

In Defense of the Mattress Industry

by Gerry Morris

This is a response to an article found on the Internet Web Site "MSN Slate". The title of the article is ["Going to the Mattress" How to cut through the marketing gimmicks of Sealy, Serta, and the rest."](#) The author is Seth Stevenson.

If you haven't seen it, it is very disparaging. It has been widely read around the country.

My name is Gerry Morris and I have been a mattress manufacturer's representative for over 15 years. I have spent considerable time with manufacturers, retailers and consumers.

While I make no claims to speak for the industry, I make no apologies about defending it. My purpose in writing is to refute the falsehoods and to give what I believe to be accurate information and a different perspective about the product that people don't like to buy.

I am sure Mr. Stevenson is well intentioned in his effort to be of service to the public, but I believe his reporting may have the opposite effect. His suggestion to "just buy the cheapest thing you can stand and be done with it," is both uninformed and irresponsible.

I will address the assertions made in the order they were written. I suggest you read his entire article. The **bold** statements (they are bold) come from the article, followed by my response.

"Everything's on Sale!!" "I fricking hate mattress salesmen".

It is just a fact that consumers respond to sales. A number of years ago some major department stores tried to get away from sales and went to everyday low pricing. Within 6 months they went back to "sale pricing" because their business suffered dramatically. Consumers just like sales.

(By the way, I like mattress salesmen and women too. And I bet I know a lot more of them than Mr. Stevenson does.)

The reality is that in the competitive environment of retail (all retail) the urgency of a sale is what brings in business. You would think that the word "sale" is so overused that it has no impact whatsoever. But to the contrary, most every person shopping for a mattress asks, "Is it on sale?"

What do you think the chances are that that customer would buy if the sales person said "NO"? Many people will not buy a mattress if it is not on sale. With so many different choices of comforts, it is not prudent to have only one price or comfort level on sale. Retailers want their customers to be satisfied with the product, not just the price. The bottom line is, most retailers offer quality products at fair prices. I don't think Mr. Stevenson gives the consumer enough credit for being able to discern values. My experience is that most consumers are shrewd shoppers and the retailers that try to put one over on them don't get their business. With the great numbers of retailers selling mattresses, it is safe to assume that few if any are either giving beds away or taking customers "to the cleaners". To stay in business, you have to stay competitive.

This is not to say that some retailers are less than honest, but name any industry that doesn't have a few bad eggs.

"Is there a more maddening industry? They confuse us with silly product names."

Well there is probably no shortage to maddening industries, but my experience has been that the bedding industry is comprised primarily of decent, hard working people that want satisfied customers. As far as names go, it is challenging to come up with new ones. Look at the car industry as an example; they have the same problem. (I saw a new model called, "Escape". That sounds more like an instruction) Names/ labels are part of the visual package that has to compete for the consumers' attention. The intent is to be appealing, not silly.

"They weigh us down with useless features..."

For the example, the author lists (silk damask ticking). Well it just so happens that many consumers like some of these features. Manufacturers and retailers want to offer products that have all the bells and whistles. This is not unique to the mattress industry. The fastest growing of all goods is the "luxury" category. More and more people are electing to buy exceptional quality loaded with features. They willing spend their money for extra attention to detail in many products, even if those details don't increase performance or durability.

Most people don't choose generic drab colored double knit polyester clothing, even though the function of covering the body would be the same as expensive designer brands. It really is a matter of choice. If no one wanted these features, the industry would quit offering them.

"What's the Best Brand?"

Which is the best brand of car, appliances, clothing or stereos? It's hard to say. Companies that want to stay in business, better make a good product. While name brands dominate the market, other smaller brands can make fine quality products as well.

It is true that the resources of a nationally known brand allow them to do the research and development to keep improving their products. In an effort to build a better mousetrap, or to "get a leg up" on the competition, mattress quality and performance improve and the consumer comes out the winner.

"Mattress makers rename identical products for each different retail store. Different labels, exact same guts."

Sorry. There is no big conspiracy here. It would be much easier to make a good, better, best selection with the same name and cover for all retailers. It is a production nightmare to make so many different models.

Competition between manufacturers and the growing number of retailers mixed with consumer choice is what has led to the variety of products available.

Here is the truth. Some products out there are the same with different covers and labels. But the reason is not to confuse the customer. In the same way that the consumer wants choice, so do retailers. So manufacturers offer a variety of choices to the retailer. If a retailer is going to make the huge commitment it takes to carry a brand, they want to have a say in how the beds look. Should manufacturers quit offering choices to their customers?

Most large retailers have exclusive models, not just covers and labels, but comfort differences as well. As an example, retailer A may choose to offer a soft pillow top model at \$999 while retailer B may decide to offer an extra firm model at that level. Each tries to merchandise the sales floor to suit their clientele.

