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From smart mattress to the city of the future: Askona Life Group's development philosophy

When a mattress manufacturer begins to construct cities, form medical and educational clusters it is no longer a mere business enterprise, but a philosophy. In an exclusive interview, Vladimir Sedov, founder of Askona Life Group, reveals the company's transformation strategy from a manufacturer of sleep products to a diversified holding that digitalizes the customer experience, creates innovative products with artificial intelligence, and founds Dobrograd, a unique city designed to cater for an individual person. From winning the Big Turnover Award to entering the UAE markets and planning to create a new generation of adaptive mattresses – these are various facets of the company’s ecosystem, where sleep, health, education and a comfortable environment are merged into a single concept of quality of life

Askona won the prestigious Big Turnover award and become the best in the Client Service nomination, presenting its Mattress Picker project. Participation in this contest indicates that the company is taking full advantage of the possibilities opened up by digitalization. Please reveal how the company is progressing on this terrain.

For Askona, digitalization, first of all, means the digitization of the client experience. We strive to understand what happens to a person at every stage of interaction with a brand: online, offline, and on the “last mile” of delivery. This approach allows

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collecting and analyzing large amounts of data so that communication with the company turns out to be personal, simple, and as convenient as possible.

Online, the unit team already understands well what type of a client knocks at our door, what are his or hers demands and income level, what kind of products he or she is looking for in our and other companies. Based on this information, the system generates personalized offers varied from price tag to assortment of products. If a client enters the store offline, the consultant uploads the previous purchases records or products examined on the web site, and therefore can make a relevant offer, rather than starting the dialogue from scratch. If a person has a problem with an order, the manager already knows about it and provides assistance ASAP, without requiring the client to make a detailed explanation.

Ascona is actively developing digitalization in client loyalty programs. The entire customer base is divided into categories listing the most vigorous buyers and those who have not made purchases for a long time. For each group, a different communication scenario has been elaborated: personalized offers are sent to some customers, others might receive bonuses, and clients who have maintained sort of a “sleeping mode” are invigorated with appealing suggestions and promotional materials.

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A separate track of digitalization is related to delivery. Customers can track the status of their order online, that is, see where the cargo is at a particular moment, as it is in the taxi services. Also at Ascona, communication has been automated: bots call customers with a request to evaluate the service (NPS and CSI), reach agreement on a convenient delivery timeline, or send a link for self-selection of a slot.

In offline stores, the benefits of digitalization are conspicuously apparent. For example, the Mattress Picker project is based on artificial intelligence (AI) technologies: the system scans the human body and automatically selects the optimal mattress and pillow without the participation of a consultant. Ascona also uses digital panels for life-size 3D furniture and kitchen layouts and creates “smart sleep rooms” where the voice assistant can control light, climate, and other comfort sleep parameters.

A similar picker works on Ascona's website: the client answers a few simple questions, and the system forms a customized selection of mattresses, beds and accessories. This AI solution saves time and eliminates the manual search for what the client needs among hundreds of products.

Another important advantage is the capability to avoid paper work. Now all financial documents and contracts are formed in electronic form: after the purchase, the client receives them by mail along with a coupon for the next purchase. This is not only expedient, but it also enables to build ties and ensure client’s comeback.

Ascona’s team is also actively introducing digitalization in marketing: it analyzes the client’s identity, selects effective communication channels and increases the conversion from each marketing campaign. QR codes have been introduced in stores providing additional information about the product, arrangement of payment in instalments or piecemeal payment.

All of these tools form a unified ecosystem of digital customer experience from first contact to post-sales service. This integrated approach allows us to be leaders in the field of customized approach and innovation.

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The company is not only engaged in the production of mattresses. Askona Life Group is a diversified holding. What are the company's development priorities at present?

Indeed, Askona Life Group has long gone beyond a manufacturer of sleep products. Today, it is a multidisciplinary holding that is actively developing in three key areas: Ascona, medicine and Dobrograd.

We continue to invest in the development of our medical cluster. Now, a new building is being under construction, it will be commissioned in January 2026. It will have new directions of medical services, both outpatient and inpatient. We remain part of the Compulsory Health Insurance (CHI) system and are energetically evolving in this area. After the opening of the medical complex, over a hundred new doctors will join the team.

We pursue a separate vector is investments in technology, including those based on artificial intelligence. We integrate AI solutions into all businesses of the group in order to speed up processes, improve the quality of service, and make the customer experience even more personalized.

Large-scale infrastructure development continues in Dobrograd. We are investing in resort, sports and entertainment facilities: a new line of golf courses is being built, new hotels are being designed, and a congress hall and a Sleep Museum are being created. Residential development is dynamically growing, and, consequently, the number of residents is going up.

