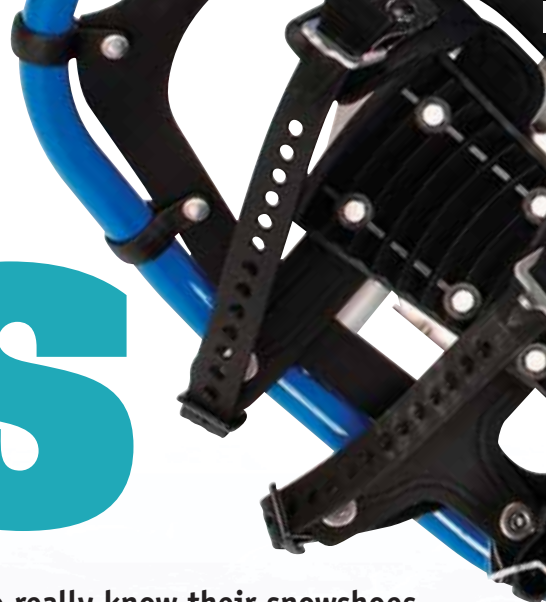




» the snowshoe blues



Our undercover shoppers came up cold while looking for retailers who really know their snowshoes.

BY MOST ACCOUNTS, SNOWSHOE SALES HAVE REMAINED

pretty healthy the past three years. But a recent shopping spree left us wondering how retailers have managed to sell any snowshoes at all. We hit the road this fall and went undercover to shop for snowshoes and evaluate the stores we visited. Our mystery shoppers took notes on all aspects of the shopping experience, such as employee product knowledge, salesmanship and store merchandising.

Folks, the news is not good. From California to Colorado to New England, retailers whose names are nationally recognized by many in the trade offered weak customer service and displayed a shallow understanding of the gear. Snowshoe manufacturers have worked diligently to grow the market and develop quality, sophisticated products. If we were those manufacturers, we'd be pretty darn upset at the way our snowshoes were being presented at the retail level. So, now, hit the road with us...if you dare. We're warning you—it's not a pretty picture.

» A SALE GOES COLD: NEW ENGLAND

We sent one of our female spies—a nationally known gear writer—into a New England snowsports specialty store looking for snowshoes for herself and her husband.

It was right about lunchtime that I walked up to the display window of the snowsports specialty store. I spied a pair of Tubbs snowshoes behind the glass and thought, good stuff. Nice display. Adds a bit of interest and draws in potential customers.

I walked into a neat, well-merchandised room, exchanged greetings with a salesperson, and then hung a left, heading toward the snowshoe display. Beneath a wall full of Tubbs shoes (and only Tubbs) sat another salesperson, apparently busy with paperwork. He promptly looked up and said in a professional voice, "Can I help you find something?"

"I'm looking for snowshoes for me and my husband," I replied. Then, he gestured toward the wall covered with at least eight styles and said, "This is what we have."

I mentioned that we would be doing day trips, and the salesperson—we'll call him Jack—offered up a brief overview of the different models. Not a bad start, I thought. He's not trying to overwhelm me with information. But I knew that most shoppers would desire more info to make a real decision.

I asked Jack for more details to help me understand the differences between the shoes, adding, "What would you recommend?" He explained a few features on two models that I knew were appropriate for my needs.

So far, pretty good. The conversation was polite, though Jack didn't really chat me up much. The conversational method of selling didn't seem to be his style. But now it was time to get down to the nitty-gritty and really test his product knowledge.

"Can you explain the differences between the bindings of the different snowshoes?" I asked. Of course, this was a reasonable question. The binding remains the one com-

ponent of a snowshoe that confuses consumers, and designs vary greatly, even within a single brand. I would expect any salesperson worth his salt to be able to differentiate the designs.

Unfortunately, this was the point where the sale broke down. Jack offered very little technical information, even after I restated my question, and he seemed kind of done with me. After all, I was probably keeping him from some important paperwork.

At this point I stopped asking questions, and he wasn't saying much. The dialogue—and the sale—began to melt. There was plenty more to discuss: advantages of certain bindings, tips on matching a person's weight to the proper shoe, details about my husband to help me choose an appropriate snowshoe for him. But we never discussed any of this.

He did offer me a brochure with detailed product information, and I gazed dumbly at the thing as if it were the technical manual for a nuclear sub. Still, not much of a reaction from Jack. If I were the typical customer, at this point I would not only lack sufficient knowledge to make a decision, but would probably feel confused. And the last thing that should happen is for a customer to leave the store more confused than when he or she walked in. If the salesperson couldn't answer my questions, he should have offered to at least find the answers, rather than just handing me the brochure.

