



THE LAST NAIL IN THE COFFIN

In 1991 Pretoria businessman Pieter Groenewald started his coffin manufacturing business under a tarpaulin with two assistants.

"We would make the coffin, load it onto the bakkie, take down the tarpaulin to cover the coffin and then I would deliver it. My two assistants would continue working in the sun until I returned and then we would erect the tarpaulin again and complete the next coffin."

Groenewald describes with pride how this three-man show grew into a major coffin-manufacturing factory called Edge to Edge, trading as Pumulani Coffins.

Groenewald's team of 45 employees currently produce between 2000 and 3000 coffins per month, which they wholesale to funeral parlours in South Africa, Botswana, Swaziland and Namibia.

"From where we started to where we are now, this business means everything to me and I nearly lost it because of labour issues that surfaced at the beginning of 2007. Without SEESA I would have sunk. It was literally the last nail in the coffin."

Groenewald explains how he always believed in going out of his way for his staff, providing accommodation and food and being lenient on them when they transgressed the rules of good business practice.

"Because of this I felt very let down when about 50% of my employees decided to bring in a union with dubious credentials and started making unrealistic demands. For example, Edge To Edge's company policy is that all our employees should learn the skills in the different sections. When the unions came in several employees started insisting that they wanted to be positioned at one section only.

"Then they started striking when I tried to move one of the guys and I could not believe it," he says. "I started this business and built it into what it is, providing employment, but now they were trying to take over my business. People I trusted and regarded as family had stabbed me in the back."



Groenewald made a 911 call to SEESA in March 2007.

SEESA re-established the ground rules of good business practice, strictly applied the Labour law and thirteen employees were dismissed.

"Eight of the thirteen were key people, which meant we had to go through a helluva learning curve to get the ten new people we employed up to speed," says Groenewald who now has a 40% female work force.

"I'm very in favour of uplifting women and they do fantastically here. Take Thembi Mamagobo, for example. She was the assistant to one of the key guys that got fired and she took up his saw and started doing his job, far faster and better than him because ladies are good with detail."

Under SEESA's guidance, it's business as usual again at Edge To Edge, with a steady growth of 10-20% per year.

Groenewald remains the owner of the business but he has handed over the captaincy to Managing Director, Emmanuel Mudau.

"There is much life in the death business," smiles Mudau as he escorts us round Edge To Edge's busy factory in Camel Drift East, northeast of Pretoria.

"Coffins are essential in our society because the majority of black people believe in the tradition of a good burial," he explains.



"Even when Eskom had those blackouts, we had to make a plan with a large generator because you cannot tell people their coffin isn't ready."

The range, in price and style, is considerable, from modest, traditional 'fish shape' coffins to elaborate caskets and domes with satin lining and internal lighting that illuminates the deceased's face for the last respects.

Mudau knows every aspect of the business because he started on the factory floor and worked his way up, doing a financial management course and a computer accounting course along the way. Eventually he became Sales Manager and finally Managing Director.

"Pieter and I make a good team because we trust each other and when I come up with a good idea, he tweaks it and then we implement it," he says.

Mudau attributes their success to the cornerstones of good business: quality and service.

"The coffin business is a cutthroat affair because it is not regulated and there are many people out there who sell people inferior coffins for a lot of money. We produce quality wooden coffins and we are proud of our product. For us to have done well for seventeen years, means we are doing a lot right."

At age 32 Mudau, god willing, has a long life ahead of him but having worked so intensively with coffins, he has given some thought to the dome in which he will depart.

"Mine will wheel itself out of the house where the people are crying," he smiles. "Or maybe I'll become really rich and pre-buy my burial ticket out of this world so that I can get buried on another planet!"

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