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Hollandia's unique approach

By David Perry

PHILADELPHIA — It starts with coffee and friendly banter in the store and ends with flowers when deliverymen, dressed in white, arrive to set up the bed.

The Hollandia shopping experience is not the norm in the helter-skelter world of mattress retailing. This Israeli-based bedding producer and retailer, with a network of stores in Europe and the United States, has its own unique formula. The payoff for its customers: A line of adjustable specialty sleep sets, loaded with special features and functions, retailing from \$6,000 up to \$50,000.

Hollandia has three U.S. sleep shops, all in the Northeast. In addition to a store in the Market-place Design Center here, shops are located in King of Prussia, Pa., and Short Hills, N.J.

The company's growth plan in the U.S. calls for additional

units on the East Coast, according to Avi Barssessat, Hollandia's CEO. The U.S. market offers considerable potential for the company's line of luxurious beds, he believes.

Hollandia beds are fashioned from Talalay latex, covered with organic cotton ticking. The company is a big believer in latex.

"The surface elasticity of a latex mattress allows for greatly diminished pressure on the body (and on sore joints and muscles), while conforming to the body," the company says on its Web site. "The result is tremendous comfort and less tossing and turning. Natural latex also has outstanding porosity. It is ventilated and therefore breathes."

The Hollandia sleep systems incorporate features like a Flexible Shoulder Zone designed to accommodate side sleepers by adjusting to improve blood flow and eliminate numbing

and tingling. Some of the beds are surrounded by high-tech home entertainment and home theater systems, featuring high-definition, flat-panel TVs and surround-sound systems.

The adjustable nature of the beds is a key to their success, the company says: "Contrary to popular belief, our bodies are not designed to sleep on a completely flat surface. In order to get authentic, restorative sleep, our back needs to be slightly elevated for better breathing and our feet should also be somewhat elevated for proper circulation."

The names of sleep systems suggest the high-end appeal of the line: The Executive, The Sanctuary, The Prestige, The Celebrity, and The Groove. Those are all models in the Platinum-Luxe collection.

These are two-sided mattresses, offering consumers varying choices of firmness for

seasonal comfort. A firmer sleep surface may be best for the summer, keeping the sleeper cooler, while a softer sleep surface might be best for winter. "You can sleep in the mattress," said Barssessat. "It is so comfortable, so cozy."

"Comfortable" is also the byword for how the company sells those beds. Hollandia's customers need plenty of time to understand all of the features in the company's beds. And they get it. "They will spend two hours in our shops without any problem," Barssessat said.

Hollandia welcomes consumers to the store with espresso. The consumers have plenty of choices to consider. "We do it slowly and carefully," Barssessat said. "Our customers really appreciate that. We become their friends. It's amazing."

It takes highly trained sales associates to provide that level of service. "We train our people

in the Hollandia way," Barssessat said.

The goal is to help consumers find the bed that is best for them, the same quest that motivated Hollandia's founder, Isaac Barssessat, Avi's father. He spent years on that quest, one that led him to establish Hollandia so that other consumers could benefit from the knowledge he gained on that journey toward a great night of sleep.

The Hollandia way extends beyond its sleep shops.

"We deliver a very unique experience in the customer's home," Barssessat said. "Our delivery people dress completely in white. They give flowers to our customer so that we start the conversation with a smile before we say hello. Then we assemble the beds."

The beds come with plenty of choices and options. "We are selling an experience, not just a bed," Barssessat said.

CEO Barssessat aims to grow business in U.S. market

By David Perry

SEDEROT, Israel — He is the son of a successful artichoke farmer who joined his father's fledgling mattress company as a deliveryman, an experience that gave him insights his company still applies decades later.

Avi Barssessat, the CEO of Hollandia International, based here, now helps the company deliver a restful night's sleep to consumers who spend up to \$50,000 on its high-tech adjustable sleep sets.

These days he's looking for growth in the U.S. market, where the company operates three retail showrooms. Hollandia is seeking an American to run its U.S. operations. An American, Barssessat figures, will help the company grow more quickly in the United States.

Hollandia has 60 company-owned shops and more than 100 stores in Iceland, Australia, Cyprus, Holland, Israel, Portugal, Russia, South Africa, Sweden, Spain and the United States. That's a far cry from the company's humble beginnings: A single store in Israel.

The seeds of the Hollandia story were planted in the 1970s, when Isaac Barssessat decided to give up his business as an artichoke farmer because of

a bad back.

"As a result," a history of the company says, "he set out to find the perfect mattress. In Holland, he came across a bed so restful that it soothed his ailing back. Isaac brought the bed to Israel and opened the first Hollandia store in 1981."

Five years later, Avi Barssessat joined the company, expanding its reach in Israel and moving onto the world bedding stage. His father remains active in the company as chairman, directing operations in Spain, where the mattresses are produced.

Avi still remembers his early experiences delivering Hollandia beds. "The first bed I sold in the U.S.," he said, "I delivered myself. I needed to train my people. That is the best way to do it."

Back in the '90s he hit upon a key to the company's delivery program: The deliverymen begin a call by giving the customer fresh flowers. They also deliver a personal note from Barssessat. He was turned off by the anonymous notes some companies use. "I'm not a CEO hiding behind a secretary," he said.

That's obvious in his factory here. "My office is in the production department," Barssessat said. "My door is always open. My employees don't need



Hollandia's Avi Barssessat, right, reviews new ticking designs with Job Droge, president of Innova, a supplier to Hollandia.

to make an appointment. This interaction with employees is important if you want to make the right product."

Another key, he said, is to have plenty of women in the company. "More than 40% of our employees are women," he said. "We have women doing jobs that men have traditionally done." Women, Barssessat opined, "are more loyal to their work and are more responsible for what they do" than men.

Women also hold some key posts in the company. Rina Benhamou, chief

financial officer, has been with the company more than 26 years. Maya Ben, senior vice president of operations, also has extensive experience in the company.

Avi Barssessat fosters a family atmosphere in Hollandia. "Any Hollandia event is always for families," he said.

Barssessat also puts his touch on the product line. He personally tests all of the company's products in his home to make sure that they deserve to carry the Hollandia name.