



Product knowledge:

What you need to know to sell backpacks

When it comes to shopping for a backpack, South Africans now have more choice than ever before. Choice is good, of course: it means there's more chance that the customer will find a product that best suits their needs. But there's also a greater risk of them walking out the shop with something entirely inappropriate! That's where good product knowledge is essential.

First things first

When selling a backpack, the starting point is always to find out what the customer wants to use it for. It's the same as shopping for a car: you first decide on the type of vehicle you want – 4x4, sports car, Mom's taxi and so on – before worrying about things like the sound system and whether or not it has a sunroof.

- For **hikers**, backpacks are categorized according to the length of the trail, which in turn determines the carrying capacity, or volume (measured in litres).
 - **Day packs** (up to 35 litres) are suitable for day walks and *slackpacking* trails, where porters carry the bulk of your gear.
 - **Weekend packs** (35-55 litres) are good for overnight trails – one or maybe two nights in the mountains.
 - **Trekking packs** (55 litre plus) are the big boys, designed to carry the heavy loads required for multi-day trails.
- There's also a host of more specialist packs for specific activities:
- mountain bikers can choose a product that contains a hydration bladder for hands-free drinking;
 - while rock climbers will want something light, but strong, with dedicated loops for clipping ice axes or carabiners.
 - There are also dedicated packs for trail runners, adventure racers, kloofers and travellers.

Key features when selling

Back system: Also known as the harness system, this comprises the shoulder straps and hip belt that distribute the load from the pack onto your body. It is an essential component because it determines the comfort of the backpack.

- With daypacks the load is generally fairly light, and thus the focus is less about padding

Our cut-out-and-keep series to assist retailers with product knowledge

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Photo by Anja Koehler

and weight distribution and more on ventilation i.e. staying cool. Manufacturers use two approaches to achieve this.

- o One way is to use a traditional padded back panel, but with a cavity, or channel, running down the middle to promote air flow.
- o The second is to use a mesh back panel tensioned between stays running up each side of the pack. This lifts the backpack right off your body, creating a nice big space for air to flow. It's definitely the cooler option, but the disadvantage is that because the stays are under tension they are bow shaped, and this in turn creates an irregular-shaped main compartment that

can be difficult to pack.

- With larger packs the back system's main role is to distribute the load comfortably. Padding is obviously important to ensure that there are no painful pressure points, but the key factor is ensuring that the weight is shifted off the shoulders and onto the hips, which are stronger and therefore better suited to supporting heavy loads.
- Different people have different length spines, so clearly a one-size-fits-all approach won't work here. Which is why manufacturers spend big sums of money developing adjustable harness systems, which allow the distance between the hip belt and the shoulder straps to be changed so it corresponds to the length of the person's spine. Being able to demonstrate how to adjust the back length is obviously crucial.
 - o A recent trend is the development of different-sized backpacks catering for different back lengths. Black Diamond, for example, offer small, medium and large versions of the same backpack models, along with different hip belt sizes.
 - o Also exciting is the appearance of dedicated ladies packs, which feature narrower shoulders and shorter back lengths to suit the female form.

Material: Another key factor is the fabric that the backpack is made from. As with all hiking equipment, it's always a balancing act between weight and durability: thicker materials are more hard-wearing, but add unwelcome kilos.

Your job is to assess what's most appropriate for the customer – a pack that's been designed to be "fast and light", or one that's been designed to be "used and abused".

The universal measure of a fabric's thickness is the Denier (D). The higher the number, the heavier the fabric. For example, the Mountain Hardware Dihedral, a backpack developed specifically for alpine climbers, uses a hard-wearing 840D fabric on the base to handle the wear and tear of being dragged over rock and ice, while Karrimor's X Lite 25, a super-lightweight daypack, is made from much thinner 210D rip-stop nylon.

Side pockets: There's been a noticeable move away from the traditional backpack design with multiple side pockets, to a slimmer profile without protruding side pockets. **To p36**



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The advantage of these more streamlined packs is that a narrower load sits more securely on your back; there's also less chance of them getting snagged on vegetation and rocks.

