



THE SERVING SALESPERSON

Meeting Customer Needs with Practices of Servanthood

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I was taught to serve customers and to look to do whatever we could do to meet their needs. We ask them what their biggest challenges are and how we can help them—it goes beyond simply selling products.... I try to be a humble servant even in the littlest of ways, calling them, telling them “I’m thinking about you.”... People want to have a relationship with others who show a genuine caring attitude for them.

—Packaging materials salesperson

INTRODUCTION

The basic philosophy of servant-leadership posits that servant-leaders exhibit a holistic, encompassing form of leadership that exhibits a genuine concern for the employment welfare and personal development of the people that report to them (i.e., Jennings and Stahl-Wert 2004). The main premise of this paper is that a salesperson can also adopt this holistic serving approach in his or her selling behavior by employing a more service-oriented, customer-focused, integrity laden, and authentically based sales approach than a more traditional transactional sales approach. Just as there are servant-leaders in the management arena, we propose that there are “serving salespeople” in the sales arena. This paper will give a brief introduction on the background of servant-leadership and then describe how servant-leadership has gained increasing acceptance in the contemporary organization. We will then build the case showing how the fundamental principles of servant-leadership apply to the field of sales by reporting and analyzing the findings of a qualitative research study examining the attitudes and practices that are adopted by serving salespeople. Finally, we propose



seven practices that aspiring serving salespeople can use as a framework to guide their selling efforts.

BACKGROUND OF SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

Since the publication of Greenleaf's seminal essay *The Servant as Leader* (1991), the concept of servant-leadership has gained an increasing amount of influence in a broad spectrum of organizations around the world. Spears noted that in all his works Greenleaf discussed "the need for a new kind of leadership model, a model that puts serving others—including employees, customers, and community—as the number one priority" (Spears 2002, 4). Spears goes on to note that as we enter the twenty-first century there is a shift away from the autocratic models of leadership toward one based more on teamwork and community. This new leadership model is strongly based in ethical and caring behavior, attempts to involve others in decision making, seeks to enhance the personal growth of workers, and improves the care and quality of our many institutions (Spears 2002).

The distinguishing feature of the servant-leadership model that typically is not addressed in other leadership approaches is that it is *holistic* in nature, incorporating a number of leadership dimensions that are all focused around developing and serving their fellow workers. Lad and Luechauer (1998) proposed five different "pathways" to servant-leadership: cognitive, experiential, spiritual, organizational, and community. Sendjaya and Cooper (2011) posit that servant leadership encompasses the areas of authenticity, integrity, morality, and spirituality. Spears (10 practices, 2002) and Keith (8 practices, 2008) have each proposed their own constructs of servant-leadership, which among others will be detailed in a later section of the paper.

There is also empirical support for this holistic nature of servant-leadership. Using a structural equations analysis of the six-factor Servant-leadership Behavior Scale (SLBS), Sendjaya and Cooper (2011) found a number of first order factors such as voluntary subordination, authentic self, covenantal relationship, responsible morality, transcendental spirituality, and transforming influence that as a set of latent dimensions reflected a second-order factor of servant-leadership. In addition, their first-order factors showed evidence of high construct validity and absence of social desirability bias. Sendjaya and Cooper are among an ever-increasing contingent of researchers throughout the world who conduct quantitative research on



servant-leadership. Thus, servant-leadership has achieved a conceptual acceptance in the modern business environment and been empirically supported in the academic environment.

SERVANT-LEADERSHIP IN THE CONTEMPORARY ORGANIZATION

Recent work on organizational performance (Collins 2001) and leader performance (Clawson 2010; Gardner 1995) stresses a deep belief that the development of people is crucial to the implementation of the organizational mission. While organizational systems matter, it is the actions of the people in the organization that make it happen through a series of committed conversations. Kent Keith, CEO of the Greenleaf Center for Servant-leadership, notes that “when we look deeply inside of ourselves, most of us discover that we truly care about people, and want to make a positive difference in their lives” (Keith 2008, 1).

Iwata (1995) cites this same philosophy of “making a difference.” Once viewed in a single dimension as a way to make money, business is seen today as a vehicle through which individuals can realize their personal vision, serve others, and make a difference in the world. The theologian Michael Novak (1996) makes a case for business as a “calling” as do Hawkin (1993) and Shore (1995). These inclinations are now increasingly being found in the contemporary workforce. In a recent study that examined attitudes toward jobs and careers, researchers found that the workplace preferences of Baby Boomers and Generation Xs were remarkably similar (Hewlett, Sherbin, and Sumberg 2009). One of the more interesting findings of their study was that the opportunity to give back to society was found to be more important than the sheer size of the pay and benefits package. Thus, this apparent search for meaning is cutting across generations.

