

## The SPEC is dead. Long live the SPEC.

© 2018, Jeff Goldfinger

Today, I'm railing against the fanatical focus on customer requirements – aka performance specifications; aka what the customer says they want, aka the SPEC. I can't tell you how many times I've shared info with engineers and program managers about an early stage opportunity revealed by a prospect only to hear the rally cry: "Did they give you the SPEC?"

Or, what I claim is one of the most egregious sins a sales or business development manager can make when talking to his/her subordinates: "So what are you doing to try to influence the SPEC?"

The title of this post is a modification of the old phrase "The King is Dead, Long live the King – a traditional proclamation ... to simultaneously announce the death of the previous monarch and assure the public of continuity by saluting the new monarch."

I've been in the government contracting business for ... let's forget my age and just say a very, very long time and I've lived through a number of attempts to steer away from SPECS because there always seems to be a breakdown between what gets built and sold versus what the end-user really wanted. But no matter how many times I've heard "this time it's different," our industry seems to swear allegiance to the SPEC king time and time again.

Previous attempts to kill this monarch led to carefully designed replacements (Statement of Objectives as one example) which, in my view, were merely just a change of family crest while still ruling the kingdom the same way. In other words, the focus invariably zeroed in on the "thing" being procured instead of on the human being(s) making the request.

In this paper, I'm proposing a far more humanistic, more satisfying, equally practical way to kill this behavior once and for all.

For our solution, I once again turn to my mentor, Dr. Fernando Flores, and an excerpt from an essay he published on this topic.

*"When we make requests of others, we do so in order to satisfy the concerns that we have. Even when we ask for specific things [i.e., the SPEC], it's because those particular things are our best current interpretation about how to take care of our concerns. We can only ask for what we know about, based on our own unique history and experiences. So focusing on a customer's needs is only one way to satisfy his or her concerns, and perhaps not even the best way. Being sensitive to the customer's concerns, rather than the stated need, opens up a larger horizon of possible actions that would satisfy the customer."*

That's a profound philosophical distinction so I'm going to recommend you re-read that paragraph a second time.

Let me use a hypothetical example to observe how this might look in real life.

Imagine you're an average, everyday car salesperson. Into the showroom walks a couple looking for a new car. Naturally, you launch into your standard set of qualifying questions trying to reveal their SPEC:



- How many passengers do you want it to carry?
- How many doors do you want – 2, 4, hatchback?
- Need a towing package?
- Do you have a specific color in mind?
- Luggage rack?
- What's your budget?
- Yada yada yada

Let's pause for a moment on the color SPEC and let's say they answer "red."

**Average Sales Person to him/herself:** "We have this perfect car that meets all of their other SPECS on the back lot. It's maroon though. No problem. My sales manager gave me some tips on how to influence the SPEC. I bet I can make a case that maroon is close enough to red that they'd be willing to adjust their SPEC. I really want to unload that car. It's been sitting on the back lot for months now. I'll be a hero if I can sell it to this family."

Does this sound familiar? Can you remember a time you've been on the buyer's side of this equation? You wanted red and settled for maroon (or whatever). How did it make you feel? What did you think of the sales person?

On the face of it, it sure sounds innocent enough. Seems like a win-win. They get (mostly) the car they want and the sales person got to book the sale.

Worse still, have you ever been on the seller's side of this strategy? I must admit that I have. In my early days in business development, I consulted for a number of different companies in precisely this role – helping craft narratives to nudge the buyer into adjusting their SPECS in order to (a) make it more likely that our product would get purchased and (b) make it less likely that our competitor's product would even qualify to bid. I later learned that this is a very common practice and continues to be encouraged to this day.

So now let me say something quite provocative – this type of strategy can be viewed as insincere and over time can produce distrust. It demonstrates a desire to take care of your own concerns at the expense of your customer. Businesses that operate that way over the long term get a certain reputation and are unlikely to remain a going concern.

Ok, now imagine what happens when a true sales professional is faced with this situation.

**Sales Pro:** "You mentioned red. Can you tell me more about that?"

**Wife:** “When I was growing up, my father owned a ‘68, red Mustang convertible. He loved that car. And every Saturday morning, our father-daughter thing to do was go for a ride. We’d have breakfast or lunch somewhere and then just drive around with the top down, wind in my hair ...”

