

# THE NEVER-ENDING SALE

Seven months of tracking furniture prices at national chains revealed some 'discounts' that lasted for the entire period

**F**urniture sales are everywhere – and they seem to last forever. Our research, which tracked 12,793 online prices for seven months at eight national furniture chains, has revealed there appears to be good reason to be sceptical about sales. We found some items 'on sale' for the whole period – more than half a year. We think many of the 'sales' on the 330 sofas and beds we tracked would mislead customers into thinking they were making savings when they were paying the usual price. We've handed our findings to the Office of Fair Trading to investigate.

## PERMANENT SALE

This was probably the most blatant behaviour we saw. At two chains the sales never ended in the seven months. Bensons for Beds had its Fiji Deluxe bed in a sale for the entire period. While its sale price fluctuated (and at one point was relabelled as an 'extra discount'), at no point was it sold at either of the higher prices of £599.99 and £699.99 it repeatedly claimed throughout the period we tracked. Similarly, Sleepmasters' Opulence double divan was in a 'sale' at £1,099.95 or 'extra discount' at £989.96 for the entire period – never at the £2,199.95 higher price.

## LENGTHY SALE

Many items were in a sale for far longer than at the preceding higher price. Harvey's Caprice sofa was on a sale for 30 of the 32 weeks – and the website stated that the 'before' price had applied for just two weeks in December 2009.

## SALE LIES?

In one instance, the 'sale' price was simply relabelled as an 'extra discount' without the price changing at all. The £399 sale price of the Ashleigh divan at Bensons for Beds ('after-sale' price £799) became an 'extra discount' at £399 after Christmas and stayed there for 11 weeks before reverting to a 'sale' price of... £399.

## HIGHER PRICE FOR 28 DAYS

Several beds and sofas were offered at a higher price for four consecutive weeks, before dropping to a sale for the rest of the seven months that we tracked – meaning if you were unlucky enough to purchase in that four-week period, you'd have spent far more than if you had bought at any other time. At SCS, for example, the Kula sofa went up to its higher price for four weeks early in our second month of tracking, before going back to its sale price for the rest of the period.

## UNCLEAR COMPARISONS

Some sale prices were compared with an 'after-sale' price that you would expect to be applied after the sale ended. But instead, the sale didn't end and the 'after-sale' price was simply relabelled as a 'was' price. Bensons for Beds' Double Comfort divan was at a sale or 'extra discount' price of £399.99 or £449.99 at



different periods, but both were compared with an 'after-sale' price of £899.99, which was relabelled as a 'was' price in week 21, despite the fact that it was never applied during the entire seven months that we tracked.

While most of the chains had items in a sale for lengthy periods, the products at one, The Bed Shed, were generally in a sale for just four of the 32 weeks we tracked. On p18 and 19, we highlight our findings at the other seven.

## REAL BARGAINS

So how can you judge whether the sofa you're buying for half price really is a bargain? We asked an ex-furniture salesman for his advice. He recommends asking when the sale began and when it is due to end – if staff are cagey, be wary. Also, if an item is not on sale during a traditional sales period such as Christmas or Easter, ask why (you may have hit a brief 'after-sale price' period). And if an item you have bought goes on sale while you're awaiting delivery, it's worth haggling – ask if the store will give it to you for the discounted price.

Our research suggests the savings you are actually making are less significant than you

think they are. We say always buy in a sale – or better yet, look for extra discounts – and take the 'after-sale' price with a pinch of salt.

## WHICH? SAYS

We think many of the offers we tracked make customers believe they are getting great savings by boasting discounts that may not actually exist, or are misleading. There are government guidelines that set out how shops should promote sale prices, but they have shortcomings that we think companies take advantage of. We're passing our findings to the OFT to further investigate never-ending sales and ensure that companies are transparent about prices.

# 60

## SECOND GUIDE

### FURNITURE CHAINS RATED

The number of national furniture companies at which we tracked prices in this investigation:

# 8

### LENGTH OF INVESTIGATION

The number of months during which we tracked prices for this investigation:

# 7

### PRICE CHECKS

The number of prices we checked in our study:

# 12,793

### THE POWER OF PROMOTIONS

In a telephone survey of 1,007 British adults in June this year, the proportion of people who said they would be more likely to buy a sofa if it was labelled as being in a half-price sale was:

# 62%

The largest saving quoted by any retailer (claimed by Sleepmasters):

# £1,100



**JOIN THE DEBATE** Does your local furniture store have a never-ending sale? Did you bag a 'bargain' only to find a better deal elsewhere? Join the conversation on our new website [www.whichconversation.co.uk](http://www.whichconversation.co.uk), where you can discuss the consumer issues of the day.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PIOTR GREGORCZAK



# BENSONS FOR BEDS



Several divan beds were in a sale for the entire time they were available. Sale prices fluctuated, but were compared with higher prices rather than immediately preceding reductions. The Memory Comfort divan's 'after-sale' price of £799.99 increased in week seven to £939.99 and was relabelled 'was' while the sale price increased from

£399.99 to £469.99 for three weeks, but it was not made clear that you only saved £70 between weeks nine and 10. **Benson for Beds said:** 'We do not believe that we mislead consumers on pricing. We will continue to work closely with our trading standards home authority to ensure compliance.'

