sore point that we had to deal with urgently. It was an area where we lacked a competitive advantage as we farmed out the making of coffins and caskets to third parties whose quality and prices we could not guarantee.

We were keen on making the cost of coffins and caskets more affordable to our customers while also having control over the quality of the final product, and it became paramount for us to explore how we could eliminate this bottleneck. In brainstorming sessions, we had been torn between building our own coffin and casket manufacturing unit from scratch or buying into an already existing one.

Because this had become an urgent issue due to the critical mass that we had built within a short period of time, I did not think it was necessary for us to reinvent the wheel because it was going to extend our learning curve, from securing the land on which to build the factory, tooling it with the equipment – most of which had to be imported – and scouting for skilled personnel to get products rolling out of the plant.

Our unrelenting quest for creating a positive customer experience, which was entrenched in our service ethos, made the acquisition of a going concern manufacturing arm a sensible option, despite the possible legacy issues that usually come with that route. I also banked on the judgement and advice of our Financial Advisors, with whom we had been in the trenches from the start. At the time, none of the biggest players were keen on letting go of their coffin and casket manufacturing entities, as doing so would be akin to giving away their competitive advantage to adversaries.

Previously owned by the Gruenthals family before being sold to Grant Nakhozwe's Moonlight Provident Associates (Private) Limited in 2000, Mashfords operated J. Davies & Company (Private) Limited, situated in Mutare. J. Davies had been established in 1968 and focused mainly on furniture production, including a wide range of coffins and caskets. Another industry player, Doves, had a coffin and casket-making outfit called Silkwood Manufacturing, also based in Mutare and which had been in operation for over three decades.

Growing the business through backward integration was therefore not new in the industry at the time we were having internal conversations to set up our own coffin and casket manufacturing unit, and neither was it unique to Zimbabwe. In South Africa and elsewhere in the developed world, several of the established funeral service providers have coffin and casket manufacturing units in their portfolios. This is partly because a coffin or casket is a key input in the provision of funeral services.

It is therefore not surprising that in many societies; a burial only becomes decent if the body is entombed inside a coffin or casket. The history of casket and coffin-making is also a long and rich one, dating as far back as 5000 BC, as evidenced by the wooden coffins found in places such as Beishouling in Shaanxi and the Banpo – both burial sites situated in China. The Celtics are also known to have created clay coffins around the same time.

It seems that even this early in civilization, societies valued their dead, although it is the ancient Egyptians who became known for their elaborate burial sites and rites. Due to the grandiosity of the burial grounds in Egypt, the North Africans are often mistaken as the first and only people that took burial seriously. For centuries, the Egyptians have used different materials for the construction of their coffins, which varied from clay, ceramics, cloth, minerals, and wood. They are also world-renowned for their detailed embalming techniques.

However, there are many parallels that can be drawn from almost all ancient societies when it comes to burial of the dead, some of which are still at play today. How one was buried, the stateliness of the ceremony and the type of coffin or casket used were largely determined by one's eminence in life: The richer and more powerful one was in their community, the more expensive and detailed one's coffin would be.

From time immemorial, it was the local carpenter's job to provide the coffin and the wood used was determined by the cost the bereaved families were willing to pay. Way back, a coffin was essentially a wooden box, which evolved into a work of art with time. Thereafter, fittings like elaborately styled handles and ornaments were added to the box, together with cloth lining, which could be silk, taffeta or velvet, as part of the coffin's trimmings.

When the rest of the world eventually adopted the use of coffins, different cultures used it in accordance with their norms and practices. In other communities, the coffin was used to transport the deceased to the burial ground, and it was thus called a pall, making those who carried it pallbearers, a term used today referencing those who carry the coffin to burial. The coffin and the casket are words that are often used interchangeably even though they mean different things. A casket is the more elaborate of the two; it is rectangular in shape, with four sides and rails placed along the sides and can be constructed using metal or wood. On the other hand, a coffin has six sides and is generally constructed to conform to the shape of the human form.

In African culture, it has always been common in most societies for the ordinary person to be buried underground, while those from royal families are usually buried in sacred caves, which are then sealed off. The royals were wrapped in animal skins, usually those of their totems. With the coming in of colonization, the introduction of coffins led to their gradual acceptance, and they have now become widely used, especially by non-Muslims.

For us at Nyaradzo, gaining a foothold in coffin and casket manufacturing was not easy as the few independent manufacturers that were spread across the country were either too small for our liking or were not scalable. Those that did meet our requirements were tightly held assets that their owners were not prepared to let go of. It was in 2004 when the heavens smiled at us, and this is how it happened!

A small coffin shop had just been opened in the central Harare and became popular for selling a wide range of coffins and caskets that catered to a variety of clients. I learned that the coffin shop was owned by one Mark Jones who had made a name for himself in the IT industry where at the age of thirty-one, he had been the Managing Director of ICL Computers, which originated in Britain in 1968, before expanding operations all over the globe.

An amazing gentleman, husband to Joanna, and father to three children, Mark had also done well when he operated a company that offered payroll services to several clients. Known for his kindness and patience, Mark had also earned a reputation for his analytical skills and ability to look at things from different perspectives, which enabled him to see opportunities where others did not.