A number of authors have proposed frameworks that include characteristics and qualities exhibited by a servant-leader. These frameworks are found in Table.1.

Common among these frameworks is the premise that the servant-leader has a prevailing attitude of sincerely caring about the other person’s lot in life, of undertaking a policy of empathic listening to their needs and desires, and then endeavoring to serve those needs and desires through whatever means and resources available to the leader. Keith puts it very succinctly—a servant-leader is very simply “a leader who is focused on serving others” (Keith 2008, 9).



Table 1.
Characteristics of a Servant-Leader as Defined by Various Authors

<i>Spears (2002)</i>	<i>Keith (2008)</i>	<i>Autry (2001)</i>	<i>Lowe (1998)</i>
Listening	Self Awareness	Caring for and being a useful resource to people	A teacher, a source of information and knowledge, a standard setter
Empathy	Listening	Being present and building a work community	Leaders put themselves in others' shoes and help them make their dreams come true
Healing	Changing the Pyramid	Being your best and most authentic self	Leaders consider others partners in their work and want them to share in the rewards
Awareness	Developing Your Colleagues	Creating a place where people can do good work, bringing your spirit to work, being authentic	Leaders are people builders—they help those around them to grow
Persuasion	Coaching, Not Controlling	Leadership is largely a matter of paying attention	Leaders don't hold people down but lift them up
Conceptualization	Unleashing the Energy and Intelligence of Others	Leadership requires love	Leaders have faith in people, believe in them. Have found that others rise to their high expectations
Foresight	Foresight		Leaders are not interested in having their own way, but in finding the best way
Stewardship			
Commitment to the growth of people			
Building community			



SERVANT-LEADERSHIP IN PRACTICE

The principles of servant-leadership have been shown to be a philosophy that not only creates an attractive and productive environment for a company's employees but also affords those companies who adopt this model a viable avenue to create and maintain a competitive advantage. Glashagel (2009) profiled eight different companies that have implemented the servant-leadership model of management. Included in this list are such companies as Toro, Johnsonville Sausage, and TDIndustries, with a number of these companies making *Fortune Magazine's* "Best Companies to Work for in America." Glashagel sets forth some concluding observations about what each of these servant-led institutions has in common:

- *Employees.* Servant-led companies provide training and education, individualized growth and development systems, and advancement and promotion opportunities. Glashagel goes on to point out that what makes all of these effective is that the organization constantly strives to build and maintain a culture of *trust*.
- *Customers.* Servant-led companies spend a lot of time listening to customers, both at the macro level and the micro level. This effective listening strategy employs a complete communication loop that starts with a question rather than an answer. These companies also approach customers with respect and with the long-term goal of being able to engage well informed, repeat customers in respectful relationships.
- *Business Partners.* Servant-led companies make a concerted attempt to create a favorable outcome among all involved parties. Business partners get to know each other's business well enough to be able to appreciate what the opportunities and barriers are to each other's success and seek to maximize the opportunities and eliminate the barriers.
- *Community Partners.* An overriding goal among all these companies is to make an effort to try and make life better for all the people and organizations they "touch." (Glashagel 2009)

Treating employees and other stakeholders well can also result in financial benefits to the organization. Employing the financial metrics used by Collins in *Good to Great* (2001) Sipe and Frick (2009) compared the financial performance of Collins's eleven Good to Great companies with eleven publicly traded companies that are cited frequently in the literature



as being servant-led (Table 2). Focusing on the ten-year period that ended in 2005, Sipe and Frick found that:

- The five hundred largest companies listed in Standard and Poor's averaged a 10.8 percent pre-tax portfolio rate of return.
- Collins's eleven *Good to Great* companies averaged a 17.5 percent rate of return.
- The eleven servant-led companies averaged a 24.2 percent rate of return. (Sipe and Frick 2009)

Similarly, Bragdon (2006) found that aligning investment capital flows with sound social and environmental stewardship can also produce superior financial performance. Consistent with findings of Waddock, Tribo, and Surroca (2010) on the positive relationship between corporate social responsibility and financial performance, not only does being servant-led create a favorable internal environment for employees, it has also been shown to create favorable financial returns for the company and its investors. As we develop the case for practices of individual servant sales professionals, we note here that the culture of servant led organizations is critical to high performance.

Table 2.

