

Buy Your Tombstone Over the Internet?

We have recently come across a few families who purchased stones over the internet. Although we have customers from Alaska to Virginia, and have had a web-site for over 5 years now, we have avoided setting up a site where people could purchase at the web-site. Our direct experience with people who have done so is limited, however, we have dealt with a number of them.

Why would someone buy directly from a dealer 1,000 (or more) miles away? The only thing we can figure is they think it will be cheaper for them. Our direct experience says this is not so. Earlier this week two sisters came in and purchased a small monument for their mother. One sister wanted to buy from an internet dealer, the other from us because we had been recommended by someone we have dealt with in the past. The internet sister said she was given a price of \$2000. What they paid me for exactly the same stone was \$1,395. Same size, same design and with us assured quality of stone.

We had someone last summer who did purchase their monument from an internet dealer in California. Naturally they had to get it installed and we did it for them. They probably paid more, altogether, than had they purchased from us in the first place. Installation has to be done locally and a local dealer will charge less if the stone is purchased from them. In addition, an internet dealer has higher transportation costs – shipping ½ ton of rock from California isn't cheap.

In addition, the internet purchaser (if they know anything about it), has other things he has to worry about beyond whether is actually saving any money:

- 1) Is he actually going to get it? Most of the time he probably will, But if he doesn't good luck. At least you know where the local dealer is. And, the local TV stations are always looking for a "cause" to go after – think they are interested in pursuing a scam dealer 1000 miles away? Lots of luck.
- 2) Workmanship. Two monuments we have first hand knowledge of were done in a fair to middling manner. However, the depth of cut into the stones was a bit shallow and the lithography was a bit spotty. Both stones looked, to an experienced person, as though they had been "rushed." The customer, lacking experience, probably didn't see the difference. But it was there.
- 3) Stone quality. The internet-purchased stones we have examined first hand were from unknown quarries. Given who was selling them, they probably came from low grade Chinese quarries. People who don't understand these things see the "fancy" patterns and "streaks" in the stone and think it is somehow better. While some Chinese rock is pretty good, much of it has a high iron content. Know what happens to iron after so many years? Starts rusting and thus streaks may run down the stone. If you look at stone under a 30 power, lighted, hand-held microscope, as we sometimes do, you can really see the difference in rock (granite) quality.
- 4) Identity theft. If you purchase (actually purchase) ANYTHING over the internet, giving your credit card or allowing some company you don't even know to directly access your bank account, I can only respectfully comment you are a fool. Even if the company is legit, they can be hacked and your personal information stolen.
- 5) Getting it installed. The internet company may hire a local dealer to do their installations (that's why we installed one last summer), but they are going to end up paying more, and that has to be passed on to you in the price. In addition, if there is any conflict in scheduling, the local dealer will take care of his own customers first. If the internet company where you bought your stone doesn't arrange the installation, you're stuck doing it. Have fun
- 6) Sales tax. Missouri has what is called a "use" tax, which is really a sales tax on stuff you purchase out of state on which the seller did not collect sales tax. I believe the minimum is \$1,000. You are supposed to report it on your Missouri Income Tax form. Purchasing an internet monument without paying sales tax may save you some money in the short term. But, if you get reported to the state they will probably pursue it. Again, have fun.

- 7) Customization. One internet marker sales operation we visited had a simple form to fill out for the lettering. Even if they have a salesman handy to talk with you they often charge extra for inscriptions. We customize all the time, add any emblems and so forth. You can even design your own. Try that with an internet monument dealer without paying a lot extra.

All in all, trying to buy a monument or tombstone over the internet seems a bit silly. Anything they can provide you can get locally, probably for less money in the end. You have to remember, what you are buying is a big, heavy custom made piece of rock. It's not something that UPS or FedEx can drop off at your door-step in a box. Other products, such as books, TVs and so forth are exactly the same product as they come out of the factory no matter where you bought it. A tombstone isn't.