In one memorable case, it was frogs.

It was at the funeral for a college professor who had dedicated his career to studying frogs, according to Danielle Thacker, vice president of sales and marketing at Thacker Caskets.

The family wanted a frog-themed funeral service and had requested a green casket with a “Going Home” insert panel featuring frogs instead of doves.

Thacker was able to accommodate the request – and so the family got what it wanted, and the funeral director and Thacker earned another satisfied customer.

“The growing personalization trend is a direct result of families looking outside religious traditions and seeking alternative ways to conduct services, either through the actual service conducted or through the merchandise purchased,” Thacker said. “Some people want something over the top and extravagant, and some want something simple. Our job is to give the family the range of options, and then let them decide how to memorialize their loved one.”

Thacker is not the only casket company offering families choices. Personalization is a growing component of any important life celebration, so casket manufacturers are working to ensure that those mourning a loss have ample choices to put a personal mark on services.

“We’ve become accustomed to having things ‘our way,’ whether it’s a cup of coffee, personalized invitations for a birthday party or even how we watch television,” said Paul Holzman, director of marketing for Batesville. “That behavior is carrying over into other parts of (people’s lives), including funeral service.”

Personalization of caskets and other funeral products has been available for many years. Still, however, families often aren’t aware of options available to them, or the cost of taking advantage of those options.

“Families learn about these things from a funeral arranger who makes a suggestion or shows them something in a selection room,” said Marty Strohofer, vice president of marketing and product development at Matthews Aurora Funeral Solutions.

Because of this, Strohofer recommends funeral directors show families caskets with custom interchangeable corners and embroidered panels or customized cremation urns.

“They are idea generators,” he said. “One of the challenges is helping families see the possibilities that exist.”

Holzman echoes the need for funeral professionals to inform families about their options. Even families who have planned funerals before might, in their grief, fail to express their thoughts or wishes.
“That’s why it is so critical for the funeral director to walk every family through their portfolio of options, to ask questions and to listen, so they can help the family make informed choices,” he said.

“We customize our homes. We customize our cars. Why would we think people wouldn’t want to customize their funerals?” asked David Hazelett, president of Astral Industries. “It’s up to funeral directors to lead. The family will instantly grab it up.”

Research done by Batesville shows a large percentage of consumers did not recall anyone explaining options to them. If they had been given a choice, these consumers would have made different choices. Hearing about options after the fact left consumers feeling shortchanged, Holzman said.

A key to integrating personalization into caskets as well as funeral services is to remember “personalization is a process, it’s not a product,” Hazelett said.

“The arrangement process is so stiff,” he said. “I have these 42 questions that have to be answered, where I could probably learn a lot more if I said, ‘Show me five things that represent your dad.’ If you give them the space to share memories with you, then you can say, ‘Well, we can do this.’”

Batesville’s research has also shown that, when it comes to personalization, there is a lack of understanding about cost. Even when options are included in the cost of the casket, many consumers assume they will cost extra, research has shown. This, again, highlights the need for funeral directors to spell out information on personalization options.

Those seeking personalization these days have a wide variety of options and price points from which to choose.

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While some go for one-of-a-kind caskets individually created by artists – think of a casket fitted out with fins to resemble a ’57 Chevy or one with a roulette table serving as the lid – most families want something more traditional, but with personal touches, Strohofer said. This is often the result of a desire to maintain a dignified somberness for a funeral event plus the practical considerations of obtaining a casket in a timely manner, he said.

“Most people don’t think about this months in advance, so you usually only have a day or two days,” he said.

Thacker said her company has done extreme custom caskets – such as the green frog-themed casket – but such projects require time.

“These caskets can be produced, but not on the typical at-need basis,” she said. “My suggestion for funeral directors is to check with their local vendor to see what is possible, in the event the family has contacted you prior to the person passing,” she said.

The advantage to products such as custom corners or inserts is that they are a quick, attractive option for adding personalization.

While there are stock options that many families choose – such as service medallions, religious symbols or sports themes – many casket manufacturers have access to large libraries of stock images they can use to personalize the insets. Some casket companies can create and deliver a custom inset within a day or two. This enables funeral homes to offer an inexpensive, highly visible and quick way to provide customization.

“With my company, if you tell us what you want by 10 a.m. we will have it to you 24 hours later,” Hazelett said.

Add to this options of casket color and interior fabric color – many casket manufacturers in recent years have added additional fabrics and patterns to their selections – and families can create caskets that reflect their loved one’s interests and tastes.

Matthews Aurora, for example, now offers caskets with lining made of the same fabric used in military uniforms. These models, the Patriot and Freedom caskets, have proved popular with veterans, members of the military and police and first responders, Strohofer said.

Using computers in the arrangement conference allows families a visual way to create an attractive casket that truly reflects their loved one.

“I’ve found that it’s easier for funeral homes to use technology to present casket choices because it allows them to show all their choices,” Strohofer said. “I can use software and say, ‘Dad’s favorite color was blue, so let’s find a masculine blue casket. Then among those caskets, we can further customize it, and we can use the software to literally show the family what the casket would look like. It brings it to life in a very easy way.”

Families also appreciate customization that provides keepsakes for families and friends to help them remember the deceased and celebrate their lives.

Details such as embroidery and custom corners are simple but effective ways to help make a casket feel personal for families.

(Photo courtesy of Matthews Aurora Funeral Solutions)
“We’ve found that families who prefer the subtle sophistication of LifeStories medallions really appreciate the matching bronze keepsakes that can be shared with friends and family as permanent mementos of their loved one,” Holzman said.

“We’ve heard many touching stories from funeral homes and families who have purchased medallions for pallbearers, children or grandchildren, team members, and others.”

Cremation families are not immune to the lure of customization. Not only do they purchase customized urns and memorial products, but those that do choose to use a cremation casket are as interested in customization as other families.

“Personalization is not bound by disposition,” Holzman said. “Telling a loved one’s life story is just as relevant with cremation as it is with burial. Whether it’s represented in the engraving on an urn, an accessory or piece of jewelry, or in their unique ‘celebration of life,’ cremation families are embracing personalization.”

While a recent Batesville study indicated cremation caskets were used in less than 10 percent of cremations last year, Holzman expects that number to continue to grow. Providing personalization is one way to ensure it does, Holzman said.

“Consumers buy what they see value in, and our experience shows that families value personalization,” he said. One of Batesville’s fastest-growing products last year was a traditional cremation casket with basic personalization that was upgraded with LifeStories medallions and a dual overlay, which gave it gender flexibility, he said.

Thacker said her company’s line of rental caskets gives families the same customization options as those provided by burial caskets.

Even as cremation rates rise, casket companies remain bullish on personalization. The key, they say, is for funeral professionals to continue ensuring that all families – regardless of disposition choice – are informed of their options.

“We absolutely believe the future of casket personalization is bright, but it will take all of us working together to realize its full potential,” Holzman said. “Studies suggest that more than 60 percent of families state a preference for more personalized funerals, and half would select a personalized casket if offered. Yet, just a fraction of those are getting that today. As an industry, we have tremendous opportunity.”