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John E. Crawford

Lipscomb University, john.crawford@lipscomb.edu

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¹Couples Sleeping Apart: Separate Master Bedrooms and the Impact on the Real Estate and Related Markets

John E. Crawford, Lipscomb University
john.crawford@lipscomb.edu

Relevance to Marketing Educators – This short case is relevant for educators desiring to involve students in a discussion of a current trend that impacts manufacturers and sellers of several categories of products. It is not a case designed to take students to a defined solution or correct answer. Instead, the purpose is to provide students the opportunity to consider how an emerging trend impacts the marketing of the relevant products, to gather additional information on the topic and the parties involved and to consider how to best sell products to couples and individuals who have or are about to adopt the consumer behavior discussed in the case.

Introduction

Society has commonly held the belief that happily married couples will sleep in the same room and that sleeping in separate beds or rooms is behavior reserved for couples that are having marital problems. While marital difficulties do lead couples to make this choice, it is not the only reason that couples choose to sleep apart.

An increasing number of happily married couples in the United States are changing the traditional sleeping arrangement common to a husband and wife by choosing to have separate bedrooms for sleeping instead of sharing a bedroom. While this seems to be a new phenomenon, couples sleeping apart is actually not such a new choice.

¹ An earlier version of this case was previously published in the Proceedings of the 2016 Atlantic Marketing Association Conference.

History of Sleeping Apart Customs

Couples sleeping in one martial bed is a re-emerging socio-cultural behavior that is as ancient as the Roman Empire (Henderson, 2009). In fact, couples during the Roman times had a separate martial bedroom and bed which was not used for sleeping together, but for sexual activity only. The sleeping apart tendency lasted through the Victorian times. The Industrial Revolution brought an end to the trend and most couples started sleeping together in a bed beginning in the late 1880's, primarily due to necessity created by cramped living conditions. The current socio-cultural phenomenon of couples not sleeping together is a re-emerging trend that has been brought about by the wealth and available space of modern times (Henderson, 2009).

Cross-Cultural Separate Sleeping Arrangements

Sleep is a universal human need. However, it is a need that, in its fulfillment, is impacted by many factors. Culture is one of these factors and a question to be answered is whether or not sleeping together or apart varies significantly among cultures. A summary of the results of an international survey of sleeping behaviors that was conducted by the National Sleep is provided in Table 1.

As can be seen in the percentages reported in Table 1, the sleeping apart phenomenon is not confined to the United States. While most people in all the countries listed have a sleeping together partner, Japan leads all nations for couples sleeping alone with a reported 28% sleeping alone rate for those who are married, partnered, or are living with someone, a difference that is significantly higher than the percentages reported for the other countries.

In light of this, proactive companies around the world should be developing new products and determining the best ways to promote products to this market segment. Included among these companies are home contractors, interior decorators, and bedding and bedroom related product firms. In order to most effectively do this, it is helpful to understand the motivations that led some couples to sleep apart.

Table 1
Sleep Partners for People Who are Married, Partnered, or Living with Someone

Country and Country Code Letter	USA (B)	Canada (C)	Mexico (D)	United Kingdom (E)	Germany (F)	Japan (G)
n=	185	218	170	176	153	147
Significant Other	82% _G	85% _G	79% _G	89% _{D,G}	87%	63%
Alone	12%	6%	12%	9%	8%	28% B,C,D,E,F
With a Pet	23% C,D,E,F,G	12% _D	3%	11% _D	11%	8% _D
With Children	9%	15%	14%	12%	11%	32% B,C,D,E,F
Don't Know/Refused	-	1%	1%	-	2%	-
Source: 2013 National Sleep Foundation International Bedroom Poll						
Letters next to numbers indicate significant differences at the 95% confidence level.						
Columns sum to >100% since multiple responses were accepted except for "Alone."						

