



Putting the fun in funerals

Entrepreneur Lynn Isenberg brings new life to the business of death with novel services that let you craft an exit strategy while you're still healthy.

By BusinessWeek

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When it comes to spicing up the traditionally somber atmosphere surrounding death, Hollywood scriptwriter Lynn Isenberg has no shortage of clever ideas. For the lifelong golf enthusiast, she foresees an end-of-life celebration on the 9th hole, complete with glow-in-the-dark golf balls engraved with the name of the recently deceased. For the animal-rights activist, perhaps a soiree at the local zoo. And when her own time comes, Isenberg has already planned an outdoor showing of "To Kill a Mockingbird."

"Sometimes it's necessary to bring an element of humor to the table," she says. "Tears and laughter are twins, and we often can't cry until after we've found the humor inside the sorrow."

Isenberg's ideas are not entirely new: She stole them from her own recently released novel, an "entrepreneurial comedy" called "The Funeral Planner." In the book, Isenberg's protagonist, Madison Banks, is a serially unsuccessful entrepreneur who finally finds her niche in opening Lights Out Enterprises, a company that plans designer life celebrations and produces commemorative life-bio videos for clients looking to add flavor to their own final farewell.

A growing trend In preparation for writing "The Funeral Planner," Isenberg spent months taking entrepreneurship courses at the University of Michigan and learning all she could about the funeral industry. That's when she first realized that unorthodox funeral planning wasn't just a wacky idea that excited her friends and made good fodder for a comic novel -- it also had potential as a real, viable business.

She found that her Lights Out concept capitalized on two of the fastest-growing trends in the \$11 billion funeral industry: personalization and pre-planning. According to a recent study by the National Funeral Directors Association, a mere 13% of adults want a very traditional funeral service; of those interested in having a funeral of some type, 62% would like to customize the event and nearly 75% prefer to prearrange their own service.

By the time she finished writing the novel in February 2005, Isenberg had received so much positive feedback that she decided to launch her own real-life version of the company. In a rather complicated case of life imitating art imitating life, she not only named the new business Lights Out Enterprises, but also adopted the same business plan, marketing tactics and strategic alliances that her character Madison Banks uses in the novel.