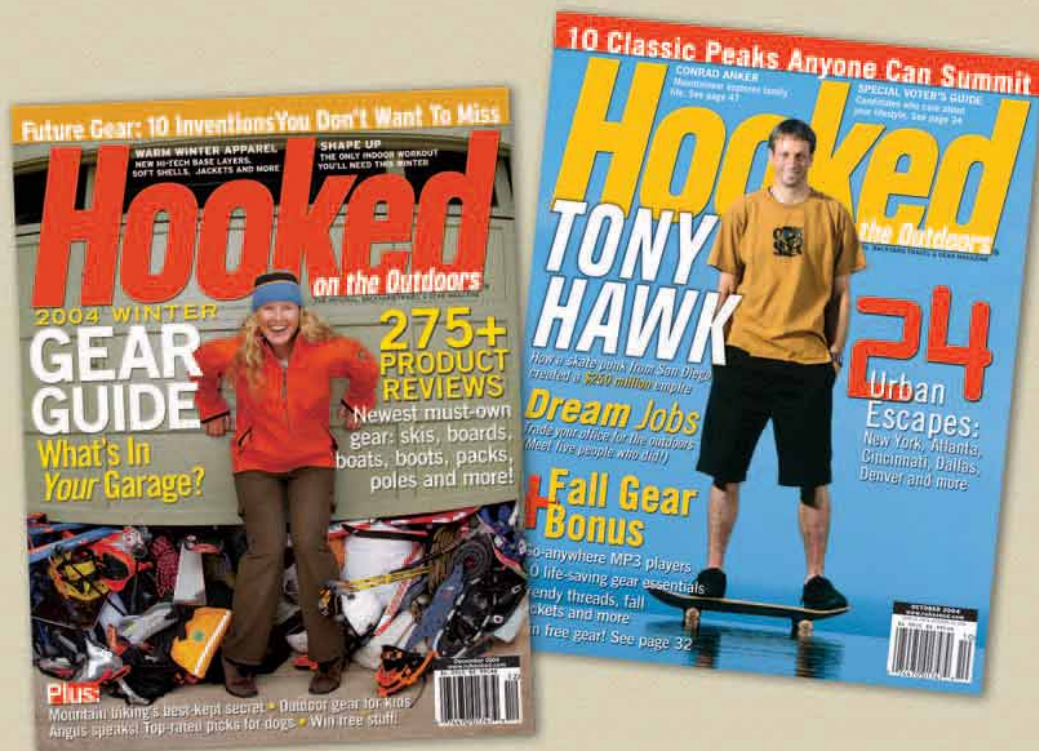
In any Selling 101 course, they'll tell you it's important to close the sale. But Jack made no attempt to transition to closure. The sale just hung wide open, like a barn door on a cold day. And here's the other thing—any savvy outdoor retail employee should have looked at me (all decked out in Cloudveil from

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head-to-toe) and realized I was a potential gold mine. My apparel pegged me as someone familiar with outdoor brands and willing to spend money on high-end items. They should have sent me out the front door with armloads of snowshoes and poles for the whole family, and maybe even something for the dog. But I walked out with a brochure.

Beyond what was happening (or not happening) by the snowshoe wall, the store appeared in good condition, with friendly salespeople actively engaging customers. Maybe I caught a salesperson in an off moment. Maybe his mind was on paperwork.

» **AN EERIE FEELING:
NORTHERN CALIFORNIA**

We sent in a very athletic and obviously well-dressed female spy with the goal of finding a pair of snowshoes just for her—her first pair.

A ghost town. That's what the place looked like. For an outdoor specialty store situated in a large city, the parking lot seemed deserted, with leaves blowing across the abandoned asphalt at 2 p.m. on a Saturday. I tried to look into the front windows to make sure the place was open, but my view

was blocked by tacky fluorescent yellow, green and orange balloon-like paintings, announcing SALES and DISCOUNTS.

I squeezed by a stack of inflatable boats, and entered the store, whose motif appeared to be "store room." The cave-like space was dark and dank, with stained carpet, disorderly jumbles of product, and that smell. "What's that SMELL?" I thought. Basically, the place was one big Yuck.

I walked a third of the way back and heard a small voice. "How you doing? You need something?" asked a young guy leaning on the counter. We'll call him Fred.

"Well, yeah, I'm sorta interested in snowshoes," I replied, waving my hand in two directions, because the snowshoes were displayed in two different places. Then I saw a third location, and the salesperson pointed out a fourth rack! Cross-merchandising is one thing, but this stuff was all over the place.

For the next few minutes, Fred fumbled as he tried to put me in different pairs of shoes, and I tried to drag information out of him. Actually, I stumped him on some really hard questions. You know, like, "How much do these cost?"