When you buy a car or clothing, do you want to get the same as everyone else, or do you want your own look, something that distinguishes you from others? With most other products, we seek out stores that offer unique choices that you can't find elsewhere. Why would you think a retailer, with the risk they take to compete for business, would be any different? In simple terms, why would someone buy a suit off the rack if they could have one custom made?

"The big name makers all get their coils... from a single company... Leggett & Platt."

Sorry again. Not true. While Leggett and Platt does make most of the spring units they don't make Sealy's or Simmons, two major players in the industry. But for the brands they do manufacture, to

say they are all the same is false. Many brands, especially the better known, have patented systems with special features that address issues like sagging, roll together and edge breakdown.

There are several types of systems as well. Simmons uses a pocketed coil; Sealy, Stearns & Foster, and Spring Air all use a form of offset coil. But each offers different features. Serta doesn't even use coils; they use a system of continuous wire spirals. This information is readily available.

Many lesser-known brands use the standard hourglass shaped coil known as a Bonnell coil and there is nothing wrong with it. It has been called the workhorse of the industry. But name brands, especially, have enhanced features that give unparalleled support and durability.

"Ignore brands, they are meaningless" Just pay attention to comfort.

There are many great brands with great reputations. It is foolhardy advice to just pay attention to comfort. (I deal with this more in depth later).

How Firm Should My Mattress Be?

Well, that depends on what firmness is? (Sorry, Bill) People mistake firmness for support and vice versa. A soft or plush feeling mattress may have excellent support. A hard or firm feeling mattress may not have enough support.

Here are three factors one should consider when choosing a mattress set:

Support: This is the ability of the wire systems of the mattress unit and the box spring to hold the body up. That's it. This is what people usually want when they say firmness. You should have "good posture" when you lay down on your mattress. Just as slouching when standing causes back ache, sleeping on a non-supportive mattress will do the same. Your back muscles just don't get to relax if they are trying to hold your back in line.

Durability: This is how long your set will provide support and comfort.

Comfort: This is how the mattress set feels to you. Comfort comes from the upholstery layers. This is the subjective quality of a mattress set. Everyone should have a set that provides support and durability.

Personal preferences in comfort cover a broad spectrum. The reason there are so many choices of mattresses is the same Reason Baskin Robbins offers 32 flavors. Stores want to be accommodating not confusing.

Mr. Stevenson suggests you focus on comfort alone. Please do not. Your quality of life depends on you considering the other factors. There is no way to perceive the true support of a mattress by laying down on it for a few minutes.

A hard feeling mattress may seem to be more supportive than a softer one but the exact opposite may be true. Some of the big soft feeling beds may have much more support.

You sense the comfort of a mattress when you lay down to sleep, the support as you sleep and the durability over a period of years.

As in most products, you get what you pay for. Not only do the more expensive sets provide more comfort, they also give much more support and will last longer. Some may say cheap mattresses are the most costly in that they have to be replaced more often.

Consumer magazines suggest top quality mattresses can give up to ten years of comfort. Name any other product you use as often and as long as a mattress.

Coil Counts and Gauge of Wire

Don't drive yourself crazy. Which is better, fewer coils/ heavier wire or more coils/lighter wire. Well who is stronger, two really strong guys or four averaged strength guys. The collective strength of the average guys may be stronger, but there are trade offs. The argument for the latter is that the more coils or wire with the lighter gauge combine maximum support with the ability to conform to the human form.

Reputable manufacturers make good quality products. Reputable stores sell them. Don't over analyze.

Pillow tops

Mr. Stevenson describes these as a rip off. The reality is that many people love pillow tops. They are not a "rip off" if customers like them and sleep comfortably. How many times have you heard people long for that feel of grandma' feather bed? Well, with the advent of top quality foams and fibers, today's pillow tops may be many times more comfortable. In addition, they also have more support and the upholstery doesn't pack down like feathers.

"Thickness is just a ploy"

Some of the thickness of today's mattresses comes from the increased height of the spring unit. Spring units are made taller now, and the reason is to make them better. They have more support and they don't "bottom out" like the older units.

But it is consumer demand for comfort that has made the real difference. New resilient upholstery layers have allowed the industry to use multiple layers. If consumers didn't like or want them, the retailers wouldn't sell them and the manufacturers wouldn't make them.

Box Springs

Mr. Stevenson says, "I find them wholly unnecessary:" This statement is what put me over the top to write a response. The foundation is the major component in providing durability to a mattress set. A good quality box spring shares a large percentage of the workload with the innerspring mattress unit. Not using a box spring will accelerate the wear of a mattress dramatically. In addition, the foundation provides strength and stability to a set.

