



The Kings of Comfort



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Brothers Graeme and Craig Turner are carrying on a proud legacy in mattress manufacturing, giving more Australians and New Zealanders a better night's sleep.

Images by Scott Ehler

Certain companies maintain quality and consistency throughout their histories. It's this stability that gives consumers reassurance that these longstanding businesses can be trusted. In the case of Sleepyhead, and now Sleepmaker and Dunlop Foams, ongoing success is a family trait.

The business was started in 1935 by Arthur Mudd, and Sidney Turner bought it in 1946. Sidney Turner's grandsons Graeme and Craig Turner now both lead the company as co-CEOs. "My grandfather was an electrician during the war," says Craig. "He did some work for a bedding company that couldn't pay their bills because of the war effort, so he took a position in the business.

"When Dad came back from the war, he got together with my uncle Roy, who had been in a training camp. Graeme and I represent the third generation, and, in turn, we have the fourth generation heavily involved in the business. I've got six children and four of them are in the company. My youngest son is currently doing a design course at university and works here in IT on his days off as well. They're all looking to come in; it's part of our DNA. Over time, our employees have brought their own kids to work at Sleepyhead; it's all part of

our philosophy of fostering a familial culture in the workplace."

The Turner family's hands-on ownership has seen continuity of management and an unrivalled accumulation of knowledge and expertise. Craig and his brother Graeme have a trans-Tasman empire with a rich history and a staff of people with experience. "As of today, there are 1,100 employees; almost 700 are in Australia and more than 400 in New Zealand. It's a lot of people. We've got people in New Zealand who have been with Sleepyhead for 40 years, and there are people in Sleepmaker Australia who have been with the organisation for 30-plus years. There is just a lot of long service in the organisation."

With longstanding staff and a proud history across Australasia, Sleepmaker is an organisation that values its people and promotes from the ground up. "Enjoying what you do is part of that. We get under the pump sometimes and the guys work hard. They know we appreciate it and we show them that. And they know that the management executives of the company often have their own sleeves up working on the factory floor.

"One of our employees literally joined us straight off a ship from Rarotonga in 1972. His father

brought him into the factory the day he arrived in New Zealand and we immediately put him to work. He's had a great career with Sleepyhead, and we recently celebrated this with his retirement function. There are plenty of stories like that.

"Despite being a 100-per-cent-owned family company, we continue to challenge ourselves with a strong board, including independent directors," Craig says. "Our board brings us fresh ideas, useful networks, and powerful frameworks that help us to maximise our potential. It is imperative that the CEO has a strong relationship with the board, and especially the chairman. The board plays a large role in strategy setting. The CEO drives this strategy, and then ultimately it's up to the people in the organisation to make that work. Our organisation only really started to flourish once we operated under this structure. Craig believes that Sleepyhead's success hinges on the people within the organisation and those that help service the industry. "You can't make it work unless you've got a team consistently pulling in the same direction," Craig explains. "It's impossible to control 1,100 people individually, so leadership becomes very much about how you set your culture up, what your values are, and how that supports ›

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the team’s outcomes in the future. It’s all about the people.”

We live in a very competitive environment, with imports devastating a number of industries. As this process has unfolded, Sleepmaker has decided to continue with local manufacturing and aggressively compete with imported goods by providing value to retailers and consumers. “We do this by creating new and innovative products and delivering consistent quality and high service levels that we stand behind,” Craig says. “We have our own version of what a lot of people refer to as ‘lean’. I’m not going to use the term ‘lean manufacturing’ because that implies a manufacturing-based situation. We’ve called our program ‘competitive edge’. This encompasses all aspects of our business, not just the

manufacturing component. We run workshops continually throughout the organisation, training people. We’ve got training managers circulating right round the organisation to get cross-pollination between the different plants. Competitive edge doesn’t just mean eliminating waste; it’s about how we’re going to do things better, and that goes beyond waste. Competitive edge gives us a platform for engaging with people through the entire organisation where we can often find the most important contribution being made.”

Craig finds that engaging with the business means regularly going out to the different plants within the group to find out what’s going on and how issues can be addressed. “Graeme and I don’t use much video conferencing at all,” he notes. “In person is more expensive, but way more effective. We’ve found it’s the best way to ensure communication lines between the 16 plants. We travel

regularly. The business is set up with KPIs, and people respond to those and it works. It’s a communication thing, and that’s what competitive edge is about.

“My brother and I can regularly be found on the shop floor in our plants. That said, we are also careful about how we manage that because it can easily be seen as a low-commitment, fly-in, fly-out experience, which is not sustainable or helpful for our people. Our trips are really about fact-finding, seeing what’s going on, and then using the insights we get to engage effectively with our management team.”

By remaining in touch with the company’s various locations and the market it services, Sleepyhead is able to identify insights and come up with new ideas to drive innovation in products and services. “We don’t just rely on traditional market research,” Craig divulges. “The breakthrough ideas rarely come from what customers



say. There is an old quote we like from Henry Ford: ‘If I had asked my customers what they wanted, they would have said: a faster horse’. Henry Ford’s potential customers didn’t yet know they needed a car, but in serving the latent need, he was able to transform many lives.