I then asked about women's snowshoes. Playing the role of the uninformed cus-

tommer, I explained that I'd heard there were some, but I didn't know what set a woman's snowshoe apart. "Are these women's?" I asked, lifting a pair in my hand. He stared at me this time, then down at the snowshoes, kinda chuckled uncomfortably and said, "Let me ask." I had to at least give him credit for seeking help.

I followed him to the sales counter blanketed in paperwork and notepads, and I think I spied a glass display under there somewhere. With the Tubbs Adventure 21 snowshoe in his hand, Fred tried to grab the attention of an older salesperson who was assisting another customer. This man pointed to the tail of the Tubbs 21 and said, "See how that's tapered there? That's a woman's snowshoe."

"That's it?" I said, knowing full well that was not it. Snowshoe companies have invested considerable resources to create shoes that address the specific physical differences between men and women. And they've managed to explain this in fairly easy terms. A salesperson doesn't need to go into a dissertation on the human body to at least convey this important point. Plus, it doesn't take much product knowledge to at least explain how a woman's gait differs from a man's.

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"This is the one you want," he said and quickly turned back to the other customer. No really. It was hilarious. Like he was a father and I was 8 years old.

I realized this wasn't the place to plumb the depths of snowshoe product knowledge, but still felt duty bound to pepper Fred with questions. What about the differences in sizes? What's a small or a medium? Does it refer to the size of the "base thing," as I put it for him, or the strap for the shoe or what? He never offered any straight answers or tried to educate me on terminology, but reiterated that the 21-inch snowshoe would provide enough "flotation" for my body size. Well, at least he mentioned flotation. Although if I'd been a true novice, I would have thought, "Huh? Flotation? Isn't that what I do with an inflatable ducky in a pool?"

At this point, we stood and engaged in lame conversation—he said something about needing good socks but never followed up to make that an equation in a possible sale—so I said I'd think about it a while and browse.

"OK," said Fred. I wandered around the store for a few minutes, making my way around jammed racks. Completely unsatisfied, I headed toward the door, passing

papers scattered on the floor; mismatched shoes flung into a corner and scattered inventory notes piled on a chair nearby. No one even noticed me leaving, and I actually felt relief as I stepped out into the light.

» THE INVISIBLE SHOPPER: NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

We sent our female spy into another Northern California area store with the goal of buying her first pair of snowshoes.

My watch indicated 6 p.m. as I walked into the national specialty chain store. I was greeted cheerily by the front desk. Good start at least. Once I reached the snowshoe department, I took notice of the ample lighting, healthy stacks of brochures and comparison sheets on display. Only one important component was missing—a salesperson.

Timing myself, I circled the area for 11 minutes. Tick tock, tick tock. Not a soul joined me. So I circled again, repeatedly standing in different areas to make myself noticeable. Nothing.

Then I noticed that in another aisle an older salesperson was engaged in a pretty technical snowshoe conversation with two

younger male customers. A young woman salesperson stood a foot or two away, obviously listening and interested. I headed over, figuring if the help wasn't going to come to me I'd go toward the help. And I stood there for a minute or two. But then the whole group—two salespeople and two customers—whooshed past me on their way to the product rack. And there I stood alone again. No acknowledgement, no one asking whether I needed anything. Maybe I needed a flare gun?

Eventually, the female salesperson noticed me, since I had tailed them back to the product rack, and suddenly asked, "Are you OK?" I paused, considered for a moment a truly smarty-pants answer and instead settled on, "No." She looked surprised, but I tried to be nice and said that I could wait if she needed to help another customer. "I'm just learning, but I'll try to help," she said. The older salesperson and his two customers zipped off in yet another direction, leaving the newbie to deal with me on her own. Obviously, she knew little to nothing about snowshoes and grabbed an info sheet to examine it with me.

"What about women's snowshoes?" I said, and she referred to the sheet to find them. She then searched for them on the



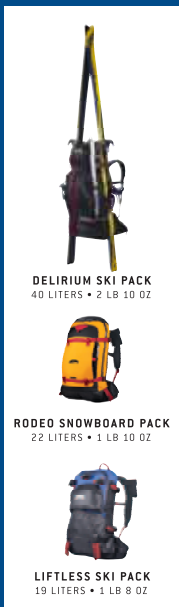
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rack. "Here they are," she said, noting that I should choose by body weight. (Hey, at least she was trying.) According to the chart and the sales rack, the store carried two models of women's shoes, which struck me as less than impressive for such a hefty player in a sport where sales to women have skyrocketed. But this sale did not skyrocket. In fact, it never got off the launch pad. When I asked her to explain the differences in women's snowshoes, all she could do was reference the tapered tail.