Comparison of Financial Performance of Good To Great Companies with Servant-Led Companies

<i>Good to Great Companies</i>	<i>Servant Led Companies</i>
Fannie Mae	Toro Company
Circuit City	Southwest Airlines
Nucor	Starbucks
Kroger	AFLAC
Walgreens	Men's Wearhouse
Wells Fargo	Synovus Financial
Altria Group	Herman Miller
Gillette	ServiceMasters
Pitney Bowes	Marriott International
Kimberly Clark	FedEx
Abbott Labs	Medtronic



SERVANTHOOD IN OTHER DISCIPLINES

The concept of servanthood has been advocated as a model for implementation in a number of other business disciplines (Covey 1988; Spears 2002; Keith 2008). Servant-leadership applications have been found in education (Bowman 2005; Taylor et al. 2007), research administration (Vargas and Hanlon 2007), nursing (Sturm 2009), the safety industry (Sarkus 1995), conducting an orchestra (Wis 2002), and even at a Wal-Mart in China (Davies 2007). In an examination of the impact of servant-leadership on sales force performance, Jaramillo et al. (2009) found that sales managers who exhibited servant-leader tendencies were more likely to influence their salespeople to exhibit those same tendencies with their customer groups. The study also found that customer-directed extra-role performance was related to increased sales performance, and that servant-leader managers had more of an impact on newer, less experienced salespeople.

Research has also consistently shown that leadership styles, specifically servant-leadership styles, can play a critical role in explaining employee turnover. Pullins and Fine (2002) found that leaders can substantially influence employee service performance and thus can enhance customer relationships. Jaramillo et al. (2009) found that servant-leaders help create a positive work climate in which salespeople feel a stronger sense of shared organizational values, become more committed to the firm, and thus express a deeper desire to stay. This study also found another positive benefit of servant-leadership is in helping the firm build an ethical organizational climate.

THE SERVING SALESPERSON

Central to the theme of servant-leadership is a prevailing attitude that leaders care sincerely about the welfare of those they lead, adopting a policy of empathic listening to determine the needs and desires of those who work for them and then endeavoring to meet those needs through the resources and abilities of the leader. Similarly, our concept of a serving salesperson proposes that such a salesperson keeps the best interests of his or her customers paramount and endeavors to serve these interests throughout the entire selling process. This concept of a customer-oriented salesperson has its academic roots in the SOCO (selling orientation customer-orientation)



scale developed by Saxe and Weitz (1982). Since that time, customer oriented selling has been classified as adaptive selling (Weitz, Sujan, and Sujan 1986), a selling behavior (Siguaw and Honeycutt 1995), a salesperson characteristic (Baldauf and Cravens 1999), an antecedent of job attitudes (Siguaw, Brown, and Widing 1994) and performance (Keillor, Parker, and Pettijohn 2000), and a measure of performance (Hoffman and Ingram 1991). As discussed above, the distinguishing behavior of a serving salesperson is the same as that of a serving leader—a more holistic approach that proposes that such a salesperson engages in a number of serving behaviors throughout the entire sales process. The serving salesperson is identified by all the above mentioned behaviors rather than just a few.

Robert Greenleaf reflects a serving attitude of the leader in his original essay *The Servant as Leader*:

The servant-leader is servant first....It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is leader first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions....The leader-first and the servant-first are two extreme types. Between them are shadings and blends that are part of the infinite variety of human nature....The best test is: Do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely to themselves become servants? (Greenleaf 1991, 15)

With acknowledgment to Greenleaf, we propose the following definition of a *serving salesperson* using a format similar to the one he used to define a servant-leader:

The serving salesperson is a servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. These serving instincts then lead the serving salesperson to continually seek to meet the needs of their customers to the best of their ability. This person is sharply different from the one who is a salesperson first, perhaps because of that person's need to simply make the sale, earn additional income, achieve their sales quota, or gain some personal recognition. The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the serving salesperson to ensure that their customers' highest priorities are being met. The best test, and the one most difficult to administer, is: Did those customers served have their needs met in a way that will improve the method by which they are able to conduct their business, and by so doing provide benefits to their organization, their employees, their customers, and perhaps even society as a whole?



Notice we have chosen the term *serving salesperson* rather than *servant salesperson*. The reason for this terminology is that *serving* is an active verb, signifying that the salesperson is continually taking proactive measures to meet the needs and wants of his or her customer base. The serving salesperson may practice different styles of selling, but the common thread throughout all their activities is that they *serve* first and *sell* second. They are people who first listen empathically to the customer, continually asking questions to fully understand the *customer's* needs and, most importantly, put those needs ahead of their own. The serving salesperson then brings whatever organizational, personal, or environmental resources s/he can to bear in order to satisfy those needs in a manner that will bring the most benefit to the customer. Their primary motivation is to transform the business processes of their customers so that those businesses will become more successful and by so doing improving the lives of the organization, their customers, their employees, and perhaps even society as a whole. What sets serving salespeople apart from most salespeople is that they are focused on the needs, wants, beliefs, and goals of their customer rather than their own individual or organizational objectives.

