

# The St. Thomas White Bronze Company: A Diffusion of Innovations Perspective

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During the years 1883 to 1900, the White Bronze Company of St. Thomas, Ontario (Canada) sold a large number of white bronze grave monuments throughout Canada (Stewart, 1989). Their product, manufactured from pure zinc, was superior to competitors' products along several dimensions, has never been improved upon, and yet has not been manufactured in over 70 years (Rotundo, 1989). There are, of course, many reasons why a product and indeed a company may fail and previous researchers have suggested several reasons for the demise of white bronze monuments. However, what has been lacking from the literature to date in a comprehensive account of why a product with clear relative advantage had such a short life span. By conducting an historical analysis using Rogers's (2003) Diffusion of Innovations theory as an organizing framework, this paper seeks to pull the various lines of reasoning in the literature together and provide that comprehensive account.

To date, the marketing history literature has not really engaged with the various companies which make up the 'death care' industry – funeral homes, cemeteries, cremation services and monument-makers. Yet, the industry should be of interest to marketing historians since gravestones represent one of the first durable 'mass customized' consumer goods; combining personalization with standardized manufacturing techniques (Norris, 1988). Elliott (2010) has argued that the project of commemorating the American Civil War dead marks a turning point in the monument industry in North America as it shifted from craft to mechanized, mass production techniques [1]. He argues further that this innovation was fostered not by traditional craftsmen but by entrepreneurs and businessmen putting technology, capital and labour together.

## **Previous Research**

Previous marketing research has focused on regulatory issues within the death care industry (Sommer, Nelson and Hoyt, 1985; Kopp and Kemp, 2007a, b), and public policy issues surrounding the vulnerability of the grieving (Andreasen, 1984; Gentry et al., 1995). In addition, a series of earlier articles reported on issues related to the regulation of channels of distribution and monopolistic methods used within the death care industry (Werner and Bechtol, 1969; Werner, Bechtol and Duggan, 1973; Werner and Knapp, 1977, 1982). Recent consumer research has dealt with death-ritual consumption (Bonsu and Belk, 2003; Zhao and Belk, 2008) and consumer behavior at the end of life (Fan and Zick, 2004), as well as how the awareness of death influences materialism, conspicuous consumption and consumer decision making (Arndt et al., 2004). However, the history of the grave monument industry seems not to have been the subject of much research attention from marketers.

Outside of the marketing literature, there is a fairly extensive historical literature detailing not only the manufacture of and market for grave monuments but also the social and cultural aspects of death and commemoration. To date, the most complete historical account of the use of white bronze for grave monuments is that of Barbara Rotundo (1989). Her research details the history of the Monumental Bronze Company of Bridgeport, Connecticut from its beginning in 1877, through the opening of multiple subsidiaries (1881-1909), until its eventual dissolution in 1939. Rotundo (1989, p. 266) offers several explanations for the demise of Monumental Bronze and its subsidiaries including: technical obsolescence, changing fashions after WWI, competitor's marketing actions, the failure of zinc to gain acceptance as an artistic material with taste-setters, and the subsequent banning of white bronze markers by some leading American cemeteries. Other commentators have followed Rotundo in suggesting that white bronze monuments were not seen as being in good taste, but rather as cheap imitations which were untested and unsuitable for commemorating loved ones (Trask, 1984). Marketing mix issues have also been raised; McIlwraith (1997) has questioned the use of catalogues as a channel of distribution while other researchers have pointed out that the products may have been priced too low. Yet, the sheer number of monuments sold and still existing in graveyards across

Canada and the United States seems to question the validity of at least some of these arguments. By placing the arguments within a Diffusion of Innovations framework (Rogers, 2003), we can reconcile some of these arguments, further examine them in terms of elements of marketing strategy, and perhaps better understand the company's fortunes. Further, by working through an historical example of innovation diffusion, we may also identify boundary conditions to the application of the theory.

### **A Diffusion of Innovations Perspective**

One of the most frequently cited theories of how innovations spread through a society is that of Everett M. Rogers [2]. Rogers's framework, as detailed in the 5<sup>th</sup> edition of his book, *Diffusion of Innovations* (2003), meshes well with marketing theory. For example, Rogers's description of the innovation development process beginning with the recognition of a (consumer) need or problem is closely aligned with the traditional marketing concept, and descriptions of the product development process (Kotler, et al., 2011). His theory has been used extensively in management research, including in the marketing discipline.

Rogers (2003, p. 5) defines diffusion as, "the process in which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system." He identifies five attributes of innovations (relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability and observability) and their influence on the rate of adoption. He also details marketing actions that can be taken (e.g., offering an incentive to speed adoption, the positioning of an innovation relative to existing products). The full paper applies various aspects of the Rogers framework to facilitate understanding of the failure of white bronze grave monuments to reach critical mass.

### **Data Sources**

The business records for the St. Thomas White Bronze Company of St. Thomas, Ontario and its parent company, Monumental Bronze Co. of Bridgeport, Connecticut, have not been found and may no longer exist (Rotundo, 1989). Researchers must turn to other records in order to piece together the companies' histories: contemporaneous accounts in local newspapers, city directories from the time period, business records of companies who did business with the focal companies, local histories, promotional materials (e.g., catalogs), and white bronze monuments themselves. In addition to traditional microform sources, many of these records have now been digitized and made available through sources which are somewhat unusual for marketing history researchers such as the Ancestry.com searchable genealogy database. Family historians and others interested in recording and preserving local history have also made a wealth of photographic materials available via the Internet. All of these sources have been tapped in order to create the research account but, in addition, I had access to a rather unique collection of industry journals addressing the concerns marble and granite monument wholesalers and retailers, such as *The Monumental News* and *Stone*, recently assembled and held in the Archives and Research Collections at Carleton University, in Ottawa, Ontario.

### **Notes**

[1] The parent company, Monumental Bronze Co., sold a prodigious number of Civil War soldier statues (both Union and Confederate) after the American Civil War and, along with its subsidiaries, enjoyed a similar success with sales of grave markers (Grissom, 2009).

[2] A search using the 'cited reference search' feature of the Web of Science database on January 13, 2013 revealed 3,226 citations across multiple scholarly literatures.

### **Sample References**

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Plate 1. White Bronze monument, Yarmouth, N.S.



Plate 2. Detail of monument showing customization plate

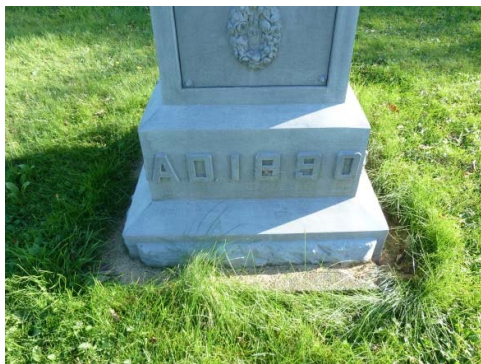


Plate 3. Monument dates to 1890



Plate 4. Maker's mark: White Bronze Co. St. Thomas Ont.