

A Boomer's Guide on How to Buy A Mattress



By Steven R Unger

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my father, my uncle, and my cousin who all spent a great part of their life selling mattresses.

Introduction

This book combines both personal and practical information and is divided into three sections.

1. The first three chapters of this book tell a personal story about my family's involvement in the mattress business and the history and evolution of the mattress industry. You may or may not be interested in this information, but it will give you some perspective on what you will experience when you go to purchase a mattress today.
2. You can skip directly to Chapter 4 if you want to dive right into the nuts and bolts of purchasing a new mattress.
3. The last section of this book provides link to 3 articles describing the process of choosing a new mattress and links to the websites of the major mattress companies.

Background

Not long after my Dad returned from fighting in World War II, he became Sales Manager of the Sealy Mattress Company of Ohio in Cleveland. When I was growing up in the 1950's, he would sometimes take me to his office at the factory and let me ride on the conveyor belt along with the bundles of cotton. I could also see the machinery releasing the compression of newly arrived innersprings.

Later my Dad became Sales Manager for Sealy Mattress of New Jersey, and then Sales Director of Sealy Inc. at the headquarters in Chicago. Eventually he became Vice President of Marketing for Sealy Inc., and when faced with a required retirement, he became President of Serta Mattress. Our family joke was that "my Dad slept his way to the top".

In his time at Sealy, my Dad rode herd on the licensees. He also opened up Sealy franchises in Japan and South Africa. He also promoted King and Queen size bedding, three levels of mattresses and the concept of the "sleep center" in furniture and department stores.

My Dad loved visiting the mattress departments of furniture and department stores. He showed them how a small "sleep center" in their store could generate more revenue per square foot than any other product. He developed a sales concept called "selling up by stepping down". In this case the King size bed was the premium level, the queen size was the medium level, and the twin mattress was the value level.

In this approach, the Sales Rep would say to the customer "in order for you to understand our mattress offerings, I am going to begin by showing you the very best mattress that we have." Then the Sales Rep could move down to the less expensive models showing what was left out. The statistics showed this approach increased the average amount of the sale.

My Dad also realized that mattresses were a "black box" item, meaning that most people did not understand what was inside of them. So, Sealy developed a small instore cut away showing the inside of a mattress.

When I was in college, I introduced my father to the "waterbed". He bought one and tried it. In the end there was not enough manufacturing and profit margin to make it of interest to the major manufacturers. Also, I sometimes attended the Sealy and Serta national sales meetings, and I would visit him at the annual Furniture Market in Chicago or San Francisco.

So, in a real sense, you could say I grew up with mattresses.

History of the Mattress Industry

In order to understand how to buy a mattress today, it is useful to understand how the industry evolved in the U.S.

From the 1950's thru the 1980's the mattress business in the U.S. was dominated by a few large manufacturers. Sealy, Serta, Simmons, and Stearns & Foster. These companies each had a headquarters that managed their independent Licensees who agreed to produce mattresses accord to specific specifications. This "franchise" structure worked well because it was expensive to transport finished mattresses great distances, so manufacturing them closer to the customer was more cost-effective.

In this period each manufacturer had a brand name and specific models that were available at all retailers nationwide. In the case of Sealy the brand name was "Posturepedic" and they had King, Queen, Full and Twin size models. Simons had the brand name "Beauty Rest" with pocketed coils, and the Serta brand was "Perfect Sleeper".

During this period, it became clear that mattresses were often purchased to accommodate specific life changes (e.g. marriage, moving, having children, downsizing) and women in general had the greatest influence on purchases.

As noted in the previous section, the evolution of the mattress industry included:

- Introduction of King and Queen Size mattresses
- Introduction of the "sleep center" in furniture and department stores
- Introduction of the mattress cut-away to show the inside of the mattress
- Recognition of the specific life changes and role of women in the decision to buy a new mattress.

These were the "good old days" where you could find the same "Sealy Posturepedic Premier" at any furniture or department store in the country.

