

Going to the Mattresses How to cut through the marketing gimmicks of Sealy, Serta, and the rest.

By Seth Stevenson



Here's a fun game I play. First, I walk into a mattress store and ask what's on sale. Then, I throw my hands in the air and shout along with the salesman, "EVERYTHING'S ON SALE!!!!" Oh how we laugh, the salesman and I. And while he's still chuckling, I turn around and walk out, because I fricking hate mattress salesmen.

Is there a more maddening industry? They confuse us with silly product names (the Sealy Posturepedic Crown Jewel Fletcher Ultra Plush Pillowtop or the Sealy Posturepedic Crown Jewel Brookmere Plush?). They flummox us with bogus science ("pocketed coils"? "Microtek foundations"? "Fiberlux"?). And they weigh us down with useless features (silk damask ticking?). It's like buying a used car, and almost as expensive—I've seen mattresses going for \$7,000. What's a consumer to do?

The secret to mattress shopping is that the product is basically a commodity. The mattress biz is 99-percent marketing. So just buy the cheapest thing you can stand and be done with it, because they're pretty much all the same. And that's all you need to know. But do read on—the world of sleep products is quite fascinating, and I'd like to share it with you.

What's the Best Brand?

Innerspring mattresses, particularly the Big S's (Simmons, Serta, Sealy), dominate the market. But how to choose among Serta and Sealy, Stearns and Foster, and King Koil? Or for that matter, between the Simmons Beautyrest Exceptionale Lenore and the Simmons Beautyrest Do-Not-Disturb Royalty Ultra?

Here's the lowdown: Mattress makers rename identical products for each different retail store. Different labels, exact same guts. Why? Obfuscation. It's hard to shop for the lowest price when you can't compare apples to apples. Lucky for you, they're all subtle variations on the same apple—not only within each brand, but even among different brands.

The heart of an innerspring mattress is the coils. Otherwise it's just foam, cotton, quilting, and stitches. But the big-name mattress makers (with some exceptions) all get their coils from a single company, Leggett and Platt, for their highest-end mattresses down to their lowest. This is akin to every single car on the market, Lamborghinis to Kias, using an engine made by Ford. Except that mattresses are far less complicated than cars. In fact, they're so simple that there's no real difference among them at all.

Upshot: Ignore brand names. They're meaningless. Just pay attention to comfort. Which leads us to our next question:

How Firm Should My Mattress Be?

Herein lies the central mattress paradox. You sleep on coils because they're softer than the floor, but you still want good, firm coils, but then you put foam padding on top to soften the coils, but you still want the foam to be dense, and then finally you put a strong box spring underneath for just a tiny bit of give. All



this shuttling back and forth on the scale of firmness—why not just start with the firmness you like, and then stop? My favorite mattress name encapsulates the paradox: Simmons Beautyrest World Class Granite Plush. Granite Plush???

Let's break down each mattress feature that creates firmness, or softness, or both.

Coil Counts and Wire Gauges: When I began, coil counts and wire gauges seemed the key to everything. I talked to several bedding journalists who had desperately sought these numbers from the mattress makers, but had long failed to penetrate the shroud of secrecy. I figured these stats were the empirical measure: More and thicker coils mean fuller and better support. But I soon found it's not that simple. Some mattresses use more coils but thinner-gauge wire. Some use thicker wire but fewer coils. And everyone uses radically different configurations that make comparisons meaningless.

Larry Thomas of *Furniture Today*—a man described to me as "the guru of the bedding industry"—told me coil counts are "overrated" and "not a good indicator." Yes, if you pay more, you'll get a theoretically better coil design, but better enough to feel a difference? I sure couldn't. Not even between two mattresses thousands of dollars apart in price. So don't worry about the stats—worry about the comfort.

Pillowtops: Pillowtops are soft layers of foam (or cotton, or wool) sewn to the top of the mattress. They're hugely popular. They add hundreds of dollars to your purchase. They are, in my opinion, a massive rip-off. You can re-create their effect with a few cheap egg-crate foam pads. And why spend all that money on springs just to dampen their affect with a giant pillow? If you really want to sleep on foam or cotton, buy a foam or cotton mattress.

Thickness: A recent fad. Some Stearns and Foster (a brand owned by Sealy) mattresses I saw measured about 2 feet thick (and cost \$5,000). It looked like they sewed a futon on top of an innerspring. Experts I talked to say thickness is just a ploy: It makes beds look comfy in the showroom. If you notice a difference, *mazel tov*, but thickness isn't vital to a good bed. You can achieve the same feel with less height (and weight—some mattresses weigh more than 200 pounds and are tough to carry up the stairs).

