

Dead Celebrities Agents of the Dead

By: Leah Hoffman
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NEW YORK - Dead people are very effective salesmen.

Andy Warhol hawks tote bags and paperweights. James Dean plugs the Gap (nyse: GAP - news - people). Marilyn Monroe brought in \$8 million last year for lending her image to products ranging from wine to diamond jewelry.

Of course, they can't do it alone. After all, it's hard to negotiate from the boneyard. So that job falls to savvy estate lawyers or, increasingly, to boutique management firms that specialize in getting the most out of the glory days. Indianapolis-based CMG Worldwide, which represents Monroe, James Dean and more than 250 other deceased celebrity "clients," rakes in between \$12 million and \$20 million a year helping them find work.

"Death isn't the end," says CMG Chief Executive Mark Roesler. "These deceased celebrities are brands."

With a stable of 15 lawyers and 35 deal-making "marketers," CMG has long had the dead celebrity business to itself. But competition is moving in. In April, image licensing giant Corbis—owned by Microsoft (nasdaq: MSFT - news - people) co-founder Bill Gates—purchased the Los Angeles-based Roger Richman Agency, a CMG rival. It has added clients like Liberace and Warhol to Richman's 50-name-long client list and says it hopes to expand the business.



Meanwhile, entertainment mogul Robert Sillerman maneuvered CKX (nasdaq: CKXE - news - people) onto the playing field by purchasing an 85% stake in the Elvis Presley estate last February. The \$100 million deal granted the company rights to Elvis' image and likeness, as well as a share in Graceland's annual intake. A new Elvis-themed attraction in Las Vegas is one of several new projects CKX hopes will drive up the King's revenue.

"Our view is that the world is under-Elvised," says Mitch Slater, CKX's chief operating officer.

The Lucky 13	
1.	Elvis Presley
2.	Charles M. Schulz
3.	John Lennon
4.	Andy Warhol
5.	Theodore "Dr. Seuss" Geisel
6.	Marlon Brando
7.	Marilyn Monroe
8.	J.R.R. Tolkien
9.	George Harrison
10.	Johnny Cash
11.	Irving Berlin
12.	Bob Marley
13.	Ray Charles

Laws governing dead celebrities' rights vary from state to state, making the business both complicated and litigious. That's why firms like Corbis could make such a big dent in it. With a sales staff of 350 and lawyers and offices across the globe, Corbis will make the process of licensing a dead celeb's image both simpler and more cost-effective by taking care of everything.

"It helps us create efficiencies for our clients," says Martin Cribbs, director of business development for rights services at Corbis.

Sources close to the industry agree. "It would make things a lot easier for licensees if there were one big rights clearinghouse," says Barbara Solomon, an attorney at New York City-based intellectual property firm Fross, Zelnick, Lehrman & Zissu. She has handled publicity disputes for the estates of jazz musician Cab Calloway and Princess Diana.

CMG and Corbis see their businesses in different ways. Corbis emphasizes the convenience of taking care of everything in one place, while CMG is betting big on the Internet. Indeed, CMG is responsible for many of its clients' official Web sites, which it hopes will ultimately open the door to ad revenue. The CMG-managed JamesDean.com, for instance, already gets millions of page views per month, and CMG just recently forged a partnership with one of the actor's largest fan clubs.

Quietly, however, CMG is also developing a small image-licensing business. In 2003, the company established Legendsarchive.com using images whose copyrights it had purchased, or were donated to CMG by its clients. CMG's Roesler estimates that 25% of CMG licensees will turn to it for images.

That edges CMG and Corbis ever closer toward being direct competitors. Looks like a real *Celebrity Deathmatch*.