“We have challenged ourselves to innovate to a point where we have created something that’s not been done before. Our company boasts many firsts in innovation in production. Our whole management team is now involved collaboratively in innovation projects that are increasingly focused on customers and consumers. They have observed people’s behaviour in stores and at home in relation to sleep. We are very excited about the possibilities we see for the future from this work. Large companies need to reinvent themselves to stay around for 100 years or more, and that is true more than ever with today’s technology revolution.”

Another key challenge is the rapidly changing market and customers’ perception of beds. “Our retailers are facing some of the most challenging times we’ve ever faced,” Craig says. “We, however, look at it the other way and say we’re faced with some of the biggest opportunities we’ve ever seen in our industry. There is a sense that people think beds are a mature industry with limited growth prospects. It does not have to be that way. That kind of thinking breaks apart with new thinking. The growing population has to sleep somewhere, after all!

“On average, beds typically turn over approximately every 12 years, yet they are ideally changed every six years. It’s not just about wear and tear; it’s also about the need to adjust your bed to suit changes in your body and lifestyle that come with growing older. We spend one-third of our life in bed, so it’s clearly an important purchase. But it really is not that exciting to buy a bed. We believe ➤

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that there is a large inactive market—people who want a new bed—but we have just not made the purchase compelling enough. We are working on this problem, and the Bed Selector on all of our websites is a good example of our early thinking on that.

“We are extending this thinking in an attempt to resolve the issue that many people are buying the wrong beds. Many beds today are sold on promotion, and this means that a lot of people end up buying the wrong products. Choosing the right bed comes down to matching individual need with a targeted product. So it is critical that a consumer engages in the right purchasing experience. Prospective purchasers enter the market with little knowledge because of the infrequency of purchase. Addressing this knowledge gap is a big focus for us right now.”

Sleepmaker’s culture is driven by its values and principles.



“We call these our ‘pillars,’” Craig says. “Over the past few years, we have started to evolve these principles away from a company-centric view to being more people-oriented. They’re in no particular order because they are all

interdependent and they are all important to us.

“The first pillar is about being passionate; we want people to come to work with their whole being, not just the bit that is not left thinking about next weekend.

Another is relentlessness: the idea that we never give up on anything. Others include agility, creativity, and pioneering.

“The last pillar that is getting a lot of focus is the idea of being T-shaped. This is an idea thought up by McKinsey and revolves around the idea that to be great working in teams, we all need to contribute at least one deep and unique skill, but we also need to have empathy across all skills and functions. We need to reach out and help one another, keep our egos in check, and work to the common good. That is the critical principle that will see us transcend the old-style company culture where everyone works in silos. We communicate those pillars to our people, and our business lives by those pillars.

“People say you should have things like respect as a pillar, but that goes without saying. It’s not a pillar; it’s a basic life necessity and it shouldn’t need to be said.”

Coming into the business with little training or experience, Craig and Graeme owe a great debt of gratitude to their father, who encouraged them to take over the business. “Dad came to Graeme and me and asked if we wanted to do it. We said yes, but probably because we had no knowledge of what we were getting ourselves into,” Craig recalls. “It was the scariest journey, but ignorance is bliss a lot of the time. We stepped into the business and had fantastic support from our father, who was a great mentor. He tragically died at 68, so we didn’t get a lot of the latter years; but we got a lot of direct experience from him when we were really growing. Often, Graeme and I would sit and say, ‘What would Dad do?’ and we sort of knew.

“We grew up around the dinner table. When we were young, our mum would make dinner for her

three boys and we would talk business. I think that was a very formative thing in our lives. Dad was a worker from way back; he came out of the war. He was heavily focused, as was his brother Roy. He always worked Saturdays, so Saturday sport was a challenge. Fortunately, with electronics these days, you can do both; you can have a family and you can have a business. I’m regularly on the sideline of netball games emailing when there’s something urgent.”

One of Sleepmaker’s main strengths comes from having onshore manufacturing, which allows the company to monitor its product from design to end user. Craig notes the importance of keeping manufacturing local to maintain quality and meet customers’ demands. “We’ve just invested \$40 million in one factory in Melbourne. Brand new building, brand new machinery, and we’ll continue to grow that. Now, we wouldn’t do that if we didn’t believe in onshore manufacturing. We’ve got opportunities to grow that even more and provide more employment. But it is also about Australia realising that they’ve got to support onshore manufacturing; they will get a bed designed in Australia for Australians, not some variant of some totally different culture. We are madly passionate about our consumers and that they get the best-possible solution. We want them and their families to come back time and again.”

The group has some major goals set for its future in the industry. “We recently had our big strategy session updating our rolling five-year plan, with some pretty large targets,” Craig concludes. “Part of that is acquisition, part of that is offshore growth, and a large part of that is onshore growth. We have some very exciting programs that will simply see Australians sleep better.



“The team are very focused; they’ve all got their projects in place and they’ll drive towards getting that done. The future means a lot of growth. In terms of ownership, there’s no intention of changing; it doesn’t need to change. We’d love the next generation to come through and take it on. We’ll see. At the moment, we’re having fun. We’re having more fun now than we’ve ever had.”

Graeme and Craig’s passion and decades of experience have meant they have been able to carry on the Turner family legacy to grow Sleepmaker, Sleepyhead, and Dunlop Foams into the successful brands they have become. The company is proud to remain a local manufacturer and hopes to continue being so. With an innovative team and rich history within the Australasian market, this third-generation family business has a bright future ahead of it. •

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