THE MEMORY COMFORT DIVAN'S 'AFTER-SALE' PRICE OF £799.99 INCREASED IN WEEK SEVEN TO £939.99 AND WAS RELABELLED 'WAS' – EVEN THOUGH IT NEVER APPLIED IN THE PERIOD

# DREAMS



Dreams had several of the divan beds we tracked in a sale for longer than they were previously offered at the higher price. When we began our tracking, its Cosmic divan was on a half-price offer at £499. It then piled on £550 in the second week and was sold at its off-sale price for four weeks. After this its price fell by £560 again as it went back on sale for 15 weeks, before increasing by just £10 for an event in which its price was compared with an 'after-event price'. In total, it was discounted for 22 weeks – almost five months – before returning to its non-offer price for three weeks and then vanishing.

**Dreams said:** 'We do our utmost to comply with the law and non-statutory guidance issued by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. Where a promotional price applies for longer than the previous higher price, we include details of the dates the higher price applied both in press advertising and on price tickets.'

THE COSMIC DIVAN WENT OFF SALE FOR FOUR WEEKS, THEN ON FOR FIVE MONTHS

# SLEEPMASTERS



The Sleepmasters divan beds we tracked were in a sale for the entire seven months. The sale price varied, but at no point was the stated higher price available. The Backcare Supreme divan was in a 'sale' or on an 'extra discount' between £404.96 and £449.95 for the whole period, but

never at the 'usually' price of £899.95. **Sleepmasters said:** 'Sleepmasters always aims to be open and transparent in all our dealings with customers. We do take our compliance obligations seriously and will review our website and seek to address the specific issues raised.'

THE DIVAN BEDS WE TRACKED WERE IN A SALE FOR THE ENTIRE 32-WEEK PERIOD. THE SALE PRICE FLUCTUATED, BUT AT NO POINT WAS THE HIGHER PRICE QUOTED ACTUALLY AVAILABLE

# DFS



On the DFS website, eight three-seater sofas were listed with an 'introductory price' for the first five weeks, but then vanished – although we've been told they were available in stores at their 'after-event price' (DFS does not sell online like the other chains, but offers phone ordering via a link on its website). One sofa, the Belgravia, re-appeared six weeks later with the same introductory

price – only this time it was labelled as 'on sale'. A note on the website said the higher price of £1,299 had applied in store for 25 days. After the sale the price was £945 – just £46 more than the 'sale' price. **DFS said:** 'We followed pricing guidance in these examples and do not believe our pricing is misleading in any way. Our objective is to offer our customers the very best value at all times.'

# FURNITURE VILLAGE



The Furniture Village website had many sofas that were in a sale for far longer than they were at their non-sale prices. The Como sofa alternated between off-sale periods of three or four weeks and on-sale periods of 10 weeks throughout our tracking. The Havana sofa was on sale at £529 at the start of our tracking, compared with an 'after-sale' price of £1,079. This was relabelled as a

'was' price in week 10 of our tracking, even though the 'was' price was not actually applied until week 20. **Furniture Village said:** 'We strive to comply with all external codes and guidelines by being transparent in the way that we describe price comparisons on our website and in store and we cannot agree that our pricing practices are misleading.'

# HARVEYS



Harveys also had sofas on a sale for longer than at the higher price. Its three-seater Sarah sofa was on 'sale' for 28 of 32 weeks and at the higher price for just 28 days. The dates for non-sale prices were stated, but in two cases this was for just two weeks. **Harveys said:** 'We must respond to the marketplace and consumer demands – which may mean using previously unplanned 'spot promotions' or 'weekend

specials'. Our aim is not to mislead, but to provide good value, quality products in an open and transparent manner.'

THE NON-SALE DATES WERE STATED, BUT IN TWO CASES APPLIED FOR JUST TWO WEEKS

# SCS



SCS was another that had sofas at the higher price for just four weeks at a time. The Plaza three-seater sofa was in a sale at £449 until week six, when it went to its after-sale price for four weeks before falling back to a £549 sale price. After two weeks, it was reduced to £445, where it stayed for the rest of the tracking. SCS told us this was part of a New Year/spring sale, which started on Boxing Day 2009

and was still apparently running at the end of our tracking – 2 June 2010. **SCS said:** 'We are complying with the specific requirements and overall intention of the government guidance and are not misleading our customers. We have for many years maintained a high standard of customer care and offered products at reasonable prices, which we will continue to do.'