We make big emphasis on the educational upgrade. A full-fledged educational cluster has already been formed in Dobrograd: spanning from nurseries to vocational education. We are elaborating a system of comprehensive education: preschool, school, secondary, higher and additional education for adults. City College has already opened, and we are completing the agreement on the creation of a higher educational institution. The Gorki School project will become a platform for the development of entrepreneurial and managerial competencies of adult specialists.

In addition, the company implements projects in the field of food security. A modern greenhouse complex has been commissioned; it will expand the range of agricultural products and provide the region with fresh products of its own making.

In all these projects, the priority for us is to create an ecosystem providing a person with comfortable living and working conditions with ample opportunities to receive medical treatment, to study and to rest. Therefore, despite the high cost of borrowed money and the tight macroeconomic environment, we continue to dynamically invest and create new jobs both in our offices and at our production sites.

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Dobrograd is a rather ambitious endeavour. What is the original concept at the core of the project?

The main hallmark of Dobrograd is that it was established not as an offspring of an “energy flow pipeline” and not as a by-product of a huge “production facility”, but specially targeting an individual. This is a city that was designed not as a springboard for economic growth, but as a point of growth in the quality of life.

At the same time, Dobrograd is not a utopia or a positive image build-up project. This is a spreading economic model of a modern city, where private investment in sports, tourism, education and real estate is returned in the form of taxes, jobs, and sustainable development of the region.

At the heart of Dobrograd is a human-centred approach, with the life of the family at the core of it. The city is not built around cars and industries, but around the needs of three consequent generations: children, parents, and elders (senior citizens). Everything is close at hand here: school, garden, medicine, sports, nature, and services – everything is located within a 15 minutes walk. This gives people the opportunity not to spend their lives always on the road, but to live their lives in a paced manner.

Our fundamental principle is to build the infrastructure ahead of sales: first, roads, sports facilities, public spaces, restaurants, and hotels, that is, the “framework of life.” And only then comes housing. This is the main indicator of the seriousness of the project: a person should not see a rendering, but a lively and functioning city.

Special care is rendered to ecology and preserving harmony with nature. We build fitting into the landscape, we preserve forest zones, and we do not cut down trees, but bypass or replant them. Lakes and parks are not “remnants of greenery”, but a frame of urban planning.

Manufacturability is also in the DNA of the city. In Dobrograd, digital services and security tools have been introduced: video surveillance, biometrics, transparent regulations for the work of management companies, a single all-in-one application with payment for housing and communal services, a pass system, a chat concierge, and event posters.

The community occupies a special place. We set up neighbourhood centres, introduce event calendar, and support micro initiatives of residents. All this is put into place not after settlement, but simultaneously with construction.

Perhaps, most importantly, it is the social impact. Dobrograd strengthens family values, affects demographics, and increases

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fertility and life expectancy. This is a city where you would want to live, raise children, and age gracefully.

All this forms the economic stability of the territory. The goal is simple: to create a self-sufficient city with jobs of a high added value, and a vibrant comprehensive economy.

Askona is also developing with focus on international dimensions. Could you share the details of this expansion?

Several years ago, Askona began expanding into the CIS countries: Kazakhstan, Belarus, Azerbaijan, and Uzbekistan. There, the company now has a full-fledged multi-faceted business with our own stores, e-com, and partner networks. In 2023, we made the next step – we went beyond the CIS, opening a business in the UAE. Now, we have e-com and stores in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, and we already see confirmation of all the hypotheses that we tested: the project shows positive operating results and is ripe for scaling up.

We work with the same assortment of products as in Russia, the trade format has also been preserved, and it has proved itself perfectly. Customers like it: the share of Russian-speaking buyers, which at the beginning was dominant, has now dropped to 30-40%. It means we are already confidently engaging both local residents and expats.

At the end of 2024, the share of international revenue reached 9%, and we profess for sure that in 2025 this figure will go up since the pace of growth abroad is higher than in Russia. E-com is expanding remarkably: Askona has set foot on Emirati marketplaces; we apply digital tools and performance marketing.

In the CIS countries, for example, in Kazakhstan and Belarus, Askona has already become the most recognizable brand in the mattress category. This was facilitated by systematic promotion of the brand and the energetic application of digital tools.

Separately, I want to highlight the teamwork. We build international business on the principle of combination of “the best of the two worlds.” It means that key managers are relocated from Russia to transfer brand’s DNA, and local specialists help adept the processes to the specifics of the local market.

Next year we plan to scale further up to the GCC countries: Saudi Arabia, Qatar and other markets in the region. In the Emirates, we are simultaneously developing a franchise. We are confident that we have found a sustainable business model that allows us to develop globally, while maintaining Askona’s basic principles.

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Dobrograd is associated with the development of domestic tourism and hotel and restaurant business. How successful is this line of business? What is the priority: increase in the number of residents of the city or in the number of tourists?