I also got to know that Mark was in partnership with Mike Monson and that apart from the coffin shop, they also owned a coffin and casket manufacturing company called Calundike Exports, located some twenty-two kilometres South-East of Harare. Apart from being a minority shareholder in Calundike Exports, Mike was also the Managing Director, with Mark being his Chairman and controlling shareholder.

Before Mike came into the picture, Calundike Exports had been founded by Mark and Peter Chauffeur. When Peter decided to exit the business and go back to his base in Europe, Kate Gamble snapped up his shares at an agreed purchase price. Thereafter, Kate would invite Mike to help them out with running the business, with Mike eventually taking over Kate's shares.

As one of the familiar faces at the shop, I would regularly strike up wide-ranging conversations with Mark. I shared with him what I was into and that I was looking for opportunities to expand Nyaradzo, including either setting up a coffin manufacturing company or buying into an existing one.

At first, Mark did not appear interested, but as we continued to engage his attitude changed. In time, he was sold on the idea of selling Calundike Exports to me, but before he could commit, he needed to convince Mike to agree to the deal. Mike tells me that Mark told him that the transaction was good for him as it would give him the experience in handling takeover arrangements as well as earning an income that he could use to pursue other exciting opportunities. That did the trick! Before we could put pen to paper, I assigned my young brother, Donald, to work with Reggie Saruchera of Grant Thornton, back then known as Camelsa Chartered Accountants, whom we had engaged to do the due diligence. Happy with their report, the transaction went through.

After wrapping up the deal, I asked Mike to stay on as Managing Director of Calundike Exports. In time, I would ask Mike to work as Managing Director of Nyaradzo Funeral Services which we had set up earlier, thanks to the light-bulb moment of Ballantyne Rupande. Mike would work diligently for us until he decided to leave to set up his own enterprise and we remain friends to this day. Unfortunately, Mark would go the way of the flesh succumbing to cancer a couple of years ago. May his soul rest in eternal peace!

If Mark had lived long enough, I am sure he would have been proud to see what Calundike Exports has become. We have expanded our product range to include most recently, the manufacture of fantasy coffins, which are common in countries such as Ghana. In April this year, we broke the internet after crafting our first custom-made fantasy coffin shaped like a Rolls Royce for one of our clients based in Mutare.

We have also expanded from just coffins and caskets to shop fittings and custom-made solutions for spaces or what in today's parlance is called space management, which includes granite works, kitchen and furniture manufacturing. Our team at Calundike Exports, led by Jameson Chindavata, has also carved a niche in making office and home furniture, as well as aluminium works. All these products are for both the domestic and export markets. From a handful of employees back then, Calundike Exports now employs 274 staff.

However, because the purchase price for the business did not include the property from which it operated, we felt very insecure about the arrangement with our fear being that we could get booted off the property anytime for whatever reason. So we made it our mission to buy the premises outright, because we did not want a situation where we could get evicted after investing significant resources in plant and machinery. Doug Stoole, who owned the property which was managed by my good friend Justin Machibaya owner of Homelux Real Estate, had emigrated to Ireland. When I made Justin aware of our intention to acquire the property, he had sounded Doug out who was not averse to the idea leading to Justin and I opening discussions that led to the acquisition of the property from which our factory operated.

I am forever grateful to Justin who with his Nomusa Constance Machibaya founded Homelux Real Estate, for facilitating the acquisition of Number 611 Muzhanje which is the premises of our coffin and casket manufacturing unit.

Over the years, I have gotten to admire Justin for what he has achieved in the three decades that he has worked in the real estate industry. Like most of us of his generation, Justin has an interesting background. Born in Bikita in 1969, he did his primary school in Bikita before moving to Chivhu for his Form One to Form Three. Justin was transferred to Gweru by his uncle to complete his "O" Levels.

For his "A" Levels, he went to Thornhill School, before proceeding to the University of Zimbabwe, where he graduated with a Bachelor of Business Studies Degree. On completing his university education, he would spend some time trying to get a job opening at Air Zimbabwe. Seeing it was leading him nowhere, Justin took up a teaching job at Gideon Mhlanga Mission in Chipinge. He would quit teaching after four years to chart a new path in Real Estate, initially as a trainee Property Sales Negotiator at Alexander Court (Private) Limited, founded in 1985. After spending seven years at Alexander Court, he co-founded Highrise Real Estate. In 1998, he left Highrise to form Homelux Real Estate, along with his wife Nomusa.

Homelux has since grown into a group of companies, incorporating Homelux Real Estate, Homelux Property Development, Semble-IT Kitchens, and Just Tiles & Bathrooms. Considering that Justin's thesis when he did his Master's Degree in Real Estate at the University of Pretoria in South Africa was on property development, I am not surprised with his achievements in the field.

Justin is also a holder of a Diploma in Real Estate as well as a Marketing and Sales Diploma, amongst other qualifications, and is an Associate Member of the Real Estate Institute of Zimbabwe. Apart from being a Valuer with the Valuers Council of Zimbabwe, he is also a Registered Estate Agent, who sits on the Panel of Valuers for the High Court of Zimbabwe.

It is through the efforts of the likes of Justin, Mark, Mike, and many others that we came to integrate Calundike Exports into our group. The journey toward offering a complete package of end-to-end services is still far from over as we continue to look for solutions that address customers' concerns and keep customer service excellence at the forefront of our business.