

Bedding Benchmarks

Colonial perks up mattress brand displays

By David Perry

HIGH POINT — This lesson in mattress merchandising begins with a naked mattress.

It is not a pretty sight, lying there in a corner of the showroom at Colonial LLC here. It is a boring beige rectangle.

Now the executives at Colonial spring into action. In short order, they add a dark blue pillow sham, two sleeping pillows, two accent pillows, a foot protector, a blue banner that tucks around the mattress at the foot of the bed, and assorted labels. And they hang a banner next to the bed.

Just like that the once-boring bed is beautiful, dressed for success and packing potent brand messages. And the lesson comes into sharp focus: Without the investment in any additional real estate, retailers can use display materials to deliver compelling brand messages and boost mattress sales.

"Every queen-sized bed has the same square footage," observed Mark Hobson, the bedding veteran who joined Colonial this year as senior vice president of sales and marketing. "Retailers can use that square footage to dress the bed, or they can leave it blank. They might as well use it."

And that's what more and more retailers and producers are working together to accomplish these days as the mattress display category continues to gain in importance.

The industry is stepping up its focus on mattress displays in response to an increasingly competitive sales climate, challenging business conditions, and the growing sophistication of the business. Bedding brands are seeking to gain an edge on sales floors, in part, by using strong display materials.

Hobson, who joined Colonial after working 25 years at Sealy and then doing consulting work for Sandler



Before: A bare mattress rests in corner of showroom at Colonial LLC in High Point.

Training, said officials at Colonial work with the industry in a consultative process. The discussions revolve around three key subjects: Brand strategy, sales effectiveness and cost efficiency.

Colonial is a full-service producer of mattress display materials based in High Point. The company is headed by High Point businessman Jim Keever, and his sons, Jimmy and Wes, are part of the management team. They are joining Hobson in taking Colonial's branding programs to producers and retailers.

Hobson said it's important for members of the Colonial team to have detailed discussions with their clients so they can better understand the nature of the clients' businesses and the issues they want to address.

On the issue of brand strategy, he said it's important for mattress brands to stand out on sales floors. Key questions here include: Is the brand recognizable from 35 feet away? How is the brand presented? What is the value proposition? How does the brand differentiate itself from other brands?

Sales effectiveness is also important, Hobson said, because most bedding producers don't have as many trainers as they would like, and the retail sales associates have a lot of information to learn. Key questions

for retailers here include: Are support materials easily accessible to consumers? Are the messages understandable? Are feature and benefit messages strongly presented?

One reason for the rise in importance of display materials today is that those materials often convey the features and benefits of the products, Hobson said.

In the old days, producers included those messages on labels sewn onto the beds. But now the trend is for producers to use fewer labels and to shift product messages to key areas such as foot protectors.

Hobson noted that that retail real estate is expensive, and said that the mattresses are already on the sales floor. That's why dressing up those mattresses is so important.

"Slot productivity is critical," he said.

Cost efficiency is the third leg of the "consulting triangle" at Colonial. "Our products must meet the needs of the customer in the most efficient way," said Jimmy Keever. "We want to help them sell more products and we want to do so efficiently."

Added Wes Keever: "This is one of the few areas where the brands can control their message."

Generally speaking, the more that producers and retailers spend on display



After: The same mattress is now dressed for success with display materials produced by Colonial.



Mark Hobson, seated, joins other members of the Colonial team: Jimmy Keever, Jim Keever and Wes Keever.

materials, the higher their return will be on that investment, Hobson said. But he added this caveat: "Spending more, in and of itself, may not bring a good return." The spending needs to be well thought out and grounded in the strategy the client is pursuing, he said.

Colonial officials bring all of those issues into the discussions they have with producers and retailers. "The difference at Colonial is that

we believe in consultative design and we are more focused on all the needs and issues of our clients."

While Colonial spends most of its time building its clients' brands, it is also beginning to build its own brand. Earlier this year the company unveiled a new logo and brand message: "Colonial LLC. Display and branding specialists." The company is using that logo on its display materials.

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Bedding Benchmarks is an editorial feature that provides a roundup of bedding news from all sectors of the industry. Bedding producers, retailers and suppliers are invited to submit information for this page to David Perry, Executive Editor, at dperry@furnituretoday.com. Or you can mail information to: Bedding Benchmarks, Furniture/Today, 7025 Albert Pick Road, Suite 200, Greensboro, N.C. 27409.