

# leep Savvy

The magazine for sleep products professionals

July/August 2010



The cover story

**Give your customers  
a retail experience  
they'll rave about**

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At great stores, it's  
the experience that  
justifies the expense

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engage consumers  
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## The cover story

# Give your customers a retail experience they'll rave about



*By Mike Wittenstein*

It's well known that, all things being equal, a better customer experience means higher sales, increased customer loyalty, improved word-of-mouth, higher profits and a place that's more fun to work. What's not so well known is how to make that happen, especially in today's tough marketplace. As buying patterns shift, mattress marketers need to explore new ways of being relevant and valuable to customers.

The concepts in this story can help you transform the way you relate to your customers and to differentiate your store's brand from others. My goal is to put you on the path to delivering a truly exceptional customer experience—one that your store's customers, employees and stakeholders will rave about.

But before exploring how to make the customer experience better, let's review how customers see the mattress business right now.



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## a retail experience they'll rave about

In March of this year—in preparation for conducting a seminar at the International Sleep Products Association (ISPA) EXPO in Charlotte, NC—I went undercover shopping at a range of Atlanta-area mattress, furniture and department stores. From bargain basements that smelled of mildew to high-end boutiques where the aroma of cappuccino met me at the door, I immersed myself in the mattress shopping experience. I paid careful attention to the ambience, signage, product presentation and store design, as well as to the way the sales associates informed and treated me.

Here's what became apparent when I stood in the customer's shoes—and I imagine your mattress customers are sensing the same things.

### It's all about price

In mattress retailing, price is the loudest message. From the manufacturers' and retailers' print ads, billboards, radio spots, Internet banners and television ads, I learned that I could buy a mattress cheap. I was repeatedly told that price was not going to stand between me and my brand new mattress. So, before I even began my mystery shopping, that's what was in my mind.

As an aside, here's a question for you: Are mattresses really cheaper if you buy them at a truckload sale? I don't understand why mattress marketers believe that people who need new mattresses prefer to buy them off of a truck. It's not an engaging image and definitely not one that instills confidence in the product.

I bet that if marketers replaced copy about truckloads with copy about sleep benefits and performance, more customers would go shopping with a good night's sleep in mind than with unrealistically low price expectations. Dumping

truckload sales is one change that could mean happier customers and richer retailers.

### Sold, but not served

Shopping for a new mattress was like shopping for a used car. I felt sold, not served. I believe that's

how most customers feel. All I wanted was a good night's sleep at a fair price. (OK, I'm a savvy customer, so what I really wanted was 3,000 nights of restful, comfortable, wake-up-energized sleep at a fair price.)

While advertising and selling on price seems to be the fashion right now, it doesn't add to the bottom line for the long term and it hurts the industry's ability to serve customers in the short term. It turns what could be white-hot, health-related products into lukewarm commodities. Advertising on price makes it harder for RSAs to help customers evaluate their mattress purchase on the benefits and value of a better night's sleep. Price-based ads make it harder for customers to appreciate that what they sleep on is intimate, personal and important. So they don't respond as well to messages about value, comfort, sustainability and the useful life of a mattress.

Emphasizing value over low cost would make for a better buying experience, lead to more sales and help to reduce the consumer's confusion.

### Shopping is confusing

When customers look across most mattress showrooms, they see a sea of sameness—one white mattress after another. *You* may see a differ-

ence, but to the untrained eye, they all look the same (except for the branded foot protectors and pillows—which often don't describe what they're lying on).

So the big question in my



**Becoming a part of your customers' buying process rather than trying to squeeze them into your selling process is the new normal for retail.**

mind was, "Why is one white rectangle \$300 and another \$3,000?"

Many RSAs still respond to the price question with, "Well, you get what you pay for"—often with a tone of condescension in their voices. That's not an informative or helpful answer. It simply compounds the frustration shoppers feel. Did you know that most Internet-savvy consumers trust the opinions and comments of strangers more than what advertising and RSAs tell them?

