

RETAIL ROAD TRIP

the selling scene

Sleep Center



Founder Ken Cassel and General Manager Mark Luhman

Florida chain thrives on satisfied employees, educated customers

By Karl Kunkel

Photography by Adam Daniels

Lakeland, FL, residents walking into a neighborhood Sleep Center store are likely to see a familiar face – someone they’ve dealt with before. A customer may come back in 7-10 years and actually be greeted by the same person.

That’s by design, according to Ken Cassel, owner of the five-store chain. A familiar face can put a customer at ease and encourage her to

do some serious shopping

Cassel founded Sleep Center 31 years ago based on maintaining a dedicated staff ready to go the distance. The roster now shows a generous listing of people who joined the team more than 10 years ago. Some have been with Sleep Center 20 years and plan to stay until they retire.

It’s simply a great place to work.

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Cassel started the company as a waterbed store in the 1970s, and the business evolved as consumers sought out additional types of bedding. Today, the five stores – four in Lakeland and one in Winter Haven – devote half of their floor space, generally 4,000 square feet, to specialty sleep products and the other half to innerspring models. A sixth store is planned for Lake Wales in January.

Cassel is now semi-retired, handling mainly advertising and keeping his golf clubs hot. He handed the baton to Mark Luhman, who took on the responsibilities of general manager and sales manager two years ago and today takes care of all day-to-day operations.

Luhman was attracted to the Sleep Center because of the culture Cassel cultivated at his stores over the years. Cassel insisted on giving his employees free rein in finding the best match for a customer, instead of moving beds out the door as quickly as possible. And Luhman has been carrying

on the tradition. To minimize the focus on getting the big-ticket sale no matter what the circumstance, sales associates are paid a salary, not commissions.

“That way there is no bias,” Luhman says. “Everything we do, as far as presentation, is to find out what the customers’ needs and wants are. Then we get them to the correct bed that will take care of their needs and issues. We take a lot of time in our presentation, asking questions, making sure we get the right bed without focusing on price. But we do understand price is important to them, so we have a wide range of selections.”

The stores are stocked with Sealy Posturepedic and its TrueForm memory foam beds, Tempur-Pedic, Simmons Air, Serta Perfect Sleeper and its Vera Wang latex line, Restonic and Spring Air adjustable beds. Prices range from \$299 to \$6,300. In volume, the most popular price point is \$799. But as the popu-

larity of higher-end beds has risen, Sleep Center’s average queen set sale is now over \$1,000.

“It’s a really extensive mix, which is one of our huge selling points and big advantages that we love people to know about,” Luhman says. “They can come in and try all the different models, from innerspring to air and foam. It truly is the best floor I’ve ever seen for a customer to experience the differences and have an unbiased salesperson explain the differences. Our salespeople let the customer decide instead of pushing a bed that will make them more money.”

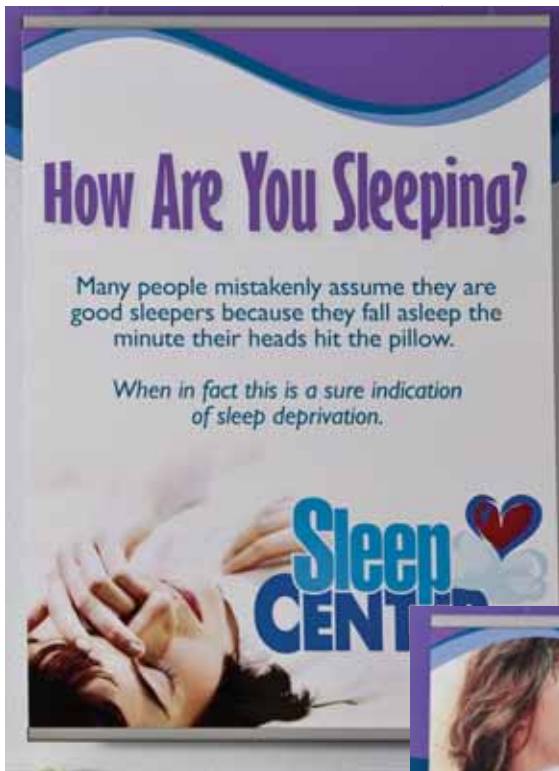
A full presentation to find that right mattress may take as long as an hour, Luhman adds.

Students of sleep

Luhman’s staff keeps an abundance of articles and sleep-study materials on hand to show customers and use as sales education tools on the importance of sleep. The staff is

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Sleep Centers' walls are a colorful backdrop for a series of educational signs focusing on aspects and facts about sleep – they function as important 'silent salespeople,' according to Mark Luhman.

trained to bring up some of the intangibles that can play into a bedding purchase. For example, a customer may be spending a great deal of money each night on a medication to help him sleep. Perhaps a good mattress would eliminate that expense and "put the money where it should be," says Luhman. The easiest thing to change is the mattress.

"Our niche is that we truly believe we are selling a better quality of life,

ceiling – companion pieces to the signage sporting the store's motto, "I love my bed." The message on each sign conveys something about the importance of sleep.

"They are silent salespeople," Luhman says. "When you look around, you start reading, and it gets you thinking about how important a bed is. Then people are more intent on listening to us.