The two young guys approached, and she turned and started talking to them about going snowshoeing sometime. As they exchanged cell phone numbers and chatted each other up, I was left just sorta standing there, once again adrift. I finally interrupted and said, "Well,... thanks.... Guess I'll think about it." She said, "OK," and I left.

If I were to point out all the things wrong with this shopping experience, I'd need about six pages of this magazine. But the worst offense was that the staff failed to immediately recognize the presence of a customer, and promise to help as soon as possible. Nothing makes a customer feel worse than feeling invisible.

» MALL HELL: COLORADO

We sent in a male spy with the goal of finding snowshoes for him and his girlfriend.

I'll admit my prejudice. I think malls are like Wonder Bread...nice packaging, but the contents are all air and no substance. I tried to push my preconceived notions aside as I walked through the doors of a large sporting goods chain store.

From the time I entered the door at 11 a.m. on a Tuesday and began to wander through various departments, it took eight minutes to even get a "hello" from a clerk.

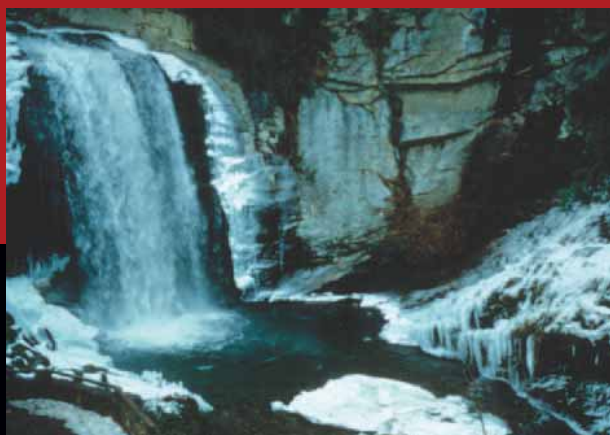
I made my way upstairs, past the paintball guns, to the snowshoe department. You wouldn't know it from a distance, because this corner was marked by a huge mural that said KAYAK.

Here I found four large, double-sided steel racks holding a good selection of Atlas and Tubbs. The walls held many packs, and an adjoining section held about eight racks of Camelbak products. Realizing there was no staff member in sight, I started my stopwatch and began to read the hangtags, looking like a very interested customer. After a full 10 minutes, a 20-something clerk—we'll call him Chris—finally noticed me staring at the snowshoes and asked if I was interested in snowshoes. Obviously, this guy was sharp as a tack.

"I'm thinking about some snowshoes for me and my girlfriend for day hikes in the mountains," I said, adding that I was over-



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whelmed by all the choices. Chris replied that he was also considering getting a pair this year for his girlfriend. Nice touch, I thought. Good salespeople incorporate their personal experiences into the sale.

Immediately, he took me to the Atlas rack and showed me the 7 Series Starter Gift Package, noting this is the best deal going—\$130, including the snowshoes, carrying case and \$60 poles. It's a good thing he pointed out the price, because none of the packages had price tags. All the other snowshoes had marked prices, starting at about \$170.

When he showed me the starter package, I said, "Hey, that sounds like a good deal." But I was really wondering why he had pegged me for a bargain shopper. I mean, I wasn't dressed like a dirtbag, and I'd made no mention of price.

"But what's the difference between all these other models?" I asked.

"Well it's mostly just the bindings and cleats," he said, followed by a feeble attempt to explain. He suddenly remembered that sizes make a difference and recommended a medium for me, and a small for the girlfriend—managing to recommend a size for my girlfriend without knowing more about her was a stab in the dark at best. Clearly, Chris hadn't assimilated much from the 10-minute snowshoe clinic that he probably had a month ago.

He then commented on how annoying it was that Atlas didn't put model names on the snowshoes to make it easier to identify them. (Of course, the names are right on the deck. I'm telling ya—sharp as a tack.)

I asked a few more questions, which drew dazzling responses. For example, he couldn't explain the difference between a fixed (Atlas) and free (Tubbs) pivot binding. When asked what makes a woman's snowshoe different, he read the hangtag to me (gosh, I could do that) and made a remark about color.

I hinted that I might be interested in buying a high-end snowshoe, but Chris continued to go on about what a good deal the Atlas package was. Never mind the fact that not once did he even explain the pole system included in the package, or give some explanation as to why I might want poles.

Because I hadn't made a decision, he retrieved an Atlas catalog and seemingly dismissed Tubbs from the conversation. I walked out with a catalog (actually a dealer workbook) and the impression that the \$130 package was all he wanted to sell.

I left with an empty feeling...a sensation not so different from eating a piece of Wonder Bread.

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