The Mattress Industry Today

Starting in the 1990's the Mattress Industry Has Changed Radically

- **Licensees disappeared.** The headquarters operations of Sealy, Simmons, Serta and Stearns & Foster eventually bought out the independent licensees. Now operating as single entities (rather than a collection of franchises) the companies produce mattress with product names specific to each large customer.
- **The major brands consolidated.** Tempur-Sealy International now includes Tempurpedic, Sealy and Stearns & Foster. Serta and Simmons merged. It is reported that even today these two companies today hold over 45% market share. This is similar to how PriceLine and Booking.com actually include most of the travel websites under their umbrellas.
- **The mattress companies focused on having “luxury tops”** on their premium mattresses. So the cost of a top-of-the-line mattress is much higher relative to the value model.
- **Free-standing Discount Mattress Stores appear** and became a new sales channel (e.g. The Mattress Firm).
- **New “inflatable” mattresses** became available (e.g. The Sleep Number mattress). This meant that a deflated mattress could be shipped in a cost-effective manner.
- **New “compressible” mattresses** became available (e.g. Purple). This meant that a compressed “mattress in a box” could be shipped in a cost-effective manner.
- **Separate foam toppers** are now available at stores like Costco.

The new reality:

As a result of these changes:

- Today, when you shop for mattresses in multiple furniture, department or mattress stores **you will not be able to compare apples-to-apples.**
- Sometimes the **same brand and model** of mattress may be sold in multiple stores under **different names with different ticking** (outer covering).

- **Many of the new vendors have store fronts in major shopping centers** where you can go and test their mattresses.
- Whatever mattress you buy, **make sure you understand the cost and difficulty of return** if you are dissatisfied. Some brands offer a “trial period” in which the mattress can be more easily returned.
- It is important to remember that most mattress **sales reps operate on commission**. As a result, they will tend to lead with the most expensive brand and model.

Types of Mattresses

The first thing you need to understand and consider are the various types of mattresses.

Innerspring/Coil

This innerspring mattress was the most common type of mattress after feather beds. As noted in an article in the New York Times, *“an innerspring mattress uses a system of connected metal springs, or coils, to support the weight of your body. A top layer of soft, fabric-encased padding (aka the comfort layer) provides cushioning and contouring without the sinking sensation of memory foam. In general, a quality innerspring mattress offers good edge support, is more breathable (and thus cooler) than its all-foam counterparts, and comes in a range of firmness levels to accommodate a variety of preferences.”*

Memory Foam

Memory foam mattresses are relatively softer than other beds. If you're not new to this technology, you're probably aware that memory foam mattresses are known for their soothing body-contouring feel.

However, owing to its soft nature, it's crucial to consider the density of the foam to ensure support and durability. Individuals weighing up to 250 lbs or so will want a mattress with a 4-5 lb density comfort section and a core foam density of 2.2 lb or higher. The best mattress for heavy stomach sleepers above 250 lbs needs memory foam layers 5 lbs dense or higher.

Hybrid (Coil and Foam)

Hybrid technology should be your first consideration when buying the best mattress for heavy stomach sleepers. This mattress combines the support of a robust system of individually pocketed coils with the pressure relief of foam, making it immensely supportive and comfortable for plus-size folks.

Latex

People who can't find a memory foam mattress with the proper density for their weight should consider latex beds. Typically, latex has a density of 4 lbs. Often this material makes the best mattress for heavy back sleepers.

Although this density comes at a cost, natural latex tends to be more supportive. Also, it has a nice bounce making it easy to move around on.

Adjustable Air

The Sleep Number Bed by Select Comfort is the market leader in air mattresses that has internal pockets that can be filled with various amounts air to create a firmer or softer feel.

Things to Consider

Besides Mattress Type, there are several other factors that you need to take into account. With so many options available on the market, choosing the right mattress can be a daunting task. Here are some of the important factors to consider and look for when buying a mattress.