Comparing products, both in-store and online, was very difficult. It was even harder when I wanted to compare products from different retailers. The names and SKUs didn't match. Neither did the information I got online, from ads, in stores and from RSAs. There were differences in the definitions of basic terms and characteristics of materials, and there was no standard for describing comfort. Even as a motivated shopper, I found it impossible to compare products on value-for-a-good-night's-sleep basis.

### Can I trust you?

Too little information breeds confusion, which can lead to a lack of trust. Halfway through my undercover experience, I started to worry about being taken for a ride and to distrust what *everyone* was telling

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me. There were times when I didn't even believe what someone told me a mattress was made of and times when I wasn't convinced that the mattress I was going to purchase had the same specifications as the one that would actually show up on delivery day.

Without better labeling, a written assurance or a see-through side on every mattress, how can a customer really know what they are getting? I'm left with no alternative but to believe you when you say, "Trust me." And based on my experience, I had serious questions about whether I had any reason to.

### Mattress retailers can do better

Making the customer experience better for mattress shoppers is a business imperative. Experiences help differentiate brands.

It's important for retailers to own their own brands and not rely solely on manufacturers' POP and co-op ads to do the job for you. Business is tough—now is the time for retailers to take charge of mattress retailing by developing new value propositions that connect, inform and create real value in customers' lives.

In my opinion, both mattress manufacturers and retailers must rediscover how to sell better sleep. That may mean less emphasis on that white rectangle.

Let me share with you a few ideas that you can put to work in your store and in your branding efforts to help create a better customer experience.

### Replace selling experiences with buying experiences

At many retail companies, attention is only paid to the customer experience if it can be proven that the new experience improves business. It either directly and immediately generates a sales lift or it improves

operational efficiency.

That way of thinking can work if you, the retailer, *own* the selling process. The problem is that this model is officially out of date.

Because of tools like Google Product Search, Kudzu, eBay, RedLaser and epinions, many customers have stopped participating in retailers' selling processes. Instead, they are developing their own ways of buying and they're looking for vendors that sell the way they want to buy. These consumers like the confidence they feel in knowing they are getting a good value, the assurance that comes with having access to as much information as the RSA and the freedom to control the process.

Becoming a part of your customer's buying process, rather than trying to squeeze them into your selling process, is the new normal for retail. Customer experiences have to be designed around buying principles instead of selling principles.

Customers are not targets to shoot offers at. Like you and me, they are

human beings who prefer buying to being sold. Give them gold-standard service that helps them make the buying decision that's in their best interests and you'll earn a fan who raves about you. Manipulate them, withhold information from them or waste their time and you'll get the opposite effect.

See the people who come into your store not as wallets waiting to be emptied, but as individuals seeking your advice and guidance. These human beings need your help in getting a really good night's sleep. They deserve an experience that informs and motivates, that simplifies their decision



## The key differences between selling & buying

### Selling is about

Telling

Speed

Closing deals

Control (of the customer's behavior)

Keeping more

### Buying is about

Letting people make **discoveries**

Helping people through their own decision-making process at **the speed that's right for them**

Finding **opportunities to serve** (which closes more deals)

**Design** (improving the way an organization works based on the needs of its customers)

**Giving more value** and service (which increases sales and profits)

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and their life. An experience they can share with their friends, colleagues and families.

### Great customer experiences happen by design

A great experience doesn't just happen. It happens on purpose and by design. You know you've got it right when your customers—and employees—start sharing their experience in a positive way with others.

Start designing the customer experience around the story you want your customers to tell their friends about you. Think about what customers truly want and relate it as a story. Then, build the experience that fits that story.

To find that story, you have to listen. Listening to what customers—and employees—want and need is the key to discovering where to focus the experience. If what customers want most is what your brand does best, you'll succeed for sure.

Listen for your customers' reasons for purchase. In other words, why are they in the market? From *your* standpoint, the answer may be, "They need something to sleep on." But your customer's reason for purchase may be quite different. Maybe he wants to show his partner how special she is to him. Maybe she is trying to impress relatives when they visit in the summer. Maybe, just maybe, they care about getting a better night's sleep, waking up without a backache, or feeling more refreshed and ready for the day ahead. The point is, you don't know until you ask.