Downey et al. (2011) describe the structure of beliefs, goals, and needs as critical to the sales process. They suggest that sales professionals who merely satisfy customer needs are not as successful as those who help customers accomplish their desired goals. Needs are a low level dissonance that derive from a customer's goals; and goals come from a customer's beliefs. For example, shoes may satisfy a female customer's need for footwear, but her goal may be to feel good about herself. Helping her feel good about herself may be of more benefit to her than simply providing her with a pair of shoes. Her goal to feel good about herself may come from an underlying lack of confidence—a belief. True understanding of a customer only comes with the ability to understand a customer's beliefs. The discovery of these facets of the customer's persona cannot be accomplished within a traditional transactional sale because the focus is on an exchange of products rather than listening empathically and endeavoring to help the customer accomplish their goals. These practices are at the core of building true partnerships.

Keith points out, "Whatever their qualities, servant-leaders have a desire to serve. Some start out that way, early in life. Others start out with a desire for power, wealth, and fame, and then discover there is more joy in serving others" (Keith 2008, 10). Similarly, we submit the same premise exists for



serving salespeople. Some individuals have a natural proclivity to serve others and exhibit that behavior from the very beginning of their sales careers. Others begin their sales careers with a desire for the wealth, material possessions, and prestige that being a successful salesperson can bring. However, as they progress through their careers, an increasing number of salespeople have begun to discover a need that goes deeper than simply selling more products and accumulating more material wealth. An ever-increasing desire to “do good,” to “give back,” and to seek to improve the lot of their customers begins to creep into their mindset. The meaning behind their behavior patterns changes. They see the value of networking, sharing, and relationship building in a different way. The seeds are planted within these individuals to embrace and express the mindset of a serving salesperson.

To be sure, becoming a serving salesperson is not something that can be achieved overnight by simply reading a book or attending a seminar. Rather, it is a long-term, evolutionary approach to one’s career—in essence a way of *being*—that has the potential for creating positive changes in the one’s entire approach to selling and serving one’s customers. While some are born with a “serving instinct,” many salespeople have to first become aware of the key behavioral practices behind becoming a serving salesperson and then endeavor to embrace those practices over time, eventually having them become ingrained into their everyday work activities.

METHODOLOGY

In an effort to better define the constructs of becoming a serving salesperson, a qualitative research project was undertaken to attempt to gain a better understanding of the key components and practices of being a serving salesperson. Through personal experience of more than twenty-five years teaching sales and marketing, one author identified four salespeople believed to practice a serving attitude with their customers. Open-ended interviews were conducted with these four to gather their ideas on what attitudes and behaviors are employed by salespeople who truly seek to “serve” their customers. From these interviews a list of questions was developed (Table 3). The four original serving salespeople were approached again and asked to validate the analysis and to determine if this list of questions did indeed capture their concept of a “serving salesperson.” The salespeople all responded in an affirmative manner. Personal interviews were then conducted with these same individuals focused around these questions. After these interviews were



Table 3.
List of Questions Asked of Serving Salespeople

1. Walk me through the process of the things you do when you get a high potential customer—someone whom you’ve identified as having a real need for your product or service.
 2. You have been referred to by _____ as a “serving salesperson.” What actions do you take in the course of dealing with both potential and current customers that would make people refer to you as a serving salesperson?
 3. In the world of business that puts “making the numbers” seemingly above everything else, how do you stay focused on serving the customer?
 4. How do you keep your passion for selling after doing this for so long?
 5. How do you meet your customers’ unmet needs?
 6. How do you go about developing trust with your customers?
 7. Is there a “joy” in serving your customers? How?
 8. Tell me a story of a time when you feel you really served a customer. I’m especially interested in any anecdotes or insights about the sales process you gained through that experience.
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completed, the researcher employed a snowball data collection technique by asking these and subsequent respondents to supply the names of one or two others they knew in the field of sales whom they felt also exhibited the qualities of a serving salesperson. Once the contact information was secured for these additional respondents they were sent an e mail asking for permission to interview them for the project. If an interview time was not set up in the initial e-mail the individuals were contacted by telephone and an interview time arranged. The potential respondents were then sent an additional e mail confirming the date and time of the interview along with a list of the questions they were to be asked in the interview.

