



WOLF MATTRESS: NO REST FOR THE INNOVATIVE

By Charlee Beasor

Paul E. Wolf was a serial entrepreneur who started at least four companies, including a mattress, furniture upholstery, carpet and curtain company in 1873 (two years after emigrating from Germany) that is today known as Wolf Mattress Corporation.

It is the oldest mattress manufacturer in the United States under continuous family ownership.

The company started producing futon mattresses early on; it is the oldest Serta licensee and manufactures Serta futons.

Wolf mattresses are innerspring mattresses that are compressed, rolled and shipped in a box in a one-day shipping timeframe to three-fifths of the U.S.

The company employs 50 at its facility in Fort Wayne; average employee tenure is 12 years.

Wolf mattresses are available through purchase at most online retailers; the company also has an outlet store in Fort Wayne.

Innovation and perseverance are keys to longtime success, says CEO and fourth-generation owner Tony Wolf.

“It’s the darn willingness to stay in there and keep slugging it out until you win,” he offers.

Good financial stewardship is another vital component, Wolf asserts, along with a solid and dedicated employee base, the willingness to look at things differently and taking chances with innovation.

“It’s survival though. If you go back to 1873 to today, the number of recessions and depressions, (those) train wreck so many business. It could have wrecked this one a hundred ways to Sunday,” he admits. “Innovation is very important and we are blessed with multi-generational employees.”

Distribution also falls into the category of doing things a little differently.

“It’s a product that ships in a box, and that’s kind of unusual for an innerspring product,” Wolf explains. “There are all kinds (of mattresses) made out of foam that can be shipped readily via UPS or FedEx, but you don’t find too many innersprings. We are an innovator in that arena and have been for quite a while.”

He affirms that listening to sales representatives about what people are buying – and how – has been a crucial strategy.

“When we followed the millennials, we caught on to their trail with the futons. Futons were a collegiate investment and for first family formations, and we got into that very, very early in the late ’80s and early ’90s. ... Then the stores that sold futons were saying, ‘We’re not seeing customers anymore.’ They were (supposedly) disappearing,” he recalls.

“We went down to one of the furniture markets and the sales rep was all excited. He said, ‘The futon thing isn’t over; it just switched channels. The kids aren’t buying in stores anymore; they’re buying on the internet.’ ”

Following customers from the store to the internet has been a differentiator for the company.

“We were the 450th member on Walmart.com and there was this little thing called Amazon,” he quips.

Tony’s wife, Beth, is vice president of sales for the company.

“You know when you sleep on a Wolf mattress, you’re sleeping on 140 years of innovation and creativity,” she declares.

She proudly quotes the company’s tagline: “Quit counting sheep – sleep with a wolf!”

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The company is also vertically integrated. It has a fiber division and manufactures many of the components of the mattresses and sells those components to other manufacturers (furniture sector and beyond) and the RV industry.

It's location in Fort Wayne also is key.

"Indiana is an incredibly stable financial platform," Tony Wolf notes. "Indiana is truly run for business and is well set up for business, and I don't think that should ever be underestimated. And geographically, Fort Wayne is wonderful. With the new things Fort Wayne is doing and quality of life here and cost of living here is extremely important to us – not just for us but our families that work for us."



A Wolf Mattress photo from around 1900 features three Wolf "craftsmen" (from left): Mr. Strongman, Mr. Hartman and Mr. Bleeke. Strongman drove the wagon that was used to deliver mattresses at that time.

RESOURCES: Tony and Beth Wolf, Wolf Mattress Corporation, at www.wolfcorp.com