Factors Driving the Trend

Several major factors are most commonly associated reasons for the sleeping apart trend. The factor driving the greatest number of couples to sleep in different bedrooms is linked to a variety of sleep related problems. For example, aging couples may develop different patterns of sleep. According to the National Sleep Foundation's 2005 poll, two-thirds of partnered adults say their partners snore and six out of ten people say they snore (Putanendtosnoring.com, 2005). These statistics proportionately increase with the higher average ages of married couples. Thirteen-percent of men and women between the ages of thirty to sixty have varying levels of sleep apnea. People that have trouble sleeping tend to move around, kick, and become restless during sleep and, thus, create a problem for the person sharing the bed.

Another major factor leading couples to sleep apart is health problems, particularly aging couples who more commonly encounter health problems. For instance, in the case of couples where a partner may be compromised by a debilitating disease, such as Alzheimer's disease, it may become necessary to sleep in separate beds in order to better fulfill each person's sleep needs.

Relationship problems also contribute to sleeping apart. In an article entitled "Sleepless in America (2008)," it is stated that one of the most common reasons for sleeping apart is emotional distance created by relationship conflicts. However, even couples with a healthy relationship are

considering or choosing to sleep apart and are exploring the option of separate bedrooms because of the free space made available by children leaving the house.

Individualism is a socio-cultural characteristic that directly influences the re-emerging sleeping apart phenomena. The United States is an individualistic culture: freedom, autonomy, and personal space are values held in high esteem by society. As a result, some couples are also sleeping apart due to the culturally conditioned need for emotional and physical space. The hectic, fast paced, stress filled lifestyles of the typical American adds to one's longing to "just breathe," a need many couples satisfy by sleeping apart. According to a professor from Yale University, "in today's world, more than in the past, people are accepting of the need for personal space and sleeping apart, at least from time to time, and may be a part of the re-emerging trend (Cline, 2008)."

According to Stephanie Coontz, "some (couples) may be sleeping apart because of a need for emotional or physical space or because of emotional distance created by the breakdown of a relationship. Separate bedrooms may also reflect the modern practice of forming permanent bonds later in life. Each party brings an extensive set of lifelong habits to the union. Some watch late-night TV, some get up early to go to the gym, while others want to keep texting well past their partner's bedtime." While some couples chose to sleep apart due to socio-culturally conditioned values of individualism, others do so to cope with breakdowns and problems resulting from the relationship (Henderson, 2009)."

As is so often the case with consuming decisions, the economy has an impact on the sleeping arrangements of couples. The National Association of Home Builders predicted that 60 percent of custom homes would have dual master bedrooms by 2015 (Luna, 2010). This mark was not reached due to economic circumstances. The Minneapolis Star Tribune reported in 2015 that the recession slowed the trend down, but also that the trend once again is ticking up (Rosenblum, 2015).

Conclusion

This case deals with a fundamental human need, the need for sleep, and the different ways that people with partners choose to satisfy that need. It has been shown that a notable percentage of people with a partner choose to sleep alone, but that there is some variation among several major cultures of the world regarding the decision to sleep with a partner or to sleep apart. For marketers of homes, furniture, and other products that are used to furnish bedrooms, the sleeping apart segment needs to be better understood. Even more important than the "what" information that is reported in this case is an understanding of the "why" issues related to sleeping decisions and how the greater understanding can help marketers make decisions regarding the sleeping apart segment. The following discussion questions will help further explore the behavior and how managerial decision making can be impacted.

Discussion Questions

Discussion Question 1 – Identify one major market firms should target in order to meet the needs and demands of those who choose to sleep apart. Why this is an attractive market for firms to pursue?

Discussion Question 2 – Women today are a very different buying segment than in the past. In addition men and woman have different needs and preferences. What are these differences? State what they mean for marketers selling their products to couples who have chosen to sleep apart.

Discussion Question 3 – Some couples would like to be able to sleep together, but some condition, such as snoring, prevents that. What is currently offered, and what might be offered as help for couples that still wish to sleep together?