However, packing all your equipment into a single main compartment also has its **disadvantages**: if you've accidentally stashed your raincoat at the bottom and the heavens open, for example, then you need to unpack everything – tent, sleeping bag, gas cooker – to get at it. Not ideal.

Manufacturers have developed various ways to get around this problem.

- Some incorporate big zips running down the front of the pack for easier access to the main compartment,
 - while others include “bellows pockets”, concertina-like side pockets that can expand to accommodate smaller items, but then fold flush with the side of the pack when not in use.
 - But the fact remains that many South African hikers still prefer the convenience of good old-fashioned side pockets, which provide quick and easy access to things like waterbottles, binoculars, first aid kits... and raincoats!
- Floating lid:** Nope, this doesn't mean the backpack can be used as a life jacket! A “floating lid” is one that can be raised or lowered (by loosening or tightening the straps), effectively increasing or decreasing the volume of the main compartment.

It's for this reason that many manufacturers rate the volume of their packs with two numbers, for example 65 + 10 litres. The “+ 10” refers to the extra packing space that can be created by raising the lid.

It's a common feature on weekend or trekking packs, and gives the customer a bit more flexibility when it comes to the amount of equipment the backpack can hold.

Other useful features

Hydration bladder compatibility: Hands-free drinking is all the rage these days. Apparently.

While it makes sense for kayakers and cyclists to suck on a drinking tube (after all, they need both hands to clutch the handlebars or paddle), it's less of an issue for hikers. Still, many backpack manufacturers now offer what's called “hydration bladder compatibility” – a dedicated pouch for the bladder, and a hole in the top of the pack for routing the tube.

Some are more effective than others. If you've got a customer who specifically asks for this feature then make sure you sell them a pack where the pouch is easily accessible, and has some sort of clip or strap system that holds the bladder in place.

Organizer: Most backpacks now come with some sort of internal organizer, a collection of zippered pockets – usually situated in the lid – that can be used to stow small items. Though not essential, these pouches certainly make life a lot easier by providing secure storage for things like your cellphone or wallet. Some even have dedicated clips for car keys.

Whistle: The best thing to do in an emergency is to dial your cellphone, right? Yes, provided there's signal and the battery isn't flat, neither of which can be guaranteed when hiking in the mountains. For those instances when a cellphone can't be used, a whistle is still a highly effective way of calling for help. A lot of backpacks now come with a whistle integrated into the buckle of the sternum strap. Many customers don't know about this clever safety feature, so point it out to them.

Rain cover: Another nifty feature that a lot of people miss is the built-in rain cover, which is usually hidden in a pouch in the base of the backpack. Made from a waterproof fabric, it pulls over the top of the pack like a shower cap. However, these covers should not be seen as a substitute for proper waterproofing.

Customers who are going kloofing – or visiting the Amazon rain forest – should also purchase dedicated dry bags for their clothing and sleeping bags.

Backpacking fastest growing travel market

BACKPACKING AND youth travel is the fastest growing tourist segment in the world, representing over 20% of all international tourists and generating about \$109-bn annually, recent research conducted by the international WYSE Travel Confederation show. In 2006 about 90 000 international backpacking and youth travellers visited SA, reports a publication from the DTI, *Backpacking and Youth Travel in South Africa*.

While SA retailers would not necessarily benefit so much from the international backpackers visiting here – except by selling clothing and equipment for adventurous activities – it is safe to say that SA youths are part of this huge global market. And they will buy their backpacks here before they board their planes.

According to the DTI publication backpackers are generally young professionals and students with a high education level aged below 26 years (although there are also increasing numbers of backpackers between 26-35 years, as well as older backpackers known as *grey gappers*).

Cape Town is a big draw card for international backpackers (most of the visitors stay at least one night in Cape Town) and apart from the Western Cape, they also visit Gauteng, the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Mpumalanga. Adventure tourism activities enjoyed by backpackers are surfing, bungee jumping and skydiving – especially by the younger crowd. More than half of them come from countries in Western Europe, Australasia and North America – according to the DTI booklet.