- **Mattress Size:** The first thing to consider is the size of the mattress. The size of the mattress you choose will depend on your personal preferences and the size of your room. Mattresses are available in a range of sizes, including twin, full, queen, and king. Consider the size of your bedroom and the number of people who will be using the mattress before making a decision.
 - Standard (Eastern) King - 76" x 80"
 - California King - 72" x 84"
 - Queen - 60" x 80"
 - Full (Double) - 54" x 75"
 - Twin - 39"x 75"
 - Twin Extra-long - 39" x 80"
- **Your height:** If you're a few inches taller than average, you'll need to favor a bed with plenty of space at the bottom.
- **Your Weight.** Some mattresses are thick and others are thin. Your height and weight can influence the thickness of the mattress you need.
 - Slightly overweight people with a BMI (body mass index) of 25 to 29.9 should consider mattresses in the 7" to 10" range.
 - Obese individuals with a BMI in the range of 30 to 34.9 will appreciate a 10" to 12" thick mattress.
- **Firmness:** The firmness of a mattress is another important factor to consider. A mattress that is too firm can cause discomfort and pain, while a mattress that is too soft can cause improper alignment of your spine.
- **Sleeping Position:** Do you usually sleep on your back, your side, or your stomach? Side sleepers may prefer a softer mattress, while back sleepers may prefer a firmer mattress.
- **Support/Firmness:** The support provided by the mattress is crucial for maintaining proper spinal alignment and reducing pressure points. A

mattress that is too soft can cause your body to sink, while a mattress that is too firm can cause discomfort. Look for a mattress that provides even support across your body, especially in areas such as your lower back and hips.

- **Edge Support:** While you spend most of your time sleeping flat on your mattress, sometimes you need to sit on the edge of the mattress. So, sit on the edge of the mattress and see if the mattresses can allow you to sit comfortably.
- **Motion Isolation:** When two people share the same bed the movement of one person while they are asleep may disturb the other person. Some types of mattresses can minimize the motion transfer.
- **Durability:** A mattress is a significant investment, so it's essential to choose one that is durable and long-lasting. Look for a mattress with a high-quality construction that can withstand years of use. Does the manufacturer have an estimate of the projected life of the mattress? Does the manufacturer provide a warranty to ensure that it covers any defects or damage that may occur.
- **Temperature Regulation:** Mattresses can retain heat, which can cause discomfort and disturb your sleep. Look for a mattress that has temperature-regulating features, such as cooling gel or breathable materials. These features can help keep you comfortable throughout the night.
- **Price:** Finally, consider the price of the mattress. A premium mattress is a significant investment (often \$2,000 to \$4,000 or more), but it's essential to choose one that fits within your budget. Look for a mattress that provides excellent value for its price, with features that meet your specific needs.
- **Materials:** The materials used to manufacture mattresses can also vary. Some mattresses are made of only “organic” materials. If you have allergies, you may want to ask if the mattress is made from hypoallergenic materials.

To summarize: choosing the right mattress is essential for getting a good night's sleep. Consider the size, type, firmness, support, durability, temperature regulation, and price when making your decision. By taking the time to research and compare different options, you can find a mattress that provides maximum comfort and support for years to come.

Summary

When all is said and done, here are the most important steps you need to take.

- If at all possible, test the mattress in person to see how it feels.
- Try different types of mattresses and see if there is one type that feels the best to you.
- Select 3 to 5 qualities that are the most important to you for your new mattress and grade your top choices on each of these parameters.
- Make sure you understand the delivery, installation and return costs, policies, and procedures.
- Remember durability. I once asked my father what the difference was between an inexpensive mattress and an expensive mattress? He said at first, they might feel about the same, but the higher quality mattress would last longer.

May you sleep well!

For More Information

Articles

- [How to Buy a New Mattress Without a Ph.D. in Chemistry](#)
The New Yorker, June 22, 2022, by Patricia Marx
- [How to Buy a Mattress](#)
Consumer Reports, March 1, 2023
- [How to Choose a Mattress](#)
The New York Times – Wire cutter, February 2, 2023, by Joanne Chen

Websites

- [Avocado Mattress](#) – The “Green” Mattress
- [Casper](#) – Hybrid Mattress
- [Dream Cloud](#) – Hybrid Mattress
- [Nectar Mattress](#) - Memory Foam Mattress
- [Purple Mattress](#) - GelFlex
- [Saatva](#) - Memory Foam Mattress
- [Sealy](#) – Foam/Hybrid/Innerspring
- [Serta](#) – Foam/Hybrid/Innerspring
- [Simmons](#) – Foam/Hybrid
- [Sleep Number - Select Comfort](#) – Adjustable Air Mattress
- [Sterns & Foster](#) – Memory Foam/Hybrid
- [TempurPredic](#) – Memory Foam Mattress
- [Tempur-Sealy International](#) – Corporate Headquarters
- [Serta-Simmons](#) – Corporate Headquarters