



THE cup on Zaani Smith's table has "Morning Gorgeous" written on it in bold pink. It's after eight on Saturday morning and Smith has been up since, like, forever. This might be her third of fourth cup of coffee, she doesn't really know. Today is a big day. Today is the last day of The Mattress Warehouse's four-day Truck Sale.

Here's the flyer info: EVERYTHING ON THE TRUCK MUST GO! 4 DAYS ONLY. UP TO 50% OFF. And there's a picture of an Isuzu truck apparently crammed with mattresses.

There is no actual truck though. All the merchandise is in the shop's large warehouse-looking mattress outlet in Midrand. The word "truck" is really there to encourage the potential mattress-buyer to envisage just how many half-price mattresses will be on sale at the Truck Sale, ie a truckload.

It's not like the Truck Sale is an annual or bi-annual or even tri-annual event. It's just something that happens every now and then but it's big and important and Smith has sent her army of salespeople out into the cold August wind to hand out flyers at traffic lights and bang banners into the ground with a rubber mallet.

So when last did you buy a mattress? When did anyone last buy a mattress? You're maybe thinking, "How does a mattress store stay afloat when all it offers are mattresses because people don't keep needing new mattresses, do they? How many mattresses can you conceivably sell in a month?"

The answer is: a lot. This branch of The Mattress Warehouse (henceforth TMW) sells at least 300 mattresses a month. That's 10 people every day needing a mattress.

"You're supposed to change your mattress every five to eight years," Smith says, "not because your mattress is kaput..."

"Oh, for hygiene," I say, trying to

Now you must lie on it

Oliver Roberts discovers there's a lot more to buying a mattress than simply pressing your knee into it

Illustration: **Lizza Littlewort**

appear expert.

"Not even for hygiene reasons. It's because as you get older your body changes so your needs are different. In eight years' time maybe you need to sleep on a softer one or a firmer one."

Someone came into TMW yesterday and said they had been struggling with back pain. When asked how old his mattress was he said he didn't know, he said it was, like, inherited. Smith asked, "Is it doing this?" and used her hands to mimic a caved-in mattress and the guy said, "Yes, it looks like that." So his back has been doing that while he's sleeping and that's why he's getting backache. TMW immediate-

'When they were lying on their tummies, shame, they were holding hands. It was so sweet'

ly got him a firmer mattress.

"Selling a mattress is very complicated actually," Smith tells me. This is why TMW salespeople are specially trained to sell the right mattress. You don't become a mattress salesperson just like that (snap of the fingers), no, there's a veritable array of information and technique the mattress slinger needs to have down so that people don't phone a week later saying, "WTF is this thing you sold me?"

When testing a mattress you must, repeat must, lie on the test mattress in the same way you

would your own, even if you feel awkward and weird about revealing your sleeping position to strangers. Also, you will do the "knee thing". The knee thing is when the potential mattress purchaser, again feeling awkward and weird about lying on the mattress, will press his/her knee onto the corner of the test mattress to check its firmness etc and say, "This one is fine." But it is not fine. You will be asked to practically fall asleep on the mattress.

Kendall Smith (no relation) is selling a mattress to a 63-year-old man who is absolutely not awkward and weird about lying on the mattresses in full simulation mode. He's taken off his shoes and places them OCD-neat at the side of each mattress he tries.

"I've had four back ops and have osteoarthritis," he says. "I've got about 15 years left so let me sleep and die in comfort."

"A Simmons Superior Firm is a very good option, and the Deluxe," says Smith.

"Do you like it?" asks Kendall.

"I do, ja."

"Is the Deluxe, is it like firm enough for you?"

"I don't know."

"Do you normally sleep on your back or on your side?"

"Depends where it doesn't hurt. I start on my back and I end up on my side and then on my tummy."

"Oh, shoh, OK."

The man tries out another mattress. Back. Side. Tummy. He is tall and thin and makes those strange,

mid-copulative grunts and moans that people make when trying to express how they feel about the mattress they're lying on.

"You realise I sleep on Egyptian cotton in summer, nè, so that means I've got to go and buy new fitted sheets..."

"Never mind about that now. Is this one better than the Deluxe?"

"I think so," he says. "I think this is the one."

"I knew it," says Smith. Including new pillows and pillow covers, it's a R17 000 sale.

For Kendall, 19, selling mattresses is just a temporary thing. Next year she's off to Rhodes to study journalism but for now she's get-

'The one mattress made her feel welcome and the other made her feel she's just there temporarily'

ting good practice by updating TMW's website blog. An actual blog, updated daily, about mattresses. She says she has a tendency to overthink things.

"You spend a third of your life sleeping," she goes. "You spend longer sleeping every day than you do driving, but people will spend a lot on a car and many of them won't be willing to spend on a mattress. A good mattress is the difference between your mood, your health, your whole quality of life actually, and once you weigh it up like that, you realise it's worth it [buying a

quality mattress]."

A handsome gay couple come in asking to try out the Simmons.

Back or sides?

"On the side," says the one. "I have to because I snore on my back."

The other, now in his socks. "Wow... oh, wow. This feels just... I sleep on my tummy. Wow, oh wow. I looove it."

Yolandè Joubert has only been at TMW for a week-and-a-half and already she's closed a couple of deals.

"I didn't know there was that much to it. Customers come in and say they just want a queen bed and it's like, OK, um, do you know which brand you're interested in? 'No.' OK, do you want a firm or soft bed? 'We don't really know.' I must say, though, it's very rewarding when people phone you after a week and say they're happy with their bed."

Smith's now with a French couple, going from one bed to another. At one point, during the transit between a possible that's-the-one and another mattress, the guy says to his partner, "OK, so you remember your feeling for that one, yes?"

The couple do not purchase.

"He likes the firm feeling but she is too light. She said the one mattress made her feel welcome and the other made her feel like she's just there temporarily. He wants a 215cm long and there's only certain beds they make to 215 so he's got limited options. He likes the Cosmic so we're going to see if the Cosmic comes in 215, and the Cambridge. But he also liked the Twickenham ("Ooh the Twickenham's very nice," goes Joubert) but it's a very soft bed. When they were lying on their tummies, shame, they were holding hands. It was so sweet."

By close of business at 2pm, the four-day Truck Sale in Midrand resulted in the sale of 45 mattresses.

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