

30. Woolbe



Re-thinking wool

recentre



Hugues Oehmichen

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It's a story of reinventing old-style mattresses. When people ask him how he came up with the idea of the Woolbe, Hugues Oehmichen goes back in time in his mind. He then sees himself as a child, at his grandmother's home in Verviers. "Verviers used to be the world capital of wool. Every year, in the summer, I went to her house for the holidays, and the first thing that we did was to take down the woollen mattresses. We opened them up. She had a tank filled with rainwater in which she let the wool soak, with household soap... My grandmother then put the rinsed wool to dry on the clothesline, then we carded it, and then we put the mattress back together!"

Offering, in addition to the bedding, a maintenance and upkeep service.

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It was only in the course of years that his ancestors' mattress revealed its possibilities for the future to Hugues. At the age of 35, back problems forced the roofing contractor to change his professional life: first a sales representative for one of his suppliers, Hugues Oehmichen then worked for an American company that sells Kirby vacuum cleaners... "It was while seeing the filth in people's houses, and especially in the mattresses, that I started to think about my own project."

In 1998, Hugues Oehmichen had the ambition first of all of setting up a company that offered solutions for the eviction of allergens in indoor environments. After having presented a plan for creating a company to Cide-Socran (Conseil pour l'innovation et le développement de l'entreprise of the ULG (Council for innovation and company development), Hugues Oehmichen decided to refocus on bedding. "One Belgian in two has back trouble, one in three has problems with allergies, but 70% of allergies are due to respiratory problems, and the primary source of infection in the home is the bedding. An American study showed that a mattress more than ten years old has gained 5 to 7 kg since the beginning! This is



Lounge © Woolbe



an accumulation of dirt! But we spend one-quarter to one-third of our life in bed!"

Hugues Oehmichen designed the Woolbe in 2003, and became "a sleep craftsman". He then developed a real concept: that of "selling a quality of sleep rather than a simple mattress". He gave special attention to its ergonomics. While in the old mattresses the wool had a tendency to shrink and move in the ticking, in spite of the partitions put in to keep it in place, Hugues Oehmichen invented a cover consisting of triangular cavities into which one slides modules filled with wool. "The advantage of these modules is that they can be made in different densities, lower at the level of the shoulders for example, or adapted to the weight of the mattress's user". Because the Woolbe is a personalised product. Hugues Oehmichen intends to maintain a long-term relationship with his customers, offering, in addition to the bedding, a maintenance and upkeep service. "Every year, every 2 years or a maximum of every 3 years, we will come to get the mattress, we'll wash it and put it back together, then return in impeccable condition."

Final touch for the design, integrated LED lighting.

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To perfect the bed base of the Woolbe, Hugues Oehmichen choose bamboo, "a natural material, much more resistant than wood". Rather than putting the slats across the width, he positions them lengthwise in order to give them a hammock position: "the legs are raised slightly for the circulation and the head as well, for respiration." Calling upon advice from the designers Jean-Michel Denis and Cédric Fouarge throughout the design process, he entrusted them with the bed frame: "I just imposed red cedar from Canada because its essential oil is soothing, and it is a natural mite repellent." Final touch for the design, integrated LED lighting.

Aside from these low-consumption lights, the Woolbe is composed only of natural materials: linen for the cover, sheep’s wool for the mattress filling, bamboo for the bed base, and cedar (PEFC) for the bed frame. Local beech wood is used for making the dowels: no screws, glue or nails in a Woolbe! Just interlocking joints and a little felt to ensure the silent aspect of the structure ... Hugues Oehmichen like to recall that what he is aiming at is not ecology in and of itself, but excellence. “As a neo-crafts-

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man, I belong to a new generation of creators: one takes what is best on the market and one improves it. What interests me is to make the best product, first of all. If it is ecological, so much the better. But as if by chance, it is natural products that are the best.”

For Hugues Oehmichen, sustainable development is also a question of relationships, upstream and downstream from the creation and production processes. One day while he was in attendance at a Natura 2000 conference on the protection of limestone prairies of the region in Rochefort, Hugues Oehmichen proposed an outlet for the wool from the sheep who are currently maintaining these ancestral pastures. “In the beginning the wool supplier gave it to me dirty, full of straw. I ask him to work more cleanly, because I remove it by hand, without sulphuric acid, just with rainwater. Everyone is happy: my wool supplier sees the work I am doing and therefore he is motivated, and I pay him more than if he sold elsewhere... All this strengthens the ecological dimension of the project. And when you do a good deed, you sleep better!”, Hugues Oehmichen smiles.

Doing more with less is his leitmotiv. “I sell directly to individuals, via the Internet, which is my showcase because I don’t have a shop or a showroom: direct sales to the consumers, that’s commercial ecology!” Hugues Oehmichen hopes to make the start up’s sales take off in the months to come thanks to a second invention: created in 2009, the Woolbe baby, a product specifically for babies, is meant to become the company’s “cash cow”. This multi-functional mattress for babies, which is adapted in particular to the medical recommendations advising putting babies at a 45-50° angle to avoid gastroesophageal reflux, is already a success. Confident in the future, Hugues Oehmichen rests easy. For him, design is a fundamental dimension of the success of his products. “Communicating on the ecological aspect does not pay. In the eyes of the consumers, ecology is just a plus, like health concerns. This is not what gives the stimulus to buy. When I sell Woolbe, it is first of all for the look, then for the comfort.” A word to the wise is enough...

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Isabelle Masson for REcentre
Interviewee / Hugues Oehmichen

Woolbe
Industry site 29A
5580 Rochefort
Belgium

www.woolbe.com
www.woolbe.net

Sector • Bedding

Year of foundation • 2005

Number of employees • N/A

Turnover (2009) • between
10.000 and 15.000 EUR