Discussion Question 4 – Examine Table 1. The letters next to the percentages in the table indicate where a significant difference was found between the percentages of the country listed at the topic of the column and the nation(s) for which a letter is present. For example, in the USA column it is indicated that there is a significant difference between the USA and Germany in regard to sleeping with one's significant other. In other words, there is probably some reason(s) why fewer USA respondents reported that they sleep with their significant other than was reported by German respondents. Pick two places where significant differences are noted. Why are there significant differences between these nations in regard to sleep habits? Develop hypotheses regarding the differences and then research online sources to see if you can find support for your hypotheses or to indicate your hypotheses are wrong.

Discussion Question 5 – The observed trend in the United States for people to marry at a later age than in generations past contributes to the sleeping apart phenomenon. Consider what other buying and consuming behaviors are being impacted by the decision of many people to marry later than in times past. What are these behaviors? What impact does this choice have on firms and how should these firms respond to the longer bachelor stage of many consumers and the buying behavior of couples that become greater aged honeymooners?

Suggestions and Thoughts for Instructors

Prior to assigning students to consider the discussion questions, instructors may choose to take the lead in discussing how the sleeping apart phenomenon can be considered and implications identified. A suggestion is for the instructor to lead the class in a discussion of the impact of sleeping apart for real estate and building firms. Following are some of the implications that can be shared with a class.

One of the most significant changes the sleeping apart trend involves the real estate and housing markets. Thus, home builders and real estate agents will be expected to provide a variety of home styles tailored to the needs of the living and sleeping arrangement of couple desiring separate sleeping accommodations. In addition to the increased demand for two master bedrooms in new home construction, there will also be an increased demand for modifying existing homes to support a dual master bedroom layout.

Having a separate bedroom is only part of actualizing a sleeping apart arrangement. Once the rooms are created, they must be furnished. The bedroom furniture and mattress industries will experience growth that stems from these dual master bedroom homes. Similarly, companies that produce bedding materials, such as sheets and pillows, are likely to have some sales increase. The sales of electronics may increase as each partner furnishes their room with a television and other video, sound, and game systems.

Regarding the discussion questions below, instructors can choose to have all students work on all them for purposes of developing individually prepared written answers to be submitted for grading as well as to prepare students to engage in a class discussion. Alternatively, different students, or groups of students, may be assigned one question so that the likelihood of greater depth of material and insight is developed.

Either is useful for accomplishing the goal of having students consider the external marketing environment and to better understand that decision makers must constantly evolve in their thinking and actions to adjust to changing market forces.

Discussion Question 1 – Identify one major market firms should target in order to meet the needs and demands of those who choose to sleep apart. Why this is an attractive market for firms to pursue?

For the instructor – One potentially lucrative market is the “Baby Boom” generation. This group is rapidly expanding the empty nest stage of the family life and is being left with larger homes with rooms that are now empty because their children are longer living with them. Combined with the increased amount of discretionary income that frequently accompanies the empty nest stage of the family life cycle, many members of this segment have the money to spend on a second bedroom. The Baby Boomer generation in America is one of the largest age segments in the United States, with over 77 million people born between the years of 1946 and 1964 comprising this group. As the members of this group are rapidly adding to the senior age segment, a segment in which a number of sleep problems are to be found, not only do they have the means to provide comfort for themselves, they are willing to open their pocketbooks in order to fulfill their dreams. From a marketer’s point of view, they are an attractive segment that could significantly contribute to the success of the firms who tap into this segment.

Note to instructor – this is a good opportunity to have students explore online resources and to find advice and methods being used concerning how marketers should attempt to sell products to Baby Boomers.

Discussion Question 2 – Women today are a very different buying segment than in the past. In addition men and woman have different needs and preferences. What are these differences? State what they mean for marketers selling their products to couples who have chosen to sleep apart.