Next, identify what outcome your store can authentically deliver that customers will truly value. Identify what annoys customers and employees the most. Use this information to focus on making improvements your company can afford to deliver and that your customers will value.

Consider these three key outcomes of offering true value:

1. Guiding customers to pick the right product—for *them*—through demonstration.
2. Allowing customers to discover for themselves what a better night's sleep means for them.
3. Helping customers feel better about investing in a better night's sleep.

These outcomes are what you will promise, teach, promote and deliver. They define your brand and represent the target your company should be designed to hit. Selling mattresses and making money are simply the results of fulfilling this important mission for your customers.

### Create an 'experience design' for your store

Start by focusing on one of the outcomes you've identified for your store. Then describe, in vivid detail, the ideal experience that delivers it. Perhaps you're thinking of a "greeting station" where you can welcome your customers, learn about their objectives and/or share information, present online displays and demos—Apple stores are a great example of this. How about an iPad-enabled selling solution that compares multiple brands and products using a standard comfort-rating system? Maybe you simply want to improve the greeting customers get upon entering the store and do a more

consultative interview with them before showing products or provide more intuitive signage and displays that make that sea of sameness easier to navigate.

As you tackle the design of a new buying experience, whether in-store or online, consider that you are doing something *for* the people who come in the door, not *to* them. It's your job to see them for who they really are—complex individuals with a lot going on in their very busy lives while juggling competing concerns for their time, money and attention. It's your job to treat them the way *they* want to be treated.

In thinking through the experience your customers want from you, consider their first impressions of your store. Find something that will make them say "WOW!" out loud. Use your environment, greeting, print displays, digital monitors, etc., to help people understand that the experience they are about to have is the one that matches what they want most.

Here are some approaches that could have made my personal mattress shopping experiences better:

- Ask customers about their last mattress shopping experience—whether that was earlier today or 10 years ago. Either way, you learn about



See the people who come into your store not as wallets waiting to be emptied, but as individuals seeking your advice and guidance. These human beings need your help in getting a really good night's sleep.

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how they want to be handled.

- Ask customers what they know about how mattresses have changed since they were last in the market. This gives them an opportunity to be in control at the start while giving you time to craft a “WOW” response that demonstrates your concern for their good night’s sleep.

- If you don’t have

the product a customer wants and can’t get it, send her to a place you know has it. I guarantee this approach will help to build your brand. (I learned it from the movie *Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street*, in which Gimble’s customers were referred to Macy’s and vice versa. Sales in both stores soared.)

- Post positive customer reviews directly on the mattresses they’ve purchased or next to it on an information stand. Use customer names if they’ll let you and show the dates to bolster confidence.

- If it’s a couple making the buying decision, use a whiteboard to write down each partner’s “must-haves” and “nice-to-haves” so that they can see what each mattress offers them.

- Before customers stretch out, go through a pillow-matching exercise and invite them to take the pillow around with them from mattress to mattress. This builds confidence and adds value to your presentation by replicating the actual sleeping experience—and it can sell a lot of pillows, if you carry them.

- Offer a special testing area with light controls, privacy screens and home-like decor to encourage extended “sleep tests.”

Circulate all of the ideas with the people on your team and with management. Get their input separately and fuse it into a design that works better for *everyone*—that’s the secret of extraordinary experience design. Be sure to separate ideas about the right things to do



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from the right way to do things. Both are important when it comes to experience design.

### Be sure to leave a lasting impression

Before you finish the design process, ask “What is the *last* thing customers will remember about their experience?” What can the experience include so that it’s memorable, stands out after customers have gone home and keeps your store in their minds? This is important because it represents the *story* they will tell their friends. And the story people tell about you becomes your *brand*.

