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## 'Something doesn't seem right'

After running afoul of consumer laws in the U.S., Thorsten Wietschel has come north to sell magnetic mattress covers

**BRIAN CALDWELL**  
RECORD STAFF

KITCHENER

A salesperson with questionable credentials, dubious health claims and a track record of trouble is now making his pitch here.

Thorsten Wietschel sprang for a free schnitzel lunch this week for about 30 people, mostly senior citizens, at the Schwaben Club.

Then he launched into a two-hour "private lecture" on the wonders of mattress covers fitted with magnets --priced from \$1,800 to \$2,800 -- to help with everything from incontinence to strokes.

"It's not snake oil and we are not fly-by-night," Wietschel said in an interview before his presentation.

His talk went over well with the people in attendance, who were told they would be contacted by sales representatives after filling out forms with their names, addresses, telephone numbers and dates of birth.

"I'm convinced what he said is true," said Dan Truong, 65, who stayed behind to ask questions. "His explanation, his presentation, is good, reasonable, logical."

But a similar sales approach by Wietschel didn't impress police or consumer protection agencies in Arizona and California.

Then using the pseudonym Sven Kugler, Wietschel was charged with commercial burglary and grand theft by police in Glendale, Calif., in 2003.

The charges followed an undercover operation that included hidden cameras to record his pitch after a free lunch for seniors at a popular restaurant.

John Genna, a Glendale police officer, got calls from authorities for months afterwards as Wietschel moved through California and into other states.

Genna said he also spoke to dozens of elderly people who paid \$700 or more for covers that Wietschel had purchased from suppliers for \$40 to \$80.

"It was heartbreaking," said Genna. "This guy feeds off of people's desperation and last hopes."

Wietschel was so persuasive, he said, that customers were still trying to give him cheques to buy covers while police were arresting him in the restaurant.

The charges never went to court after Wietschel left the state and couldn't be found again.

Genna also acknowledged it would have been difficult to prove the charges in court because of grey areas in consumer laws and the need to call expert evidence on the effects of magnets.

In Arizona, authorities won a 2004 judgment against Wietschel and his two companies after he did not show up to defend a civil lawsuit.

They were ordered to make almost \$150,000 in restitution and pay \$2 million in penalties.

The court also told them to stop "engaging in any and all deceptive acts and practices" and to have nothing to do with the sale of medical products, devices or services.

Wietschel, 49, would not let a reporter into a rented room for his presentation at the Schwaben Club.

But in an interview, he claimed to be a "doctor of alternative health" with training in Belgium and a medical degree from the University of Oregon.

A spokesperson for the university said it does not have a medical school or issue degrees in alternative health.

Wietschel also said magnetic mattress covers are "proven" to improve blood circulation and therefore ease or prevent numerous health



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problems -- including asthma, arthritis, stroke, back pain, tendinitis, headaches, gout, depression and incontinence.

According to Health Canada, however, there is "insufficient published evidence" to show magnetic products have therapeutic benefits -- the same position taken by governments in the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia.

Making specific health claims to sell magnetic mattress covers is therefore a violation of federal regulations.

Wietschel said he wasn't aware of the Health Canada policy stating that such claims are unfounded.

"I would say they're wrong," he said.

Wietschel also said charges in California were dropped after authorities realized his product actually works and that his problems in Arizona stemmed from a relatively minor dispute about his return policy.

He has another appearance scheduled for the Schwaben Club next week and Fred Schmidt, who says he has been working with Wietschel for two or three years, has recently given similar talks at other area German clubs.

In October, Wietschel appeared at Martin Luther Evangelical Lutheran Church in Toronto after approaching Pastor Alexander Mielke following a service.

Mielke said he expected a general health presentation for members of his elderly, German-speaking congregation, and was mortified to hear a pitch for mattress covers.

He apologized to his parishioners and strongly recommended they not buy anything.

"I didn't like it from the first paragraph because I felt this is no doctor, no professionally trained person," said Mielke. "He's a salesman."

Wietschel didn't actually sell anything at the Kitchener club.

Instead, he said his Toronto-based company, Experience Vitaflex, plans to open a factory in the Kitchener area and have its products in medical supply stores later this year.

In the meantime, Wietschel said, company representatives will be in touch with guests who left contact information.

Bonnie Spry, 55, has severe fibromyalgia and is willing to consider any treatment that might relieve her constant pain. She attended the lunch after getting a flyer in her mailbox.

Spry also found Wietschel's spiel persuasive but left the Schwaben Club with nagging suspicions after elderly guests were asked to provide their dates of birth along with addresses and telephone numbers.

"Something doesn't seem right," she said. "I worry about these seniors with health needs being sucked in."

Sgt. Rob Zensner said Waterloo regional police have received one inquiry about Wietschel. Although they aren't investigating, he urged potential buyers to be wary.

Mattress covers and other magnetic products are widely advertised on the Internet with similar claims of health benefits without any side effects.

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