

## Talking in Trademarks: The Clerk to Customer Disconnect



Recently, an apparel colleague and I did a technical training clinic for a major ski shop in Vail. On a snowy Monday evening we arrived early and waited for another sales rep to finish. Then it was our turn, we stepped up and did our little spiel about winter dressing systems, fabrics, wool, insulation, etc. It was all good, the staff of a dozen or so attending that night nodded, ate pizza and drank beer while we gave them the nuts and bolts of how alpine apparel works and for whom it's designed. It seemed to go well. At the end of our time together the manager, a savvy retail veteran, stepped forward and asked each member of the group to summarize what they had learned that night. The answers were unexpectedly painful and short. In the awkward silence, we were reminded that communication is the sum of what is heard, not spoken, and although we had spoken plenty, it seemed as though we had not communicated very much.

As the crew was locking up the shop and we were leaving for the toboggan run back to Denver, the manager pulled us aside.

"The problem is," he put his hands together before him, "You guys, all the big brands, you put a lot of effort into getting information out to us retailers." It was our turn to nod. "But then, when it comes time for my guys to go sell your product, it just doesn't come across." He pulled his hands apart. "There's a disconnect between my staff and the customer, and your message is never really delivered on the sales floor." That thought, along with the cold night air, sunk in as we shook hands and said our good-nights.

That evening's retail team was selling nine hundred dollar jackets all day long and they hadn't a clue about how they worked, that much was clear. But what information expectation is there between brands, shop employees and customers? That was a little fuzzier.

The debate on the way home centered around two points of view. The first argument was if WE were customers we would want to hear the straight-up technical differences between competitive

garments, and the retailer has an obligation to get those details correct. With a little motivation, anyone can navigate the technical landscape of modern outdoor apparel and keep up with the market. Besides, isn't technical expertise expected of specialty retail?

The second observation reflected more of what we had experienced that evening. We had overheard the last few minutes of the sales rep's speech before our clinic and had actively paid attention so as to glean the 'competitive' message he delivered. What we overheard was a dense, pseudo-scientific, and jargon filled sermon about his company's outerwear. Not only did we not know what it meant, we wouldn't even be able to repeat the terms and reasoning if we had to! If the industry's internal dialog with the sales associates is this bombastic, then it is no wonder it doesn't reach customers, no one can turn that gobble-gook into real world advice.

As Pogo would say, "We had met the enemy, and

he is us." After all, our clinic had been just as ineffective as the one before it. Our top down approach and complex language mirrors that of industry competitors. All the big brands do it.

Technical conversations in our industry have devolved into marketing speak. Instead of talking about function in an accessible way, brands obscure their simple science with nomenclature. Every company, a different language, put 20 of them together in a ski shop, and you get a cacophony. Add 'translator' to what sales clerks are supposed to master, it's no wonder that no one knows what any of it means.

And as for technical education, it might be over rated. A few simple parables about layering, hydration and wearing a hat are more useful. Those ski shop employees seem to do just fine with the skill set they have, and I know they could teach us a thing or two about why people buy jackets. Maybe we should be listening to them. ●