Thirty-four people were contacted and agreed to be interviewed. Thirty-three interviews were eventually conducted. Eight interviews were conducted in person with the remainder being conducted by telephone. Interviews ranged in duration from seven to fifty-three minutes, with the average interview lasting just under twenty minutes. Of the respondents, twenty-five were male and eight were female. The age range was from twenty-seven to sixty-two. Respondents came from a wide array of industries such as printing, pharmaceuticals, real estate, financial services, machine tools, consulting, lawn and garden, duplicating, medical supplies, and auctioneering.



RESULTS

As the interviews were being conducted the researcher took careful notes, often asking the respondent to clarify or expand further on their particular point. When the interview was completed, the researcher immediately went over the notes and clarified any points, quotes, or examples. When all the interviews were completed, responses were collated first by respondent and then by question. The responses were then content-analyzed. The analysis of the results indicated that there are seven basic practices that serving salespeople display:

- Set Serving as Your “True North”
- Carry a Passion for Selling
- Sharpen Your EQ
- Grow the Trust
- Meet Their Silent Demand
- Create the Wins
- Share the Joy

Each of these will be described below supported by illustrated paraphrased quotes.

THE SEVEN PRACTICES OF A SERVING SALESPERSON

Practice One—Set Serving as Your “True North”

In medieval times seamen were constantly in search of a tool to guide them on their voyages. They first did so by using the rising and setting of the sun, but cloudy days and windstorms soon made that impossible. Seeking something that did not change no matter what the conditions, they soon discovered that a simple magnetic compass would always point north—true north—and guide them on their way. This true north was unchanging, steadfast, and unwavering.

Just as there is a natural law of true north, so does each individual need a “true north” to guide them in their everyday activities. For the serving salesperson, this “true north” exemplifies an unwavering, steadfast philosophy of serving his or her customers as their primary motivation. The serving salesperson enters each sales interaction with the express purpose of discovering the customer’s needs and meeting those needs to the best of their



ability in an honest and forthright manner. Morgan proposes six principles of selling with integrity, with one of them being “service is the goal, discovery is the outcome, and a sale may be the solution” (Morgan 1997, 22). Pink (2000) echoes this premise by espousing that a person’s character is the result of their habits; habits are a result of their individual acts; acts are the result of their thoughts, and their thoughts are theirs to choose. Downey et al. (2011) point out that a customer’s product needs are the result of their goals, and their goals are the result of beliefs about what is important. A product’s features, advantages, and benefits correspond to that same tripartite. They point out that the best salespeople are those with the ability to focus on customer beliefs, not just their need for products. If a salesperson’s “true north” thoughts and actions are focused around serving their customers in a manner that is consistent with the customers’ goals and beliefs, the salesperson’s individual behaviors centering around those thoughts are likely to follow.

The practice of a salesperson setting their “true north” around serving their customers is a journey, not a destination. Like all journeys, salespeople can get lost in the roller-coaster life of sales, which is filled with ups and downs, twists and turns. However, with their “true north,” that unchanging compass of values, mission, and vision will always lead them back to the path of serving their customers even if they temporarily lose their way.

Responses from the serving salespeople in this survey typified having a serving attitude that was set to a “true north.”

Rather than setting an agenda for yourself, you set one for them. This agenda should not be ABC—Always Be Closing—but ABS—Always Be Serving. This doesn’t mean you’ll only be closing the sale. You may find out things—like they have a sick child and need a doctor, and I can recommend someone to them. (printing services salesperson)

It means having a consistent mindset that “Do I have the product that they can benefit from?” I want to be in the relationship for what they can get out of it, not for what I can get out of it. (machine tool salesperson)

Our business has six guiding principles, with the first one being “Seek first to serve.” (copier salesperson)

Practice Two—Carry a Passion for Serving

Once the serving salesperson has set their true north of serving the customer, they must find the motivation to fulfill that vision. The true serving



salesperson carries a passion—the drive, the desire, and the strength of conviction—that will sustain the discipline to achieve that vision. This passion to serve comes from deep inside the salesperson and is evident in their determination, optimism, excitement, and energy to serve the customer. The serving salesperson displays his or her passion through genuinely caring for and about their customers and being willing to proactively serve their needs in a humble, focused, and unassuming manner.

This passion to serve shows itself clearly when the sales process is not going well for either the salesperson or the customer. Through this adversity the salesperson remains true to their mission of serving first and selling second. However, this does not mean the salesperson will continue in an unprofitable relationship for an extended period of time. The serving salesperson may be willing to sacrifice some short-term gain for longer-term mutual benefit, but they also understand that they serve the company whose products they represent. In calculating this balance, serving salespeople recognize that profitability is not determined from a single transaction. Serving salespeople believe that with having passion for serving their customers they will achieve a higher level of long-term profit not only from the customers they serve but from the referrals that come about as a result.