"We try to get them to realize this mattress can be one of the most important purchases they will make. It's a bed, but it's also a direct indicator for all aspects of the person's life. Whether you are happy in your job,

if you are stressed-out, if you are fighting diseases – all of these things can become a problem if you are not sleeping on a good mattress. We recommend what is best for a customer's situation; it will give them a better quality of life."

Freedom to grow

Luhman was well aware of the importance of selling sleep and good health – not just a mattress – before being recruited by Sleep Center.

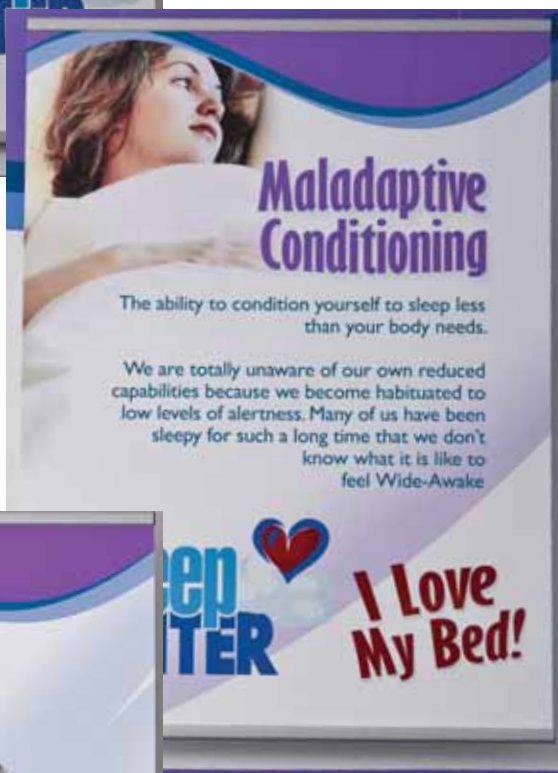
When Cassel started looking for someone to take over most of his duties, he needed a person with bedding experience who could keep the Sleep Center shops competitive and up-to-date in a vibrant Florida market. Luhman, a Mattress Firm executive in Denver, was

and not just a mattress," he says. "Customers know they have to sleep on something, but they might not put as much emphasis on it as they should."

Each Sleep Center store features educational signage suspended from the

looking for a new challenge.

What he found was a community needing a fresh look at bedding and a company willing to give him carte blanche to use his college degree in management information services and be creative as a general manager. "It was an opportunity to be a pioneer, if you will, and not just follow everyone else," Luhman says.



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His MIS knowledge has been valuable. When he arrived, Sleep Center was a decidedly paper-oriented business when it came to tracking, invoices and other documents. He has automated practically all of the company's operations and increased efficiency, providing better, quicker service to the customers.

Luhman continued Cassel's emphasis on giving Sleep Center a professional work environment as a means to keep employees satisfied and on staff. Employees at too many other retail bedding companies view their work merely as "a job," according to Luhman.

"It was always, 'I'm doing this until I find out what I really want to do'," he says. "Here, it is definitely a career for them. I had never heard anyone say they wanted to retire in

bedding until I got here. If an employee is happy, it goes that much smoother."

Sleep Center employees get a great deal of flexibility in their work. They work hard, of course. But they also have the freedom to enjoy the benefits of Florida, returning to the store with renewed enthusiasm and a good attitude for sales and customer service.

"At other places, you may be locked into working every weekend and every holiday," Luhman says. "Here, we let people live their lives. They appreciate the time off. We work on a smaller scale here. If we find out our people don't like something, we can change it. We want to make sure people are happy and that they stay around a lot longer."

Luhman has already enticed two of

his former co-workers from Denver to relocate to his Lakeland operation so they can lead fuller lives, too.

"They say this is completely different from what they were used to," he says.

Connecting with consumers

The Sleep Center name stays in front of consumers through regular newspaper advertisements and radio spots. A direct-mail campaign is in the works. To date, the chain has not done much with television because Lakeland is currently served by stations in Tampa, a market that is not a Sleep Center target. But Luhman notes that a local TV station for Lakeland is under development, so Sleep Center commercials may hit the airwaves in the future.

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The store's website, www.yoursleepcenter.com, is on schedule to expand from basic consumer information to a more comprehensive and interactive site. Luhman is developing a Q&A page, which he hopes will encourage consumers to email questions to him and the staff.

"We are also working on some prepared documents with tips and advice," he says. "We want to make this whole process easier for the customer. We'd love for them to buy from us, but mainly we want them to have all the information they need."

One of Sleep Center's longtime secret weapons has been its crack delivery team, which Luhman describes as "amazing." Rather than rely on the sometimes ques-



Ken Cassel and Mark Luhman with members of the delivery team Tom Bragg and Don LaMaster.

tionable abilities of outsourced talent – white-glove or otherwise – Sleep Center has a fulltime, professional delivery/pickup staff that actually generates phone calls to the stores from customers, complimenting the professionalism of the delivery people.

"This is a small town, and people will tell us about it when they have a good experience," Luhman says. "I really think the delivery people stay enthusiastic because of the reactions from the customers. They know they are making a difference in people's lives." ●