For us, tourism is not an absolute goal per se, but a point of first contact with the city. The resort and hotels work as a funnel of involvement: people come here for the weekend, relax, get acquainted with the environment, enjoy the scenery with a view on the waterscape, embankments, golf course, wake park, and often come back not as tourists, but as potential residents.

The balanced approach here is simple: we do not strive for mass tourism. The priority is the quality of life for residents, and the tourist flow is a neat, manageable component that supports businesses, enlivens events and gradually converts into the purchase of real estate.

Why does it work? The city has strong “magnets”: a good wake park, golf course, water stage, sports complex, restaurants, family activities. These are not mere attractions, but a way of life. Therefore, such a “funnel” has a high confidence conversion.

Our task is not just to “fill in the numbers”, but to let a person absorb the city with his inner self. Hotels, restaurants, events and “guest weekends” are a kind of test drive of life. In 2-3 days, a person can feel the rhythm of the city and might decide to move in. Up to 20% of real estate transactions today come from this “guest” traffic.

Priority No. 1 is residents. Tourism is a tool that helps the family consciously decide to relocate. Priority No. 2 is a steady tourist flow that ensures the loading of services and the development of infrastructure.

In 2026, we plan to increase the hospitality capacity to 300 rooms and continue the development of resort infrastructure. Already in Dobrograd there are three 4-star hotel buildings, five restaurants, a powerful sports cluster: a golf course, an arena, a wake park, tracks, and an activity park.

By the end of 2025, we expect up to 500,000 tourists. But the strategic goal is not just to grow in numbers. We are creating the largest resort in Central Russia outside the zone of traditional sea resorts. We create a place where rest, health, education and comfortable living are well combined.

How is the city’s industrial block developing?

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The industrial cluster is one of the key drivers of the development of the territory. A Special Economic Zone (SEZ) of the industrial-production type ”Dobrograd-1” was created in 2020 for a period until 2069, and today, it demonstrates stable dynamics. It is located in the Vladimir region, just 2.5 hours from Moscow along the M-12 highway, and occupies 211 hectares: two plots of land, 136 and 75 hectares. The first area is fully equipped with engineering infrastructure: gas, electricity, water, roads, and medical treatment facilities are supplied.

At the beginning of 2025, eight business residents were registered in the SEZ, including companies specializing in the field of mechanical engineering, lighting, medical products, sleep products, climate equipment, and food. Among them are Intex, Home Electro Systems, Dobrograd Agro, International Furniture Technologies, Svetogor Laboratory, Dobromash, Remakom, and others. The total investment flow exceeds 30 billion rubles, and the total number of jobs will amount to over 2,000.

The entire engineering infrastructure has already been commissioned; the first production facilities have been launched. One of the largest projects under implementation is the Data Processing Center of one of the leading banks with an investment volume of 27 billion rubles. The Dobrograd-1 management company has invested over 2 billion rubles in the creation and development of the site.

Today, the Dobrograd-1 SEZ is recognized as one of the most dynamically developing private zones of the Central Federal District. Its creation forms a new point of industrial and technological growth in the Vladimir Region, stimulates the development of small and medium-sized businesses and creates modern jobs.

Going back to the basic activities, what key technological or material science trends in the sleep industry Askona considers the most promising for the next 3-5 years?

One of the key vectors is the development of sleep monitoring technologies. Askona is already creating solutions that allow you to monitor quality of sleep using trackers built into a mattress or pillow, and as a result articulate personalized recommendations for improving your sleep. Moreover, we are talking not only about sleep, but also about an integrated approach to health in general, that is, we analyse the relationship between sleep, nutrition, activity, and, among other things, emotional state. After all, if a person’s eating habits are incorrect or if a person experiences stress, this directly affects the quality of recovery and, consequently, impacts the level of energy and well-being.

The next step is to digitalize this experience. We are developing our own Askona Sleep application: this AI somnologist has already been launched. This application is an intelligent assistant that communicates with the user, analyzes complaints and

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offers personal recommendations, even if the individual does not possess smart gadgets.

The second direction is adaptive mattresses of a new generation. Askona introduces adjustable support technology based on air pumps: the mattress adjusts to the human body and allows changing the level of rigidity using a remote control or application. The first samples have already been tested, and now the unit team is preparing to scale this technology.

And finally, the third direction is the formation of an ecosystem of healthy sleep and recovery. This is the combination of a smart mattress, pillow, climate control and lighting into a single system controlled by an AI assistant. Such an assistant will be able not only to regulate comfort, but also to suggest when to adjust the regime, consult with a specialist or undergo an examination.

We are confident that the future of the sleep industry lies in personalized solutions that help a person not just sleep, but also recover and manage state of health in general.

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