

# PERCEPTIONS & REALITIES

## I Want It, I Have It, I Hate It!

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The weather seems to have gotten colder as I've gotten older. As a result, the ski jacket that once kept me warm became too skimpy. Sensible people would simply stay indoors, but that lets me out. So I needed a jacket that would protect me when the thermometer suggested I should be indoors, relaxing by the fireplace.

Off I went to the ski shop. It took some searching, but to my delight, I found the Perfect Jacket. It was roomy enough to fit comfortably over the quadruple layers beneath. It was long enough to keep the nether regions from freezing. Its multitude of pockets would make me a self-sufficient storage system. It zipped up to my nose, ensuring protection from the wind.

And the color was striking. It was orange. Or rather ORANGE. I mean, it was bright! With this jacket, you could have seen me from a mile away on a moonless night. What a find this jacket was.

Until I got home, that is. I tried it on several times, and each time, one more thing annoyed me. Such as that it wasn't just long, it was too long to ski in comfortably. The nose-high zipper would be great in stormy weather but a nuisance on clear sunny days. The jacket was big and roomy and heavily-pocketed, which was good, but with the belt cinched, I looked like a blimp with a belt. And that was bad. When short people wear big, bulky things, they look like big, bulky, short people.

And then there was the color. Iridescent neon orange. My husband pointed out that it would attract dirt. He, being a dirt magnet, would naturally think of this. I knew he was right, and despite my best efforts, it would soon be not just ORANGE but *filthy* ORANGE.



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I began to have unpleasant images. I can ski advanced terrain unless it has strategically situated trees that remind me how much I value my head. But just because I can ski it doesn't mean I remain vertical the entire time. By the 17<sup>th</sup> time I tried on the jacket, I could hear the sounds of skiers shouting, "Look, there goes a short, dirty, orange, belted blimp — and a clumsy one at that."

The jacket had to go back. This 24-hour trial period made that clear. But it did something more. It helped me clarify my requirements. I thought I knew what I wanted in a ski jacket, but I was wrong. I'd missed several key features that I wanted the jacket to have, such as a color that wouldn't result in signs saying, "This way to dirty skier." And I had failed to realize the importance of other features. Until I saw a concrete example of my specifications, I didn't really understand what I wanted.

Similarly, sometimes your customers don't initially know what they want even when they're positive they do. What my ski jacket experience helped me appreciate is that specifications are really nothing more than a starting point, a first approximation. Sometimes, customers need, in effect, to try on the solution, simulating its intended use so they can see if it satisfactorily addresses their requirements and they can make adjustments if any are needed.

I returned my jacket, and after a bout of trying on, I found another jacket, a beautiful, dirt-concealing blue. It lacked several features I'd previously wanted, but I loved it nevertheless. If I had evaluated this jacket based on my original requirements, I'd have rejected it. I have now worn this jacket for many a ski season, and I still love it.

I learned from this experience that in the abstract, it's impossible to know which requirements really matter, and of those that do, which are more important than which others. You might want to keep this experience in mind as you help your customers define their own requirements for your products and services. You can help them avoid signs that say, "This way to befuddled customers." ☺

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