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‘I Call Top Bunk!’ Some Companies Make Executives Travel by Bus

Executives sleep in bunks on marathon road trips; ‘we’re going to have cocktails’



Jody Putnam, Mattress Firm's talent and integration officer, snaps selfies aboard the bus in Greensboro, N.C. PHOTO: DAN MILLICAN

By

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44 COMMENTS

UNIONDALE, N.Y.—A good night's sleep is something John Pergolizzi promises others as a vice president at mattress retailer Sleepy's. So he wondered one evening this summer just how he found himself wedged into a 20-inch-tall bunk space on a bus parked outside a Marriott here on Long Island.

Thoughts of a hotel room steps away taunted him. "Is there a king in there or a queen?" he recalled fantasizing, speaking the next morning on the coach as it lumbered toward New Jersey.



Executive travel often means premium-class flying and plush accommodations. The executives of [Mattress Firm Holding Corp.](#) and Sleepy's took a cozier business trip together this summer, [after Mattress Firm bought Sleepy's](#), spending nights crammed onto a 45-foot bus that sleeps 12.

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The bunk-bed business bus let them travel to nearly 20 stores, where they aimed to rally employees and build camaraderie among the combined leadership teams. Bunking in a 450-square-foot space alongside fellow executives between stops, though, created awkwardness.

“You don’t want to look silly getting in,” said Joi Falana, Mattress Firm’s development director for mergers and acquisitions, speaking of her struggle to enter her bottom berth. She finally dived in stomach-down, then rolled over. She had to text a colleague for help getting out of the sleeping area.

Cory Ludens, Mattress Firm’s Vice President of Culture and Events, said he learned to “spider monkey” into a high bunk, crawling up as a primate climbs a tree.

Dino Cifelli, a Sleepy’s regional sales vice president, hadn’t met some Mattress Firm leaders before boarding. After he got stuck in the bathroom, “I said, ‘This would be a great first impression.’ ”



Mattress Firm employees on a bus tour earlier this year. *PHOTO: DAN MILLICAN*

The event-planning company that manages the firm's tours, Encore Live LLC of Fort Worth, Texas, last year arranged bus expeditions for a bank and a car maker, said its chief executive, Walter Kinzie. In recent months, a Florida car dealership and an Ohio firearms-distribution company inquired about sleeper-bus trips.

Pure Romance LLC liked its sleepover trips so much it switched to an extended lease on a pink-accented bus its executives use for three tours a year. The Cincinnati company, whose wares include "what you see in 'Fifty Shades of Grey,'" according to CEO Chris Cicchinelli, uses the coach to visit dozens of cities.

The trips are for marketing, to connect with sales consultants and to gather executives without distraction. At first, “they were like, ‘What are we doing? This is going to be terrible,’ ” Mr. Cicchinelli said, but the camaraderie brought people around.

Also, his bus has a fully-stocked bar. “Are we going to have some cocktails at 9 o’clock [p.m.] when we’re talking about business?” he said. “Yeah, we’re going to have some cocktails.”



Pure Romance’s bus on a tour earlier this year. PHOTO: PURE ROMANCE

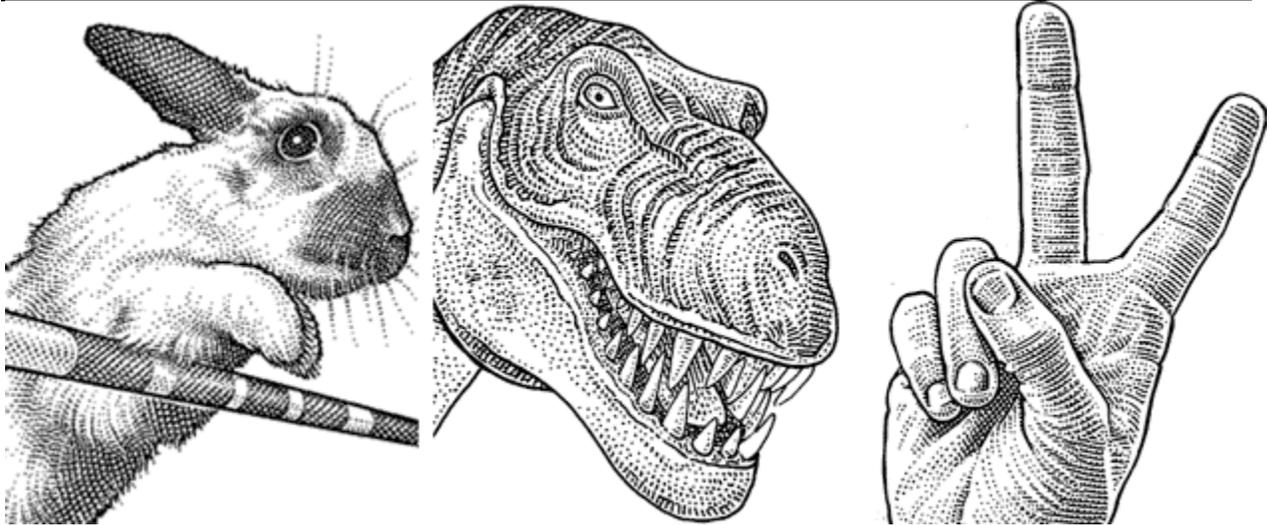
Thanks to ideas from one trip, his executives hatched plans for a high-end line of vibrators. “I get their full undivided attention for a week,” Mr. Cicchinelli said. “It’s priceless.”

