

SMALL BUSINESS

Brothers find making mattresses is a natural fit **They fill a niche by shunning machines and man-made materials.** **Sales rose 36% last year.**

By David Colker, Times Staff Writer
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By a window with a view of a lake, two men hand-stitch a mattress pad in a time-honored manner by passing a foot-long sewing needle back and forth through a frame.

Nearby, a worker stuffs a pillow casing with pure wool while another attaches mattress springs, one by one, to a grid.

But this is not a quaint bedding museum.

It's the factory of Vivetique Sleep Systems in Arcadia, a company that makes mattresses, box springs, pillows, comforters and other sleep products the old-fashioned way with natural fabrics and stuffings.

There isn't a speck of polyurethane foam, by far the most common filling for modern mattresses, in Vivetique's 31,000-square-foot factory across from a rock quarry (thus the man-made lake) in a nondescript industrial park that includes manufacturers, public storage units and a couple of strip clubs.

"Foam is a dirty word around here," quipped Scott Carwile, 47, who co-owns the company with his twin brother, Steve.

Although the Carwiles say they are devoted to ecological causes, their decision to specialize in natural materials has more to do with making a name for themselves in a highly competitive industry.

"You can't directly take on Goliath with his marketing money if all you have is a pebble. We had to pick a good, strong niche," Steve said.

It seems to be working. Vivetique's sales shot up 36% last year to about \$6 million at a time when the mattress industry is in a bit of a rut: The number of mattresses sold in the U.S. last year rose 1.5%, according to the International Sleep Products Assn. Revenue was up 7.5%, with the increase reflecting an upswing in expensive mattresses.

Still, Vivetique's results are dwarfed by industry leader Sealy Corp.'s annual revenue of more than \$1.5 billion.

David Perry, bedding editor of the weekly Furniture/Today trade publication, said the trend toward natural mattresses, though small, seemed genuine.

"There have been isolated cases of natural being tried in the industry over the years without much success," Perry said. "But now you have Whole Foods and hybrid cars out there. This will probably be a bigger and bigger movement as we go forward."

Natural often means high-priced, and Vivetique is no exception. Although the average mattress costs about \$400, according to the international sleep products group, Vivetique's queen mattresses start at \$1,200 and go up to \$10,000.

Much of the price premium is attributable to the hand labor involved in making a mattress of natural materials that can't withstand assembly line machinery. Although it takes a modern factory about eight minutes to make a mattress, Steve said, it takes Vivetique about 45.

Ryan Trainer, executive vice president of the sleep products group, said the demand for premium product had been increasing. "As people get older, they are encountering sleeping problems," he said. "Getting a good mattress is a cheaper way of dealing with it in the long run than drugs."

On top of that, novelty sells when it comes to bedding. "It's like people who buy a new car every couple of years," Trainer said. "There is an allure, a sexiness in a new solution in sleep."

Cathy Strull, a retired television producer living in Encino, bought a Vivetique mattress and box spring about 18 months ago, shortly after she moved into a new home with her husband.

"When we first got together, he had a bed that was so soft we kept meeting in the middle," said Strull, 52.

They bought a natural bed set for about \$4,000 from Mary Cordaro, a North Hollywood-based consultant on environmental and allergy issues.

She has a line of bed sets, made by Vivetique, that carry her private label.

About 30% of Vivetique's output is made for retailers — usually promoting themselves as sensitive to environmental issues — that put their own names on the products.

"The bed is so comfortable, physically," Strull said. "And mentally, it's comfortable knowing that it's good for us."

No widely recognized scientific studies have shown that harm can come from sleeping on a mainstream mattress. But Strull feels more secure.

"With the environment getting so crummy," she said, "it's nice to have something we feel safe with."

The Carwiles grew up in Temple City, where their father, who worked at a box spring factory in Alhambra, often took on home projects. In 1976, when the twins were in high school, he started a business to make mattresses, with their help, in the garage.

"Everything was by hand," Steve said. "We made one a week."

After six months, they had created enough demand that they moved the operation into a five-car garage. A year later, they were in a San Gabriel storefront.

In 1983, the venerable Crown City Mattress company, which was founded in 1917 in Pasadena, went out of business, and the Carwiles bought the name and hired some of the employees. A few had been with Crown City so long, they remembered the era before man-made foam.

"They taught us how to make the cotton bed," said Steve, who became president in 1990 and reinstated production of nonfoam beds for a small portion of the company's output.

Eight years later, when the twins bought out their father, almost all of the products were of natural materials. They changed the name to the more exotic-sounding "Vivetique" — made up by a marketing company.

The move to the factory space came in 2005. Currently, they turn out 12,000 mattresses a year, plus other products. There are 33 full-time employees.

Even in this sterile space, there are homey touches.

On a bed outside the main offices, a small dog named Scruffy lies curled up in a prototype of a wool-filled comforter. "The idea is to get it dirty," Scott said, "to see how well it washes."

There are two other dogs in the factory, including a lanky, gray Weimaraner that never leaves Steve's side.

The only large machine is one that cleans and stretches raw wool and cotton.

The company has been profitable, Steve said, in all the years he and his brother have owned it, but he declines to say by how much.

Neither of them graduated from college, but they've taken business courses at Pasadena City College to help them handle company finances.

One of their best business moves, Steve said, was to close their retail store in San Gabriel seven years ago.

"We didn't want to compete with retailers, including many mom and pop outfits who were buying our mattresses wholesale," he said. "As soon as we closed the store, our wholesale business took off."

The Carwiles' goal is to move beyond boutique sellers and into the mattress retail mainstream.

But they don't plan on altering their manufacturing methods, which haven't changed much since they made mattresses in the garage with their dad.

"We'll get more production space, hire more people," Steve said. "And we would still do it by hand."

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