"Do I Need All Those Extra Features?"

No. You don't. But you also don't need air conditioning in your car. And while we're at it, you don't need a stereo, a nice paint job, tinted windows, wheel covers or anything other than dependable transportation with minimum safety standards. How many people would drive a car like that?

Most people don't even question spending much more than the cost of a mattress for the comfort of air conditioning, even if they only use it for a few minutes a day, for a few months out of the year. But, they agonize over spending money for a mattress they will spend 1/3 of the day on for several years. Is being comfortable in your car just more important than being comfortable on you mattress. No, it is just a lack of awareness of the value of a good mattress.

"Ticking and Quilting" "Moronic"

It's like gift-wrapping. The better the quality of the contents, the better the cover, (in durability and comfort as well as looks).

Covers and quilting visually communicate the luxuriousness of the mattress. In the same way that labels compete for your attention, so do covers. If you are about to buy a mattress, which one will you look at? It is just human nature to be attracted to nice looking fabrics. That is a consumer's choice, and while it may not be important to some, it is one of the most important features to others. Again, this is about choice.

No-Flip Designs (written before the industry went all no-flip)

Your choice. If you don't like the idea of a no-flip mattress, you don't have to buy one. Some people want them. For those that want the option of turning a mattress over, they can buy a two sided one for more wear and to even out the upholstery layers, like rotating tires. (Note, this article was written when non-flip mattresses were just starting to get popular and only a few companies were offering them.)

Warranties:

The reason manufacturers make warranties so long is that they can. Little can go wrong with a mattress. More problems are based on customer's expectations than actual manufacturing defects. People that want the surface of their mattress to remain level and flat should not buy thick plush or pillow top sets. Those that do, think there is something wrong and want to return them.

Most brands now offer 10-year warranties. As stated above, the consumer magazines say quality mattresses can provide up to 10 years of comfort. Consumers may conclude that longer warranties imply that they can sleep on the mattresses longer than 10 years. But a mattress set can wear out and still not have any defects.

Water, Foam, Air

It is nice to have these choices too, but most tests show that innersprings are more supportive and durable.

Conclusion (Mr. Stevenson's)

Mr. Stevenson says he couldn't feel the difference between a \$200 and a \$900 bed. Really?

He suggests that if you can't, "buy the cheaper one". With all due respect, does anyone believe this is good advice? The bitter taste of poor quality remains long after the sweet taste of a cheap price.

Purchases made on comfort alone with out considering support and durability are a major mistake.

Conclusion (mine)

What is it about mattresses that cause so much confusion and distress?

I think I have the answer, and it is probably not what you think. The problem is not the product or the industry. The problem is you. (Sorry) But don't get mad. The problem is also me. It is also everyone else. The problem is human nature.

Especially in today's booming economy, we as a society have lost a sense of value of the things we depend on most. (Utilitarian items)

I call it the NEEDS VS. WANTS PHENOMENON. People like to buy things they want, but don't like to buy things they need. It's true! We agonize over buying tires, or replacing broken appliances. We hate to spend money on insurance and service plans. And yet many people will go into

debt to buy things they want but can't begin to rationally justify. We may put off buying something we need for a month but spend more going out to dinner.

There is a reason for this and it gets to the heart of the debate over buying a mattress. Our motivation to buying things we want is emotionally based. Our motivation to buy the things we need is intellectually based. We use logic and reason to analyze our choices. We scrutinize to find what we perceive to be the best value for the dollars we are reluctantly going to spend.

But if we want something badly enough, our emotions can trump an intellect that tells us not to buy it. The emotional pay back seems to make it worthwhile. But the payback is fleeting. The newness wears off and we set our sites on something else. This is not a judgment. We have every right to live our lives as we desire.

My desire is to put mattresses in the proper perspective. While some may bash the industry, mattresses are still considered one of the best consumer values on the market today. If you keep a mattress 10 years you will sleep on it three full years on average.

The problem comes in with the simplicity of the product. There is a mattress and a box spring. They all have wood slats, steel wire, and upholstery layers. That's it. We call them upholstered rectangles. It is difficult to understand the price variances. People can't think of these simple components as either high tech or expensive, but they are.

PhD. engineers have spent their lives working on the molecular structure of foams and fibers to give the comfort and resilience found in today's fine quality products. Other engineers are constantly designing and improving the performance of the spring units and foundation.

The mattress industry accounts for over \$10 billion. Contrary to Mr. Stevenson's claim, the manufacturers are not trying to trick you with gimmicks, they are burning the midnight oil to make a superior product and compete for your business. They hold the consumer in the highest regard.

As Sam Walton once said in so many words: "There is only one boss, the customer, and he can fire everyone from the chairman of the board on down simply by spending his money with a different company."

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