Now it’s a different narrative. It’s not about red anymore, it’s about a connection to childhood.



**Wife, continuing the story:** “Truth is, I didn’t particularly care for the car but I really loved spending time with my dad. Unfortunately, when I was 11, my father passed away at a young age due to a heart attack. I still miss him terribly. So every time I buy a car, I try to look for a red one.”

Aha, it’s not even about childhood or the car or the color red. It’s about a concern for the dear memory of a loved one and the only way she knows how to express herself is by saying “I want a red car,” which becomes her SPEC.

**Sales Pro:** “I’m so sorry to hear about your loss. I can really empathize. [Said with sincerity.] So let’s ignore the color for the moment. We’re going to find you the perfect car first. Then I’m going to contact Ford and find out the precise color palette for a ‘68 Mustang. Then we’re going to take your car down to our favorite auto repair house and have them do a custom paint job for you. I don’t know if this will fit into your current budget but I’m sure we can work through it together because it’s important to me that we get this part of your request just right. I want to make sure every time you look out on the driveway and see that color red, you’re able to smile, fondly remembering those drives with your dad. How does that sound?”

Let me be straight here. I am not implying that focusing on concerns is the path to driving up the price (aka “scope creep”) or extending the schedule. That’s definitely not the point.

The moral of this story is that the Sales Pro focused on the underlying human concern and not the articulated request.

Some of you that deal with more technical, complex, arms-length type sales (e.g., like those found in the aerospace and defense industry) might be saying to yourselves: “This doesn’t apply to us since we don’t get involved with the personal feelings of our prospects. It is really about the thing we’re selling.”

Let me respond with a slightly different spin on our car sales story.

**Sales Pro:** “Is there a specific reason for wanting a red car?”

**Prospect:** “Thank you for asking. Yes, in our spare time, we take turns driving for one of the ride share companies and our old car is too unreliable. A bold color, like red, is easier for the customer to spot when arriving at the pickup location and even saving just a few seconds of search time can enhance the customer experience.”

**Sales Pro to him/herself:** Aha, it’s not really about the car at all. They have a concern about their business use of the car. The color requirement is actually a concern for customer experience and the time-value-

of-money. And assuming they don't operate the business purely for fun, although they didn't come right out and say it, I can make a grounded assessment that they also care about the ROI for this car.

**Sales Pro to Prospect:** "I had heard something about red cars and being stopped by police so I was fascinated to learn that in a study of 924 citations collected from four intersections in two countries, white cars actually received the most tickets followed by red with gray third and silver fourth. So having a red car may cost you more in citations than you make driving the car for hire. And for sure you don't want to get stopped with a passenger on board."

Head nod.

**Sales Pro:** "On top of that, dirt tends to easily stand out against a bold red background. Whether we like it or not, passengers will form an immediate impression of you if you pull up to the pickup location with a dirty exterior. Keeping it clean will require you to spend \$X every month taking it to the car wash or Y hours of your personal time if you clean it yourself. And every hour you're washing the car is one less hour you're earning money driving. Does this make sense so far?"

Head nod.

**Sales Pro:** "Perhaps you would consider a gray or silver car instead. Silver reduces your odds of a ticket by 75% while gray will reduce your odds by only 50% but save you an additional \$Z every month by not having to wash it as often since studies show gray will mask dirt longer. On top of that, with the most recent changes to tax law, there's a special tax on red cars for the next four years."

Okay, that last part was purely an attempt at political satire ... because I can.

I trust you get the point with both hypothetical situations.

It's not about "influencing the SPEC" (a phrase I'm not fond of, by the way). Rather, it's about a narrative that takes care of their concerns thereby compelling them to do business with you instead of your competitors.

**To influence (v): produce an effect without apparent exertion of force; in indirect or intangible ways.**

**To compel (v): "To force or oblige someone to do something."**

Influence = good. Compel = better.

Focusing less on the SPEC and more on the underlying concerns leads to a far more intimate, human-to-human (H2H) customer relationship – even with a one-time transaction like car sales. Don't you think this couple will praise the Pro and send referrals his/her way? Isn't this a far more trustworthy sales person?

So let's take a stab at a "new and improved" title for this article:

**"The SPEC is dead. Long live the Concerns."**

Until next time ... keep putting the H2H back into B2B,

Jeff