

Innovation wins kudos for Hollandia

By David Perry

SDEROT, Israel — And the winner is ... Hollandia International!

Shouts of appreciation and joy erupted from the crowded auditorium in the community center here, where the leaders of the Israeli furniture industry were gathered to honor their best and brightest stars, winners of the year's design awards.

Hollandia International, based in a factory just down the road from this city, was one of the big winners in the competition, grabbing two awards.

It was a night of celebration for Hollandia CEO Avi Barsessat and the mattress company that he has built into a leader in adjustable sleep systems. On hand to participate in the gala awards program was one of the country's leading politicians, Deputy Prime Minister Elyahu Yishai, minister of industry, trade and labor.

The awards marked another chapter in the ongoing success story engineered by the company that began as The Sleep Engineering Center, founded in 1981 by an artichoke farmer obsessed with finding a bed that would provide the best night of sleep. That farmer, Isaac Barsessat, Avi's father, eventually found a great mattress in Holland, which helped give the



Hollandia CEO Avi Barsessat stretches out on an adjustable Hollandia sleep set in a company store in the design center in Ramat Gan, Israel.

company its present name.

Hollandia has found a niche with the same startling admonition that shook up conventional thinking hundreds of years ago: The world is not flat. In Hollandia's case, it is the mattress world that is not flat.

"We don't recommend that you sleep flat," Avi Barsessat says. Truly restorative sleep, he said, comes to those who sleep with their heads and their feet slightly elevated.

The company has thousands of fans who swear their Hollandia sleep systems, many cushioned with Talalay latex mattresses, have changed their lives. Hollandia equates the high-tech adjustable beds to a finely made automobile, packed with features like entertainment centers and massage motors, a remote hand control

that operates through air pressure instead of electricity, and a safety system that automatically stops any motion of the bed if a child or pet comes near the base of the system.

Oh, and there is also a heavy-duty safe that can be installed inside the head rest. In these days of stock market turbulence, some consumers really are putting their money under their mattress.

"You wouldn't believe how many of these safes we sell," Barsessat said, motioning to a supply of the safes on his factory floor as he led a tour



An in-depth look at Israel's bedding market

Sleep shops and U.S. bedding brands play a big role in the Israeli mattress market, as Furniture/Today discovered during its first visit to that country. These stories take an in-depth look at the retail and wholesale mattress scene in Israel, finding a number of similarities to the U.S. bedding market.

Monday: A look at bedding retailer Dr. Gav and one of its lines, U.S.-based Spring Air.

Today: A profile of mattress manufacturer Hollandia and its charismatic leader, Avi Barsessat.

Wednesday: Bedding producer and retailer Aminach finds success with a lineup that includes U.S. brands King Koil and Serta.

the day before the awards ceremony. "It's a huge hit. It's unbelievable. People are putting their money in our safes."

Consumers have been putting their trust in the company since its early days. Hollandia has a reputation as a producer of high-quality, luxury sleep sets — a reputation that it has brought to the United States, where four Hollandia stores sell its products.

Worldwide, there are 30 company-owned Hollandia stores, and the products are sold in more than 200 other retail locations. The company has six stores in Israel.

In keeping with its non-traditional product proposition, Hollandia marches to its own drummer in its selling and delivery programs. The company's sales associates encourage customers to lie on the beds before engaging them in detailed conversations, an approach few other retailers follow. (Sales associates joke that if a customer comes into a store and asks to use the restroom, they must lie down on a mattress first.)

There is plenty to talk about with a Hollandia sleep system, and the sales associates cover a lot of ground with their customers. This is not a quick purchase, but it can be a life-changing one and it deserves time, Barsessat said.

And when it makes a delivery, Hollandia gives each customer 20 red roses.

"We were looking for something to hit your heart," Barsessat said. "Some customers say to me, 'I've been married 20 years and he's never given me one rose. You gave me 20.' They are crying."

The customers also get a card with a personal message from Barsessat, and his phone number. This is not a CEO who hides from his customers. Barsessat relishes the contacts.

"Make the customer your friend," he advises. "He will trust you and give you his money. If he's not a friend, he will give his money to someone else." Most of the company's customers place more than one order.

It's all part of the winning formula at Hollandia.



This sleep shop at Ramat Gan, Israel, is one of 30 company-owned Hollandia stores worldwide.