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## Sit 'n Sleep owner grabs business, attention: 'You're killing me, Larry!'

By Rachel McGrath

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Larry Miller of Sit 'n Sleep talks about the business in the showroom of his new store on Canwood Street in Agoura Hills.

Sit 'n Sleep is adding a location in Agoura Hills as part of a new phase of expansion for the mattress superstore renowned for its radio and TV commercials featuring company founder and President and CEO Larry Miller.

Miller says that while the recession affected sales, it has also offered opportunities, and lower lease rates for commercial buildings have allowed him to open in Agoura Hills, where's he's been trying to lease space for a couple of years.

He also recently opened new Sit 'n Sleep stores in Costa Mesa and Santa Monica, bringing the total number of stores to 26, including one in Oxnard on Outlet Center Drive.

He's not done yet, though, he says, revealing plans to open at least two other locations this year. He said he is actively looking for premises for a new store in the Moorpark and Simi Valley area.

"Most of these stores would have not been real affordable at the height of when business was good," he said. "Every downturn has an opportunity, and while it's unfortunate, it's provided growth opportunities, and I'm going to take advantage of them and try to open as many stores as I reasonably can."

"In 2007, we did more with fewer stores. Sales fell off about 15 percent in 2008, fell off a bit more in 2009, and in 2010, business came back," he said. "I'm starting to think we've seen the worst of it."

Miller has leased 9,000 square feet at the Agoura Design

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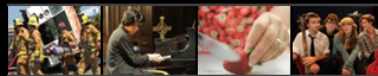
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Center on Canwood Street, fronting Highway 101. He says it's a great location that gives him visibility and offers easy access for customers.

Miller founded Sit 'n Sleep in 1980 in Culver City, where he and his father, Phil, who had previously operated a number of small mattress stores in the Los Angeles area, focused on selling futons, sofa beds and mattresses.

"We struggled like crazy, but over a period of years, we morphed more into a mattress specialty store," he said.

In the early days, Miller says, he worked as a sales person in the store during the day and delivered products to customers in the evening.

In a bid to boost sales, he paid \$100 for four commercials to air on KABC radio overnight.

"I couldn't even afford that, but it started working slowly, slowly," he said. "Then I went on more day ads, and I was listening to every ad because every ad was a penny out of my pocket, and they were reading the ads, and I said to my dad, 'They're not reading it with much gusto,' and he said, 'Well, why don't you do it?' "

The big breakthrough for his business came, Miller says, when "The Howard Stern Show" arrived in the L.A. market, and in 1991, Miller put his ads on Stern's show.

"That year, business went up by 50 percent, and I took that money and the next year went on more radio, and in 1993, I went on TV. TV put us really over the top, and 1993 is the first year I thought maybe I was going to be OK," he said.

Miller's catchphrases "You're killing me, Larry!" and "We'll beat any competitor's advertised price or your mattress is free!!!!" have made him a household name.

Miller says his company is now one of the largest mattress retailers in the country and the largest in Southern California. He also offers the widest selection of mattresses in America, he says.

He has more than 250 employees and as well as his stores, he has a distribution center and corporate offices in Gardena.

He anticipates gross revenues this year will be in the region of \$95 million.

Over the years, Miller says, he's evolved his business to try to educate consumers about the value of a comfortable bed and a good night's sleep and the importance of choosing the right mattress.

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In partnership with Sleep to Live Institute, a state-of-the-art sleep research center located in Joplin, Mo., he's helped develop "My Side Technology," a body diagnostic machine that identifies the best mattress an individual needs for maximum support and comfort.

Jackie Martel, who was at the Oxnard Sit 'n Sleep for three years and has moved to Agoura Hills as store manager, says the system is a big draw.

"This sets us apart from our competitors, and Larry does such a good job in marketing it that people come in asking for it," she said.

"What we're trying to do is be more relevant," Miller said. "Today, you've got to give consumers an overpowering reason to do business with you. The future is bright for those people who are willing to reinvent themselves."

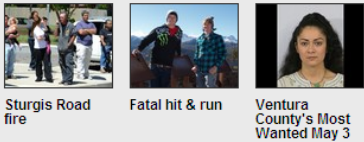
Miller also credits his employees for his success.

"We hire people who are nice people and smart people. We can teach them everything they need to know to become mattress experts, but you can't teach people to be good

*are willing to  
reinvent  
themselves.*  
*Larry Miller*


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people or nice people," he said. "My dad taught me an important lesson. He said if you take care of your customers, they will take care of you, and it was very wise advice."

For Miller, Sit 'n Sleep remains a family business. Although his father died eight years ago at the age of 89, his brother-in-law Nelson Bercier joined him as a partner in the company, and he's hoping a third generation of his family will come into the business, too.

"I've done better than I ever thought I would, so the thing that would make me happiest is to know that the business is expanding with my kids and my nieces and nephews," he said.

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