



Home > News

It's good to be the mattress king

Sit 'n Sleep owner has gone from delivering his wares after-hours in a Ford pickup to moving \$95 million in volume annually.

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Larry Miller, chief executive of Sit and Sleep has opened a new store in Costa Mesa. (SCOTT SMELTZER, Daily Pilot / May 16, 2011)

By Sarah Peters, sarah.peters@latimes.com
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COSTA MESA — Before he became Southern California's mattress king, Larry Miller was broke.

In 1987, the Sit 'n Sleep chief executive faced business problems that coincided with the birth of his first child, Danielle. For Miller, that was the most wonderful and terrifying time of his life.

"It was the best moment of my life, but then I realized that I had this business, and it wasn't in good shape," Miller, 61, said. "It was the high point of my life and the low point. I was in debt to everyone, there was no money in my bank account, and I literally was on the edge of not knowing if I was going to make it."

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Earlier this month, Miller, known as the pitchman for the Sit 'n Sleep commercials that sign off with "... or your mattress is free!" celebrated the double-grand opening of his chain's 25th and 26th stores, in Costa Mesa and Agoura Hills, respectively.

Sit 'N Sleep's first Costa Mesa store, on Newport Boulevard near 17th Street, boasts an 8,500-square-foot showroom.

"I never dreamt it would be like this," Miller said at the Costa Mesa Sit 'n Sleep, talking about the decades-long journey to build the business, which started out in 1981 as a father-and-son run futon operation.

"I just wanted to give my kids a house to grow up in," he said. I'm so grateful. Trust me, I know the difference of having

nothing."

While Sit 'N Sleep is growing faster than ever — with a plan to expand to 40 stores within three years, including more Orange County locations — it took 17 years before the Gardena-based company was stable enough to open a second location, Miller said.

The business did about \$200,000 in sales volume its first year, with Miller doing the deliveries in a

Ford pickup truck after-hours, he said.

Sit 'N Sleep expects to reach \$95 million in sales this year, he said.

Miller's childhood friend, Irwin Zigmond, has been a key supporter since those rough early days, Miller said.

Zigmond is perhaps best known as the high-strung accountant whose tagline, "You're killing me, Larry!" replays on television and radio spots "hundreds of time a day," Miller said.

In the now widely recognized commercials, which feature back-and-forth banter between Miller and his accountant, Zigmond is actually portrayed by an actor. However, the duo's friendship and business dynamic is very real.

"He always has my best interests at heart," Miller said of Zigmond. "I'm the entrepreneur, and he always brings me back to reality."

When Sit 'N Sleep first began recording commercials, with carefully selected low-cost spots on a local radio station, Miller said his skills as a spokesman were "terrible."

"My voice was squeaky, my palms were sweaty, and I couldn't get the lines right," Miller said. "It took us three hours to get a 60-second bit done."

As the business continues to grow, Miller may one day pass it over to his son, Andrew, 20, or another family member, as long as "the fit is right for both." His daughter Danielle is 24, but is not interested.

However, Miller doesn't have any plans to ease into mattress retirement just yet.

"I'm going to stay in this until they carry me out," Miller said. "I love what I do."