The respondents exhibited this passion in the following ways:

When I was younger it was all about winning—I had to be number one. As I got older, it became more about how can I help the doctor with this patient. When you give them information during the operation and afterwards they shake your hand and tell you they couldn't have done it without you, that's more rewarding than just making a sale. (medical device salesperson)

Most customers expect salespeople to jump in, show them a glossy brochure and try and sell them something they don't need. I don't do that. I love exceeding people's expectations and I love helping people that have been burned by others. I give a lot to my job, but I view it as giving a lot to people. (pharmaceutical salesperson)

One's passion comes from being energized from what you're doing. That isn't to say that things don't get tough. God has created us for a special purpose, when we get in that vocation that He's created us for, we will feel that passion. For me, to solve a problem, to comfort people, to help meet their needs is greater than a paycheck. (printing equipment salesperson)



Practice Three—Sharpen Your eq

Just as we all have an IQ—an Intellectual Quotient telling us how “intellectually smart” we are—we also have an EQ—an Emotional Quotient that tells us how “emotionally smart” we are. An emotionally intelligent person is one who knows his or her own strengths and weaknesses and is also able to discern the feelings, motivations, and desires of those they are dealing with at the time. Emotional intelligence in salespeople has been linked to longer-term customer views and customer orientations that lead to high levels of sales effectiveness (Rozell, Pettijohn, and Parker 2004). Daniel Goleman, recognized by many as the father of emotional intelligence, originally identified five key factors of emotional intelligence:

- Self Awareness—the ability to understand one’s own strengths and weaknesses, motivations and desires;
- Self Regulation—The ability to control one’s emotions in highly charged settings;
- Motivation—Having an intrinsic drive to always do their best, to perform above expectations;
- Empathy—An ability to understand others’ emotions, their needs and wants;
- Social skills—The ability to bring the necessary resources to bear to solve a particular problem or to deal with a particular situation knowing that nothing of consequence gets done alone. (Goleman 1998)

By carefully observing the outward behaviors of their customers, salespeople with a high EQ are able to get a sense of an individual’s social style in relatively short order. Knowing that different social styles have different information needs, the serving salesperson can then tailor their communications to match the social style of those they are communicating with. Tailoring the communication to the specific information needs of the customer will allow the customer to better process that information and view the sales communication in a more positive light. The serving salespeople exhibited their EQ in the following statements.

I was having an initial meeting with a client and I could tell that there was something else that was bothering him besides what we were talking about....I gently asked him a couple questions about that and he burst into tears....It turned out that he was afraid of failing and afraid his wife would



leave him if he did....I put everything else aside and we talked through that. (executive coach)

It's very important to develop rapport with the customer and relate to them on a personal level rather than a business level. In my business many of the products are the same, so it's the one-on-one that's going to get you started. From there it's really listening to what they want, demonstrating the product, and then tying it down with the features and benefits and how they can use the product every day and how it will benefit them. (real estate salesperson)

You have to build credibility early on that you're someone who understands their business and can make a positive impact on their numbers. You do that by understanding how they look at a situation and what type of information they need to make their decision. When you build that credibility and have some early successes, that takes a ton of pressure off you later on. (medical device products salesperson)

Practice Four—Grow the Trust

The world of business has changed and will continue to change dramatically and rapidly. Markets have grown from local to national to global. The differentiated products and services of yesterday are the commodities of today. The customers of today buy differently, so the salespeople of today must sell differently. Customers seldom feel an urgency to buy because good companies, good salespeople, and good deals come along every day. Buyers will buy from salespeople they like and trust, so establishing trust early on in the relationship is critical to a salesperson's trust and sales effectiveness. By establishing a relationship based on trust, serving salespeople can create a differential advantage that can firmly entrench them as an asset to their customers.

Covey (2006) submits that trust affects two business outcomes: speed and cost. When trust is high, speed increases and cost decreases; the reverse is true if trust is low. The serving salesperson understands that establishing trust does not happen immediately but is a continuous process that takes place over time. These salespeople must take a proactive approach to establishing, nurturing, and maintaining a trusting relationship with the customer. The serving salesperson views these relationships as a "relational bank account" in which they can make timely, regular deposits to build trust equity with the customer. Covey (2006) has proposed thirteen character-based and competence-based behaviors that individuals can engage in to



build trust, the following of which are applicable to salespeople: communicate clearly, demonstrate respect, create transparency, right wrongs, deliver results, clarify expectations, listen first, keep commitments, and extend trust.