Here are a few ideas I had on ways to conclude—and continue—the experience:

- Offer a nighttime-related snack in the store and make sure customers take some home—in a store-branded wrapper, of course.
- Give each customer a complimentary list of tips for getting a better night’s sleep—you can find great tips on the Better Sleep Council’s website at [www.bettersleep.org](http://www.bettersleep.org)—and create a simple handout that includes your store logo and location (and maybe your name as the customer’s personal RSA).
- Send an email follow-up with answers to some frequently asked questions about mattress care or pictures of new accessory products for the shopper to consider—with a preferred-shopper discount coupon.
- Set up a blog for customers to share how their sleep has improved

on their new beds—offering a small gift in return is a good way to invite and encourage participation.

You’ll need to lay your customer experience design out from start to finish—in notes and sketches (if you or someone in your company can draw)—representing each stage so that everybody can see the entire experience. Double-check your work for quality, uniqueness, intelligent design and practicality. Think the design through to make sure your ideas are:

- ✓ Engaging
- ✓ Memorable
- ✓ Story-worthy
- ✓ Practical
- ✓ Affordable
- ✓ Profitable
- ✓ On-brand

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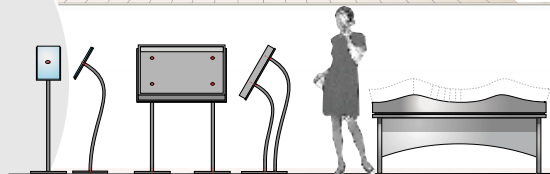
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- ✓ Supported by management
- ✓ Supported by fellow employees.

Keep in mind that the first and last impressions are the ones customers judge you on and remember you by. Make sure that any process you put customers through is consistent with the way you designed the first impression. If you go from kind and welcoming to hard sell, customers will notice the disconnect and resist whatever you tell them next. End to end, the experience must be consistent and authentic.

### Start with a great employee experience

Behind every great customer experience there must be an equally great employee experience. A compelling employee experience prepares your team with the know-how, training, support, understanding and motivation to deliver the customer experience you've just designed in an on-brand way.

You'll have to test your new experience before you deliver it to your customers, so let your employees—and their family members—experience it first. Let them *feel* the experience for themselves so that they know what to do and how to impart those same *feelings* to customers. If possible, let your employees sleep on your best mattresses so that they can speak personally about the benefits. The conviction in their voices and eye contact will make all the difference.

Employee comments and observations will help you perfect the design. And by asking them for their feedback, you also demonstrate respect. That leads to more good ideas, support for implementation and more willingness to change behaviors.

The first step to building a great customer experience is to care about people and what happens to them. Care about customers and whether you're helping them get those good nights of sleep. Care about employees by making sure they are growing in their profession and have the opportunity to enrich the lives of others.

Remember that brands don't offer experiences—people do. Brands make promises, but it's people who keep them. Break your brand promise at the risk of damaging the company brand—and your own. Make promises that matter and keep the ones you make.

Remember that people are not statistics, widgets, numbers or abstractions. People are rational, emotional, creative, learning, self-reflecting and unique beings. Design with those characteristics in mind.

Don't measure the value of a customer in dollars

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only. Instead, understand what customers value, then connect to that through your experience design. Make sure that what you offer is what matters most to your customers.

### The triple bottom-line return

As you implement the design, you'll find that great customer experiences achieve a triple bottom-line return:

**1. For customers:** The shopping experience is a good one and people rave about it, which brings in new customers.

**2. For employees:** Store employees are happier, more fulfilled and feel like they're engaged in the business because they're helping people. No longer are they fighting the systems that are supposed to

support them.

**3. For stakeholders:** The business makes more money because more products are sold, good word-of-

mouth brings in more customers, and because selling the right product right from the start reduces returns. ●



**Mike Wittenstein** is an Atlanta-based consultant specializing in guiding business leaders to differentiate their brands and improve their results based on a superior customer experience. Mike has worked with both established and emerging retailers, including Party City, Kinko's, Best Buy, Alternative Apparel and SOHO Office. As an interactive agency leader, IBM e-Visionary, interim CXO (chief experience officer) and consultant/speaker, he has helped companies across the globe build their brands around unique value propositions. Mike holds an MBA from The Thunderbird

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