

Get a deal on a mattress

The industry makes shopping by price difficult but not impossible

After checking Consumer Reports' Ratings and doing plenty of research, you've finally found a mattress in your price range that feels just right. But before plunking down your credit card, you wonder whether you could get a better deal if you shopped around.

The mattress industry intentionally makes it almost impossible for you to do that. In some cases, manufacturers provide identical or almost identical mattresses to different retailers, but each store gets an exclusive label with its own model name. With other mattresses, the model names are the same among retailers, but the manufacturers set minimum prices below which the mattresses can't be advertised or sold. Retailers that violate the rules risk losing advertising support money from a manufacturer or having the product yanked from their stores.

Complicating things further, some retailers have mattresses made to their own specifications. And some sell mattresses labeled with their store name instead of the name of the manufacturer, such as Sears-O-Pedic instead of Sealy or Serta.

"It's a system designed to put a veil over the consumer's eyes," says Tom Wholley, president and owner of Connecticut Mattress, which has three stores. But that doesn't mean you can't find your way to a better deal.

Try a Web search. Look for a mattress



by manufacturer and model. If you find it at more than one retailer, it may well be a minimum-price model. Find out what most stores are charging. That's probably the lowest price the manufacturer will allow, and you should never agree to pay more than that. (Keep in mind that you won't find a mattress elsewhere if it has a store label or if it's being sold directly by the manufacturer, as is the case for those made by such companies as Charles P. Rogers.)

Try to find an equivalent model. If you don't find the mattress you like at more than one store, it probably has an exclusive label. You might be able to determine which mattresses are equivalent models by comparing specifications for the same manufacturer.

For instance, by using the specifications we were able to find the same queen-size

Sealy mattress being marketed with two different names. One website was advertising it for \$849 and the other for \$679, or 20 percent less. A friendly retailer might help you figure out which of his models is equivalent to a competitor's. But you'll still need to use the specifications to verify that because the store might represent a lower-quality mattress as an equivalent one.

Among the features you should compare for an innerspring mattress, for example, are the foam and padding, and coil-spring type and count. Of course, if you're in a store, you should lie on the mattress to make sure it feels the same as the one you tried and loved elsewhere.

Negotiate. For exclusive models and store-label mattresses, retailers are usually free to charge any price they want. That can give you lots of room to dicker. Even if you can't figure out which mattresses are equivalent, you can still try walking away (or threatening to) if the retailer won't budge. (Leave your phone number so that a store employee can call you if he or she decides to meet your price or make a counteroffer.)

Even if a mattress is price restricted, negotiating could save you money. The retailer might be willing to sell below the minimum price and risk having the manufacturer find out. Or the store might attempt to sweeten the deal by throwing in pillows, a mattress protector, a frame, free delivery, or interest-free financing. Although the entire Tempur-Pedic line is marketed under a minimum-price restriction, stores are allowed to advertise up to \$300 in extras.

Haggling might be less successful if you're buying a mattress from a discount store such as Sam's Club or one that's sold directly by the manufacturer. But it's worth a shot.

Weigh other considerations. When comparing prices, don't forget to factor in any additional costs, such as delivery and the removal of your old mattress. And don't just look at price. Take into account the store's reputation and its return policy. Some retailers, including Connecticut Mattress, let you try a mattress for a certain period, and if it's not satisfactory, you can return it for a full refund and without pickup charges. **\$**

Is it really on sale?

Consumer Reports' secret shoppers found that you might be able to save by shopping for a mattress on a holiday weekend. But that doesn't mean you should assume that any advertised big mattress sale is automatically the once-in-a-lifetime deal it's trumpeted as, says Tom Wholley, president of Connecticut Mattress.

To see for ourselves, we searched online for a queen-size Serta Vantage mattress, which we knew had a minimum price of \$1,074 set by the manufacturer. Not surprising, every retailer we checked was advertising it for exactly that price. Some retailers, including Sam's Club and

Connecticut Mattress, listed \$1,074 as their regular price, but others had a regular price that was much higher, making it seem as though \$1,074 was an extraordinary deal. For example, US-Mattress.com listed its regular price as \$2,148. Sears, which calls its version of the mattress the Vantage II, displayed a regular price of \$2,685 and represented its sale price to be a savings of \$1,611.

US-Mattress.com confirmed that it always advertises the mattress as on sale for \$1,074. Sears said that it offered the mattress for \$2,148 as recently as April. When asked whether it actually sold any of the mattresses at that price, Sears said that it does not publicly comment on specific item sales figures.