The serving salesperson has as their cornerstone the desire to build long-term, transformational relationships with their clients. The respondents in this study echoed the priority by the giving the following responses about trust:

If I think about the people I really trust, those are the ones that are dependable, reliable, and the ones who do the things that they say they're going to do....That takes time, especially in those environments where trust is not really looked upon as a favorable trait, but this is what I try to do. (machine parts salesperson)

Trust is a guiding principle of our business. If we commit to do something we follow through. We empower our people to do what's in the best interest of the customer....If there's a problem, we deal with it right away, and most companies don't do that. (copier salesperson)

The only way you develop trust is through actions....You're telling them the truth, even when it's not easy to say or hear....If you do it with honesty and integrity and own up to the things that are yours and hold yourself accountable for them, in the long run you build trust. (industrial parts salesperson)

Practice Five—Meet Their Silent Demand

Meeting customer needs is the essence of successful sales. Through company research and their own experience, salespeople will determine and work to satisfy their customers' *explicit demand*—those needs and wants that a customer has communicated to the salesperson. However, after addressing explicit needs, many salespeople consider their jobs completed. They become so focused on selling needs that they forget about uncovering any needs beyond the basic factors the customer has expressed to them. It is at this point that the serving salesperson needs to step back, to ask more questions, to probe deeper to determine their customers' goals and beliefs by uncovering and meeting their *silent demand*.

While *explicit demand* is usually determined early on in the sales process, *silent demand* is determined later on in the process or even after the product or service has been delivered. When the product (or service) is delivered to the front door of the customer, other than a few followup or service



issues, for the most part the traditional salesperson's value creation process is completed. However, what the serving salesperson realizes is that while their own value creation process is ending, the value creation process for their customer is just beginning. Their customers will now use that product or service to create value either internally for themselves or externally for their customers. Either way, the customer now engages in a value creation process of their own, and they may or may not have the necessary expertise to take full advantage of all the features and benefits of the value proposition the product or service can offer.

The serving salesperson recognizes this time as an opportunity to meet these unmet needs, their customers' silent demand. Very often the salesperson or the salesperson's company has adjacent expertise that can easily facilitate the customers' value creation process—what Downey et al. (2011) refer to as co-creating value. Co-created value arises when the buyer and seller work together to maximize the value received from a solution. For example, a large distributor of pharmaceuticals had developed the ability to get the pharmaceuticals to the front door of the hospital effectively and efficiently. Upon further investigation they discovered that there was an entire drug distribution function inside the hospital, which in many cases was inefficient and thus very expensive. The selling company was able to bring the distribution expertise they had learned outside the hospital to the drug distribution function inside the hospital, making their processes more efficient, creating value, and meeting the silent demand of the hospital pharmacy. The serving salespeople in this study realized the importance of meeting their customers' silent demand:

An unmet need would be those needs that those salespeople who have come before me have missed. They have missed it because they are not there to serve others but themselves....If I don't ask the right questions and listen, then I'm making the assumption that I know how to serve them. They tell me what I need to know, then I have to be empathic and then figure out how we can solve this together. (machine tool salesperson)

The biggest part in meeting the unmet need is investing the time to want to find it. If you've focused on closing rather than discovering you're going to miss something important. (real estate salesperson)

The initial thing is to get an understanding of what they're trying to accomplish. If you get prints that come in and send a quote out, it's about a five to ten percent success rate. However, if you make followup phone



calls and see what they're trying to accomplish and develop an understanding of what they're trying to do rather only relying than the print in front of you, you call them and see what their goals and objectives are, your success rate goes way up. (industrial parts salesperson)

Practice Six—Create the Wins

Successful salespeople have traditionally worked to create the “win/win”—where both buyer and the seller gain from a mutually beneficial exchange. However, win/win implies that that are only two parties affected by the outcome—the salesperson and his or her company's financial performance and the customer and his or her company's financial performance. The serving salesperson, on the other hand, seeks to “create the wins”—to endeavor to make sure that *all* parties affected by the transaction share in the positive outcome—the service people, the billing people, the implementers of a solution, and so forth.

While the amount of information and product choices available to customers today has given them more options to consider, it has also created quite a dilemma for them. Many customers are overwhelmed, inundated, and confused by the sheer volume of information. In such an environment filled with uncertainty, customers want sustained relationships that help provide clarity and confidence about choices. In the vast majority of business interactions, customers start out with the expectation of a positive relationship. They want to deal with suppliers that will study them, learn from them, and bring expertise and experience to solve the issues they face.