One bus had just hauled a reggae band, leaving a telltale aroma. For two weeks, Mr. Cicchinelli and his team prefaced client meetings with a disclaimer that the marijuana smell wasn’t theirs.

“Somebody who’s never done it before thinks this is like sleeping at the Ritz Carlton, and it’s not at all,” said Don Neuen, senior vice president at Star Coaches Inc., which leases such buses.

“You’ve got a 500 horsepower diesel engine underneath you.”

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Bearing, a New York charter service, pitches shorter runs to corporations as discreet meeting venues. Its black 45-foot buses have tinted windows, conference rooms and toilets stocked with amenities including mouthwash and Dramamine. An investment bank hosted premerger talks on one, said John McDermott, Bearing's founder and a former fund manager.

“How do you get two CEOs together, unnoticed?” he said. “No one has any way of knowing who’s on board.”

CEO Ken Murphy of Mattress Firm, which [Steinhoff International Holdings NV recently agreed to acquire](#), conceived bus trips as a way to meet employees face to face, embarking on the first tour in 2013. The next year, the tour became part of the firm's “Bed Talks,” motivational programming named after TED Talks.

There have been six expeditions, typically about 6,000 miles across 15 states over roughly 21 days. Most executives rotate on for about a week, flying home; some ride the duration.

The bus features leather couches, televisions and a kitchen with a drawer labeled “wine.” In back, a lounge provides a place for conference calls.

In the middle are sandwiched 12 bunks, three high. The mattresses don't come from the company's stores because the berths are too small, said Mr. Ludens. As for comfort, “your expectations are pretty low.”



Pure Romance employees on a bus tour earlier this year. PHOTO: PURE ROMANCE

Managers on one trip awoke at 2 a.m. when someone screamed and opened the curtain to another's berth; he hadn't warned of suffering from night terrors, Mr. Ludens said. To help sleep, an executive once played a recording of a children's book, “The Rabbit Who Wants to Fall Asleep.”

Posted rules of the road include “Don’t drink the water” and “Pass back to back,” instructing passengers in the cramped corridor to brush by others with backs touching instead of fronts. They snack on board and stop at restaurants such as Cracker Barrel.

The bus is kept cool to mitigate odors, but things get “funky” when air-conditioning goes out, said Sunni Goodman, vice president of communications. Mr. Ludens describes that smell as “a little bit of feet.”

Mattress Firm books two hotel rooms nightly for showering. Under no circumstances, said Mr. Murphy, may riders sleep there.

Sleepy’s Mr. Pergolizzi, a bus-trip rookie, said he began asking “qualifying questions to see if everyone was committed” to bedding down aboard. His colleagues, he said, “grabbed the tar and feathers.”



Clients aboard a Bearing bus. PHOTO: BEARING

After the bus left Long Island, some executives turned to laptops. Others shared a box of jelly beans, some bearing flavors such as “dead fish.” DJ Khaled’s “All I Do Is Win” played.

Rolling into New Jersey, they discussed a quick Manhattan foray. Mr. Ludens suggested Central Park or a Broadway show.

His colleagues had another idea: They went on a bus tour.

—*Lauren Weber contributed to this article.*