

Bedding leaders share growth ideas

By David Perry

NAPLES, Fla. — About 240 bedding industry leaders gathered here in May for Furniture/Today's third Bedding Conference, a sold-out event that focused on the importance of selling better sleep.

The strong turnout, in the midst of what was expected to be a year of mattress unit sales declines, gave attendees hope that the industry can devise strategies to return the bedding sector to its customary growth track.

The conference theme, "Better sleep equals better sales," was emphasized in presentations that highlighted retail success stories, retail advertising strategies, the importance of sleep accessories, and the power of high-end bedding. Some speakers shared bedding industry research that helped put the necessity of selling better sleep — and not just touting low prices — in perspective.

The conference, held at the Ritz-Carlton golf resort here, attracted a blue-chip list of bedding retailers, producers and suppliers, with each of those segments accounting for about one-third of the attendance.

The retail delegation included 14 of the Top 25 Bedding Retailers. Those 14 retailers together command retail bedding sales of approximately \$3 billion. Seven Top 10 retailers — Select Comfort, Mattress Firm, The Sleep Train, Mattress Giant, the Serta-exclusive sleep shops, the Berkshire Hathaway furniture division and the Ashley Furniture HomeStores — attended.

On the wholesale side of the business, Top 10 producers (and sponsors) in attendance included Sealy, Simmons, Serta, Tempur-Pedic, Spring Air, Comfort Solutions and Therapedic.

Other producer sponsors were Aireloom, Englander, Restonic, Coaster and Natura. Most of the Top 15 Bedding Producers attended the conference.

And the industry's top suppliers also were well represented, with Hickory Springs being the headline sponsor, and Leggett & Platt also being a sponsor.

Other supplier sponsors included Latex International, Protect-A-Bed, the Sleep Trust Guarantee, Home Direct, Protect-All and Carmel Financial. In addition, 1800mattress.com was also a sponsor.

The Home Furnishings Independents Assn. was once again the co-sponsor of the Bedding Conference.

The two-day educational program focused on retail issues. Retail keynoter Danny Seo, a green living guru who works with JCPenney as its green living partner, touted the advantages to retailers of offering green marketing programs.

Seo said the green movement is "not a trend, it's a culture shift," and said the green category offers strong growth prospects for businesses.

Retailers can become more green in their stores by using energy-saving lighting, low-maintenance plants and carrying eco-friendly products, he said.

Seo's new Natural Care by Danny Seo mattress line, produced by Simmons, is available at select JCPenney stores.

Retail success stories were shared by Barrie Brown, CEO of Mattress Giant, Addison, Texas; Pete Bills, director of clinical research at Select Comfort, Minneapolis; Steven Stone, president of BedMart, Portland, Ore.; and Tom Beall, president of Beall's Furniture, Hemphill, Texas.

Brown cited the importance of selling sleep accessories, which he said should rival sleep set sales in volume. Bills explained the need to engage consumers in conversations about how well they sleep so that retailers can better meet their sleep needs.

Stone said his stores provide a spa-like environment to help consumers relax and to elevate the shopping experience. And Beall said it is im-



High-end bedding panelists were Irwin Pearl, left, Magniflex; Mark Quinn, Leggett & Platt; and Avi Barssessat, Hollandia International.

portant for furniture retailers to put bedding in the spotlight on their sales floors.

Advertising guru Jon Parks, of Horich Parks Lebow Advertising, gave retailers a checklist they can use to improve the effectiveness of their advertising.

And Kurt Ling, president of Customer Kinetics, said retailers need to escape a price-oriented model if they want to get credit for selling better health and well-being through a focus on selling better sleep.

Five companies selling sleep accessories — Protect-A-Bed, Protect-All, Hickory At Home, Natura and Latex International — explained the profit opportunities afforded by sleep accessories, and noted how those products improve consumer comfort.

Highlights of the second day of the educational program included an address by International Sleep Products Assn. Chairman Charlie Eitel, vice chairman of Simmons, who explained an industrywide marketing program that ISPA hopes to launch, a high-end panel that featured presentations by Magniflex, Hollandia and Leggett & Platt, and a wrap-up address by business strategist Thom Winninger.



Attending Furniture/Today's Bedding Conference were George Bruni, left, Art Van Warren, Mich., and Dwayne Welch, Hickory Springs.



Lisa Stansbury, left, Fred's Beds, Wilmington, N.C., and keynote speaker Danny Seo.