Mattresses have gotten so thick recently that people are complaining they can't see their headboards. Actual industry response: They made the box-springs thinner. Which of course leads us to ...

Box Springs: I find them wholly unnecessary. Think about it: Presumably, you could put a box spring under your box spring for even more "give" and "support." Another box spring under those two. Where do you draw the line? Also, remember that box springs add significantly to your cost. One reasonable argument I heard *for* them is that they save wear on your mattress, but I had no way to prove or disprove this.

Many Europeans use platform beds without box springs. Do you hear them complaining? I don't use a box spring, and I don't miss it. It's a princess/pea thing. If you need 17 layers, OK. If you only need one, don't buy a box spring, unless you don't like platforms and can't think of anything better to put your mattress on. My recommendation: Put your mattress on the floor—it saves money on nightstands. Give in to gravity!

Is a Firm Mattress Best for My Back?

I asked an orthopedic surgeon at something called the National Foundation for Spinal Health. He said a mattress should support you in the "position of function"—the normal curve of your spine when you're standing up. When a mattress flattens the curve (too firm), or exaggerates it (too soft), bingo: back pain. According to him, a supportive innerspring works better than foam, air, or water. The NFSH recommends: the Simmons Back Care mattress. Problem solved, let's go home, yes? No! I soon discovered the NFSH takes money from companies, including, especially, Simmons! Sketchy! Next orthopedic surgeon, please.

This second guy was independent and no longer practicing. He debunked the myth that firm mattresses are best. They are if you get acute back spasms, but for regular back pain your mattress doesn't make much difference. "The back is a complicated structure," he said. "Back pain has a lot to do with how you're built, but not a lot to do with your mattress." So you don't have to feel guilty about buying a soft, cushy mattress. It doesn't make a difference. (Regional trivia: Firm mattresses sell more in the Northeast [you penitent yankees, you!], while soft wins out in the South.)

Do I Need All Those Extra Features?

No. Screw 'em. For instance...

Ticking and Quilting: People often buy based on how a mattress looks in the store. This is moronic. You're going to spread a sheet over it the second you get home. Belgian damask? Really, now.

No-Flip Designs: Manufacturers say to flip your mattress every three months. It's even in some warranties. Yet this year's Simmons Beautyrest 2000 boasts a "no flip" design. And it's selling like hotcakes (for which flipping, incidentally, remains compulsory). Why? People love work-saving innovations—we're too lazy to flip. But what does it really mean? It means there's block foam on one side instead of something you could sleep on. And it means if there's a stain or a rip on the sleeping side, you're SOL. They should have called it the "can't flip" design. It's like a "No Oil Change" car that's simply had the dipstick and cap soldered in place.

Warranties: Almost any problem from normal use (which is all the warranties cover) will happen in the first month or so. Ignore the 10- and 20-year coverage. Just make sure there's a solid, 30- or 60-day return policy. That's important not only if the mattress is defective, but if you plain don't like it upon further review.

What About Foam, Air, Water, and Latex?

These legendary "four elements" of classical mythology can also be mattresses. Viscoelastic "memory" foam is popular now. I tried the Tempurpedic brand and loved it—it melts to fit your form. But I wouldn't spend \$1,500 for a mattress, no matter how Swedish it is.

Select Comfort air mattresses have sold big lately (though innerspring sales still dwarf everything else, owning more than 80 percent of the market). I didn't like the feeling of air, even though I could adjust the firmness with a remote-controlled pump. When you compress it with your weight, air doesn't seem to have as much give as foam. And it felt like I was camping. These start at \$550 for a queen-size.

Waterbeds have hung around (still half of all specialty mattress sales), but I couldn't find one out on display to test. And they give me the yips a little.

Finally, an independent mattress manufacturer I talked to swore that latex makes the best mattresses. (Coincidentally, he makes latex mattresses.) I tried a latex bed, and it didn't feel very different from a firm innerspring, but that's me.

Futons?

Sure, why not? They're cheaper, partly because there's no box spring. But what is a futon these days, anyway? The definition has essentially devolved into "it bends." They even make innerspring futons, now. At the same time, real innerspring beds keep stacking on the foam and cotton, emulating futons of yore.

Conclusion

If you can't tell the difference between a \$200 and a \$900 mattress (I couldn't, but maybe you can), get the cheaper one. They're nearly the same, anyway. Anything over \$1,500 and you're just paying for prestige, says Larry Thomas. There are tons of great mattress sets for low prices. Yes, to an extent, you get what you pay for (better coil design, denser foam, ritzier ticking), but don't go crazy over this stuff. Lie down on mattresses in the store and trust your own judgment. Remember: Once you're asleep, every mattress feels the same.