



# The aching loneliness of the Houston mattress salesman

**So many stores. So few customers.**

By James Haynes, Houston Chronicle | August 26, 2016 | Updated: September 1, 2016 12:46pm



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Photo: Jon Shapley, Houston Chronicle



Composite photo: Renan Brandao, a store manager for two Mattress Firm stores on Rice Boulevard, looks for things to do.

Most of the time, the people who work in mattress stores aren't selling mattresses. They're sitting alone, waiting for customers.

Since Urban Mattress' location on Kirby opened this spring, Rick Goulding has worked there part-time. "It's very slow-paced...you need something else to do." he says. "You could play on the Internet, you could do whatever you wanted to, but I prefer to work on my own business."

His friend Taylor Rogers, a former Urban Mattress sales manager in Austin, agrees. "Some days, I would literally go to the store at ten in the morning, be there until eight at night, and not have a single person come in."

"I read books," he says. "I did some writing. I managed my fantasy football team."



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It only looks like competition: Two of Houston's largest mattress chains, Mattress Firm and Mattress Pro, are actually owned by the same company, Mattress Firm. Now, Mattress Firm is in turn being acquired by an even bigger seller, Steinhoff International Holdings, sometimes called "the IKEA of Africa."

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In Houston, as in other cities, observers marvel that mattress stores are often only blocks away from each other, or even in the same strip center. And yet the stores hardly ever seem busy.

That quiet, it turns out, doesn't mean that they're not making money. Mattress stores **combine low overhead and low labor costs with an expensive product** — and thus, have plush, pillow-topped profit margins. According to Consumer Reports, **the retailer's profit** on a luxury-model name-brand inner-spring mattress set can be 50 percent.

Add to that a lack of competition, spurred by a consolidating market: Houston's two biggest retail chains, Mattress Firm and Mattress Pro, are owned by the same company, the Houston-based Mattress Firm — which is currently in the process of being acquired by Steinhoff International Holdings, sometimes called "the IKEA of Africa."

It's a recipe for a highly profitable, low-traffic business. "In an average day, you may only have two or three people walk in, and that's kind of the crazy part," says Rogers, who started at Urban Mattress in 2013. "But if they buy a \$6,000 mattress or something like that, then the store's able to stay afloat."

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## TRANSLATOR

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## GRAY MATTERS

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Ken Murphy, the president and CEO of Mattress Firm, was unavailable to comment.

## **Quiet hours**

Each of Houston's 150-plus stores has one or two sales managers, and each sales manager works about ten hours per shift. Sure, there are mattress-related tasks to be done: They catalog inventory, clean the store, and study mattress-chain videos, learning the ins and outs of latex material and organic memory foam.

But usually, such work takes only a fraction of the long workday. So each day, Houston's mattress salesforce spend hours upon hours with nothing to do but wait for customers to appear.

At the Urban Mattress store on Kirby, Goulding runs a contracting business. On the three days of the week when he's not at the mattress store, he makes site visits. Then, during the quiet hours at the store, he works on inspection reports, writes descriptions for photos and sends e-mails.





Without anything to do, he says, the job can put many store managers to sleep.

Literally. "One of the first weekends I was here by myself... there was one bed I really liked, and I was lying on there, not much happening," Goulding remembers. "I laid back there and was almost asleep when the front door opened."

A lot of the time, he says, the people who open his door aren't even customers. They're salesmen from other stores who want to scout the competition.

## **"Everyone needs a mattress"**

For an ambitious, outgoing person focused on sales, the work can seem slow. Renan Brandao, a store manager for two Mattress Firm stores on Rice Boulevard, is a recent graduate of the University of Houston, where he studied marketing and was active in the American Marketing Association.

From Brazil by way of Angola, Renan Brandao said that his cultural background gives him an advantage with customers: "Anyone that comes in, I can connect with."

But he doesn't have many opportunities. On a typical day, he's the only one in the store. On a busy Saturday, four people might come in.

Despite that slow-seeming traffic, Mattress Firms' two Rice Village stores are only a block apart. "I was surprised how profitable this business is," Brandao says. "Everyone needs a mattress."

He was promoted to store manager for Mattress Firm a few months ago. Early on, he educated himself on the product line by watching mattress-education videos. Now, during the dead hours, he takes customers' calls and checks on deliveries.

As hard as he's working to increase sales, he doesn't see himself managing mattress stores forever. "A leadership position in marketing," he says, "would definitely be my goal."

### **Lucrative at a busy location**

"I was actually at Walmart for 26 years," says Donald Jackson, who now works for Mattress One on Shepherd Drive.

These days, Jackson says, Walmart is "all about the almighty dollar." But Mattress One offers a five-day-a-week schedule, "and if we need certain days off, they let us have them."

Jackson started at Mattress One over a year ago, and has now worked at several of its locations. This is his second stint at the Shepherd store.

At a busy location, it's a lucrative job. Jackson says he averages \$80,000 a month in sales, and so he brings home around \$12,000 a month. Some employees, Jackson said, sell up to \$200,000 a month.

To deal with lulls, Jackson might check Facebook or Instagram. But mostly, he says, he finds mattress-related things to do: drawing up promotional flyers for 10 percent off a bed, or calling former customers and offering them deals for making referrals.

Still, he says, the days are long. He remembers another employee's shock when starting at a mattress store: "His first weekend, he was like, 'You're in this store by yourself all day?'"

*Bookmark Gray Matters. On a busy Saturday, four people might come in.*

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