

[Home](#) > [Business](#)

Earnings From The Crypt Agents Of The Dead

[Mark Lewis](#), 08.12.02, 12:00 PM ET

NEW YORK - To most people, immortality is a metaphysical concept. In Hollywood, it's a business proposition. A star who dies young like **James Dean** or **Marilyn Monroe** can enjoy a highly profitable afterlife--if they have a good agent.

As it happens, both Dean and Monroe have the same agent: **CMG Worldwide**, an Indianapolis firm that styles itself as "the premier company for representing the families and estates of deceased celebrities." CMG founder **Mark Roesler** had his epiphany two decades ago when he was a young lawyer trying to protect the licensing rights to the late **Norman Rockwell's** artwork. Roesler went on to work for the **Elvis Presley** estate and soon grasped that dead legends make excellent business clients, especially if some state legislatures could be persuaded to codify a "right of publicity" that is transferable to the stars' heirs.



"We were the pioneers," says **Beth Vahle**, the CMG senior vice president. Indiana's 1994 statute extends the inheritable right of publicity for 100 years after a celebrity's death, which is why **Mark Twain** (who died in 1910) is today a CMG client. Roesler no longer represents Presley, but the CMG roster does include such distinguished dead people as **Babe Ruth**, **Buddy Holly**, **Malcolm X** and **Princess Diana**.

Another pioneer in this field is Beverly Hills agent **Roger Richman**, who represents **Mae West** and **Albert Einstein** among others. Richman has boldly extended the concept to embrace people who are not only dead but were never alive in the first place: The client list on his Web site includes Zorro under the heading of "Fictional Legends."

Obviously, the possibilities here are endless for enterprising lawyers. Identify some unrepresented legends, sign up their heirs, issue a flurry of "cease and desist" letters to deter unauthorized use of their images and then devise a market strategy tailored for each client. For example, James Dean died when he crashed his **Porsche** Spyder; now his name will grace a new James Dean Special Edition Boxster, which, according to the CMG Web site, was "created with racing enthusiast James Dean in mind."

For Monroe, who died 40 years ago this month, CMG has helped craft a posthumous career that generated some \$7 million for the late star's estate in the past year, winning her a spot on Forbes.com's list of the top-earning dead celebrities. Monroe's image helps to sell **Levi's** jeans and **Nestlé** after-dinner mints, is licensed to the Franklin Mint for Marilyn Monroe dolls and adorns video slot machines and bottles of wine. She has now been dead longer than she was alive, but her celebrity career has lost no momentum.

So here's a possible strategy for would-be immortals: Live fast, die young and leave your heirs the name of an aggressive licensing agent. Death has its unpleasant aspects, but for some it can also be a good career move.