

## 2009 Bedding Yearbook

## Day Two: Cardi's

By David Perry

PROVIDENCE, R.I. — They were 30 feet tall when I saw them on the billboard on busy I-95, where they were described as MattMen. But they were only five inches tall when I saw their smiling faces, cute stuffed dolls sitting on a red sofa.

The Cardi brothers — Nick, Ron and Pete — loom large (and small, but only in toy form) over the Rhode Island market, where Cardi's Furniture has become a fixture through the diligent application of family values, hard work and superior service.

The three are known, collectively, as Ni-Ro-Pe, the first two letters of each of their first names. It is a name that their great-aunt came up with years ago, and it fits them well, bonding them into a cohesive unit, a mattress retail engine.

They are seated this morning on beds in the sprawling, spackle-mattress department of their flagship store in West Warwick, R.I., a suburb of Providence.



Brothers Nick, left, Ron and Pete Cardi, at back, join Butch Webster and Scott Smaling on the steps of the Showroom on Wheels, parked at the Cardi's store in West Warwick, R.I.

The department grew larger and larger over the years, Nick said, until it reached its current size, home to a healthy 66 SKUs. "Our staff is happy with the department," Nick said. The beds retail from \$299 to \$5,000.

Cardi's has been able to do what the experts recommend, but few retailers seem able to accomplish: Grow its mattress business in this downturn. "Through all the downturns, our market share has probably grown in mattresses," Pete said. Cardi's has become "even more aggressive," he said. "You can't sell from an empty cart," Nick added. "The stores have to look good. You have to promote."

I found the Cardi brothers to be more optimistic about business conditions than I had been expecting in the hard-hit North-

east. They said they believe the worst is over, that better days are surely coming, and that the recovery, while slow and gradual, will bring more and more consumers into stores. Consumers will, eventually, forget these tough times, they said.

Nick cited that classic line: "We choose not to participate in the recession."

How, exactly, did they decline the invitation? "We are three owners," Nick said. "We come to work every day. We all get e-mails. The phones don't stop. We don't screen calls. If customers have a concern, we will take care of that concern. We are fully involved. We believe in customer service. That's what brought us to the dance."

They liked the service afforded by the ComforPedic Loft

## Highlights

**Itinerary:** We started the day at the Westin in downtown Providence and then drove to West Warwick, a Providence suburb where Cardi's Furniture has its flagship store. From there we drove to Nashua, N.H., where the Showroom on Wheels was set up for the afternoon. We ended the day by driving to Mystic, Conn., where we spent the night.

**Best meal:** Grinders and pizza at Mystic Pizza. Yes, Mystic Pizza is in Mystic, Conn., a quaint town put on the tourist map by the movie "Mystic Pizza," in which an up-and-coming actress named Julia Roberts made her break-out performance. I had a Genoa salami grinder (sub sandwich), while Scott and Butch had the justly famous pizza.

**Surprise of the day:** The impressive commitment to customer service at Cardi's Furniture. The Cardi brothers answer their own phones and answer e-mails. These are hands-on owners. They make a difference in their business every day.



Butch Webster enjoys a slice of Mystic Pizza.

Showroom on Wheels. "This is very good for our staff," Nick said. "They don't get to go to the market." So Simmons brought the market to them, parking the mobile showroom in the parking lot of the West Warwick store.

The Cardi brothers were friendly hosts. They showed me

around the attractively merchandised store, pointed out a replica of the storefront of the original Cardi's store, located in the center of the store, and even posed for a picture with me while I held the toy version of them sitting on a sofa. It was a nice visit.

## Day Three: Sleepy's

By David Perry

HICKSVILLE, N.Y. — It would not be good to keep the nation's largest bedding retailer waiting. That thought ran through our minds every few minutes as we negotiated the heavy traffic of Interstate 95 on a rain-spattered morning, hoping the vital traffic artery would remain open.

When, some nervous hours later, we pulled into the parking lot of the sprawling headquarters of Sleepy's in this Long Island city, Scott Smaling nodded approvingly at the dashboard clock, which obligingly struck noon. We were perfectly punctual.

Inside their 90,000-square-foot offices, Sleepy's executives David Acker, president, and Adam Blank, chief operating officer, welcomed us to their new corporate digs, a step up



Scott Smaling, center, and Butch Webster, at right, introduce the ComforPedic Loft line to Sleepy's executives.

from the former headquarters in Bethpage down the road. The new place, which includes a state-of-the-art 367,000-square-foot warehouse, is an impressive facility. It sits on quaintly named South Oyster Bay Road.

Acker, the son of Sleepy's founder Harry Acker, and Blank got a look at the ComforPedic Loft line in the mobile showroom, which was set up near the loading docks behind the offices. David Acker said the line, which starts at \$999, is perfectly timed for market conditions.

Blank said it nicely complements existing lines in Sleepy's stores.

Sleepy's now stands unchallenged at the top of the mattress sales pyramid. There has been no stopping the retailer's steady, aggressive growth push.

And yet, David Acker told me after giving me a tour of the complex, the growth story has not just magically unfolded. Sleepy's owes its success, he said, to a basic formula laid down years ago by Harry Acker. It is one that is summed up on signs

## Highlights

**Itinerary:** We left Mystic, Conn., in the morning and drove to Hicksville, N.Y., where Sleepy's is based. After wrapping up our session there, we drove to the LaGuardia Marriott, next to the airport.

**Best meal:** The breakfast buffet at the Inn at Mystic, located in the hills above Mystic. Eggs, Portuguese sausage and pecan sticky rolls got the day off to a fine start.

**Surprise of the day:** The size of the warehouse at Sleepy's. Remember that final scene in "Raiders of the Lost Ark" where the ark is tucked away in a vast warehouse? The warehouse at Sleepy's is bigger.



A cloudy morning dawns at the Inn at Mystic.

throughout the headquarters: "Assume nothing. Check everything."

Harry Acker followed that philosophy from the day he opened his first mattress store back in Brooklyn in 1957, a store that still stands to this day. That first Bedding Discount Center later gave way to

Sleepy's, which is now known as "Sleepy's. The Mattress Professionals."

David Acker said there were 712 Sleepy's stores open as of the moment. Make that 712 and counting. The new headquarters is built for growth. And plenty more growth is in the cards for Sleepy's.