

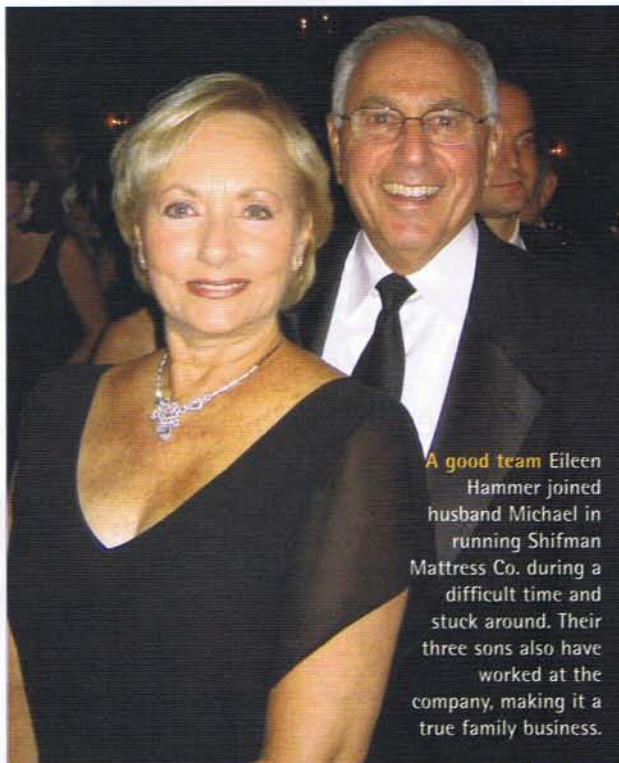
'I owe everything to my family' Shifman owner credits wife, sons with success

By Dorothy Whitcomb

It's been said that when one door closes, another opens. Michael Hammer believes that's true, but would suggest checking what's behind that open door before charging through.

After rising through the ranks at Simmons, Stearns & Foster and Sealy brands, he decided it was time to make a change. Frustrated by the impact of cost cutting throughout the industry, he wanted to manufacture "the best product I could possibly make at the best value."

Knowing Shifman Mattress Co.'s reputation for quality, he approached the company for a job. They couldn't hire him, but were happy to sell him the company. Six weeks later he made



A good team Eileen Hammer joined husband Michael in running Shifman Mattress Co. during a difficult time and stuck around. Their three sons also have worked at the company, making it a true family business.

'I work six days a week. I'm not ready to retire. I just want to lighten the load some. My wife is as dedicated to this company as I am, so I have to convince her, too.'

the deal, walking through a door with plenty of surprises behind it.

"If I had it to do over again, I wouldn't do it," Hammer says. "I was not prepared for what took place. It took two years before I really knew what I had gotten into."

When he purchased Shifman in 1985, the 90-year-old bedding producer was deteriorating. The average age of factory workers was 70—a fact that

helped explain product quality but that made change nearly impossible.

In addition to running a challenging company, in the early days Hammer was its only sales representative. Stress ran high.

"I knew that I'd be in debt for the rest of my life if I didn't turn this thing around," he says.

Hammer's wife, Eileen, and two oldest sons stepped in to run the

plant for five years so that he could go on the road to sell. Following a pattern that worked well for him at Stearns & Foster, he shifted the dealer base to upscale furniture and department stores and offered exclusive distribution. It worked. With the exception of last year, when sales dipped 4%, sales have consistently grown an average of 16% annually.

"I owe everything to my family," Hammer says. After helping Shifman through the tough times, Eileen never left. Her official title is office manager, but Hammer says that's just the tip of the iceberg. She knows the business inside and out—and he knows how lucky he is to have her there. Their youngest son, Bill, joined the

company 13 years ago. He is now vice president of operations and has responsibility for running the company day to day.

Goals Hammer hopes soon to put a plagued expansion project behind him. When finished, the additional 26,000 square feet of warehouse space and an upgraded manufacturing facility will allow Shifman to add new accounts for the first time in six years.

Retirement At 66, Hammer has begun thinking about retirement—sort of. "I work six days a week. I'm not ready to retire. I just want to lighten the load some," he says. "My wife is as dedicated to this company as I am, so I have to convince her,

too.” With the extra free time, Hammer hopes to travel and play more tennis. He also wants to become more involved in politics, supporting candidates and working on issues he believes are important to the country.

Factory tours Hammer requires retailers to bring their sales team for a factory tour before he will open an account. He wants them to see why it takes eight to 12 hours to make each Shifman mattress—a production time far in excess of the industry average. He sees his retailers as partners and wants them to understand all aspects of production.

Off to the races One of Hammer’s quirkier hobbies is handicapping horse races. “I enjoy the challenge,”



Bio in brief

Name Michael Hammer

Company Shifman Mattress Co.

Title Owner & president

Location Newark, N.J.

Family Married for 44 years, Michael and Eileen Hammer have three sons and two granddaughters.

he says. “It’s not easy to pick the winner—and even harder to make money at it.”

The power of food Hammer believes that good food brings people together and that cake, in particular, makes people smile. He learned

the social value of food while working in his father’s New York City restaurant as a teen-ager. Today, he never visits a dealer empty-handed—and those hands are usually carrying chocolate cake.

Family values His best characteristics, Hammer says, are the result of examples set by his parents. From them he learned about generosity, hard work, honesty and strength of character. “My father was the nicest, most considerate person I ever met. He worked 12 hour days, six days a week and was always generous and kind,” he says. “My mother was tough and taught me how to be strong. My children also have these characteristics. All three boys are good people—considerate, honest and hardworking.” **BT**