For the instructor – In the days when the traditional family was dominant, men would work and women would stay home with the kids. The man’s role was to bring in the income, and the wife’s role was to take care of the family. For men, it was understood that work came first. For women, family/homelife came first. Now, women are as large a part in the workforce as men and play a much larger role in purchases for themselves and for their families.

This is a good opportunity to assign students the task of researching how trends in the employment of women have changed, the amount of income that women earn and what percentage those earnings are of a typical family’s income. In addition, students can be tasked with determining how the education levels for women have changed across the various degree levels and how women’s roles have increased as company leaders and business owners.

Regarding the sleeping apart phenomenon, when both the husband and wife work, the schedules of the spouses may differ. One may have to wake up significantly earlier than the other. One may go to work in the morning while the other goes to work in the afternoon. This difference in work schedules can cause conflict in couples' sleeping schedules. This opens the door of opportunity for those selling new homes and for those who modify existing homes. In both cases, these marketers may find the two-worker family to be a prime market for a home with two master bedrooms.

For those families that choose this arrangement, two bedrooms and bathrooms now must be furnished rather than one. In most cases, the furniture and other items will be selected according to a man's tastes and preferences for one bedroom and for a woman's tastes and needs in the other.

Consider dividing your students into "married" couples and have them discuss what they would want in their respective bedrooms. Then have the class share to discover the common and uncommon items that are listed.

Discussion Question 3 – Some couples would like to be able to sleep together, but some condition, such as snoring, prevents that. What is currently offered, and might be offered as help for couples that still wish to sleep together?

For the instructor – Some couples may feel they should to sleep apart due to health and age related issues, but they do not want to sleep apart. The decision is being driven by necessity rather than personal choice. This, too, represents an opportunity for firms to position products or services as solutions for couples who have this dilemma. For example, the manufacturer of the Sleep Number © bed gives couples the ability to adjust their individual comfort settings to allow couples to sleep together and each be comfortable.

For couples having sleeping issues such as snoring and restlessness, nasal strips and ear plugs are available for those who have snoring problem. Specialized beds that are similar to hospital beds are helpful for those who have back problems or suffer from restless sleep.

Discussion Question 4 – Examine Table 1. The letters next to the percentages in the table indicate where a significant difference was found between the percentages of the country listed at the topic of the column and the nation(s) for which a letter is present. For example, in the USA column it is indicated that there is a significant difference between the USA and Germany in regard to sleeping with one's significant other. In other words, there is probably some reason(s) why fewer USA respondents reported that they sleep with their significant other than was reported by German respondents. Pick two places where significant differences are noted. Why are there significant differences between these nations in regard to sleep habits? Develop hypotheses regarding the differences and then research online sources to see if you can find support for your hypotheses or to indicate your hypotheses are wrong.

For the instructor – This question allows students to consider the meaning of research results in terms of the clues the results provide about consuming behaviors, but clues that still need to be explored. Encourage the students to ask "why" rather than just consider "what" was reported. Tell them the task now if find the managerial implications of the data, that is, what it potentially offers managers when hypotheses are developed and explored and a greater understanding of consumers can then be used to explore strategic marketing decision making.

Discussion Question 5 – The observed trend in the United States for people to marry at a later age than in generations past contributes to the sleeping apart phenomenon. Consider what other buying and consuming behaviors are being impacted by the decision of many people to marry later than in times past. What are these behaviors? What impact does this choice have on firms and how should these firms respond to the longer bachelor stage of many consumers and the buying behavior of couples that become greater aged honeymooners?

For the instructor – This question allows students to see the intermingled impact of social and cultural changes and to extend their research, analysis, and to consider the extended set of implications of the changes in the marketplace when people change the way they do what they do and when they do them.

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Author Information

Dr. Crawford received his Ph.D from the University of Alabama and is a Professor of Marketing at Lipscomb University. He has previously published in the Atlantic Marketing Association Journal, Journal of Instructional Pedagogies, the International Journal of Management, and has contributed to an international team effort to study attributes that impact business instructor teaching effectiveness that soon be published in the International Journal of Educational Management.