The serving salesperson understands these issues, works to reduce these uncertainties, and thereby reduces the customer's perceived risk. These salespeople will seek to go much broader and deeper in creating mutually beneficial exchanges, rather than just creating a “win” for their customer or the customer's organization. The serving salesperson seeks to understand what stakeholders will be affected by this exchange and will then attempt to create a positive outcome for those stakeholders. In so doing, the serving salesperson will consider the impact this purchase will have on the organization and its employees; the customers of the purchasing organization, the employees of his or her organization, the employees and the organization that supplied them, and finally society as a whole. In keeping with the holistic view of the serving salesperson, they will keep a holistic picture of the stakeholders that will be impacted by the decision.



The serving salespeople in this study addressed “creating the wins” in this manner:

We really want to qualify both sides—if we’re not qualified, we will recommend someone else who may have the expertise that we don’t have. We really want to serve the client and do what’s in everyone’s best interest. We really don’t worry about losing money—there’s plenty out there for everyone, and we’re going to focus our efforts where we can do the most good. (auctioneer)

Affecting peoples’ lives for the better is what it’s all about....We work very hard on trying to make everyone we deal with successful. If you really serve people and make them successful they will take you with them....We help people do things more efficiently, smarter, and better, and as they grow, we grow. (industrial parts salesperson)

When it comes right down to it...we serve our customers by helping them succeed. We are always asking, “How do we help them get there?” Every buyer reports to someone, and we continually ask what we can do to help them be successful....It’s all about helping your customer succeed. If that’s your focus then in the long run you will be successful. (machine tool salesperson)

Practice Seven—Share the Joy

The final practice of a serving salesperson is the sheer joy they feel when they are able to serve a customer to the best of their ability. A distinction to be made here is that the salesperson experiences true joy, not merely happiness. Happiness is a short-term emotion based on the outcome of events; if things work out the way we want them to, then we are happy. Joyfulness, on the other hand, is a long-term character quality. It is the quality of a person who is experiencing the inner satisfaction and conviction of knowing they are aligned with the deep and unchanging principles of their “true north,” of being a serving salesperson to their clients. Being aligned with these principles allows the salesperson to break free from the all the emotional ups and downs that many salespeople face and instead stay focused on those unwavering principles of their true north. Sir Rabindranath Tagore, a Nobel Prize–winning poet, put it this way: “I slept and dreamt that life was all joy, I awoke and understood life was but service, I served and realized service is joy!” This joy does not come from the temporal pleasures such as money, recognition, or promotions. The one enduring satisfaction



that will always be there as a serving salesperson is the joy they receive from meeting the needs of the client, from transforming their business to help them do their business better.

The serving salespeople in this study affirmed the fact that there is great joy in serving their customers to the best of their ability.

We've all had people who have helped us achieve our dreams, and we remember the joy we felt when we achieved them. There is a true and even bigger joy in helping other people achieve their dreams if we can get out of our self-centered world. (lawn and garden equipment salesperson)

There is absolutely great joy in serving. When you can make people's lives better, there's satisfaction in doing things right and in helping others. Give and it shall be given—if you give it away you get it back. (franchise distributor)

That's the essence of joy. When we're only serving the person in the mirror we can wallow in self-pity. Where the real joy is in serving people—that gives me life. If it was just about making money, there are lots of ways to do that. (business consultant)

I find great joy in serving. From our perspective no one likes what we do—the only time people notice our product is when there's a problem. If we can step into a problem situation and make their lives easier, then there's a great joy in doing that. Even if it costs me a thousand dollars, if it's the right thing to do then it's the right thing to do. Also, when your people see that, it's a good life lesson for them. (copier salesperson)

DISCUSSION

Just as the concept of servant-leadership has been shown to be a holistic concept encompassing a number of different leadership behaviors, this same holistic nature is seen in the behaviors of a serving salesperson. This study has revealed seven basic practices that serving salespeople employ to truly serve their customers. Many of these practices are similar to those that have been mentioned by other researchers—i.e., listening, empathy, awareness, foresight, and facilitating a common vision, to name a few (Spears 2002; Keith 2008). In addition, many of the key practices of servant-led organizations found by Glashagel (2009) were also similar to those of the serving salesperson—building trust, listening to customers, creating a favorable outcome with all business partners, and making life better for all the people and organizations they touch.



The term *serving salesperson*, rather than *servant salesperson*, has been used as *serving* indicates each of the seven practices involves taking a proactive approach to each sales interaction in order to bring to bear all the necessary resources that will help the customer accomplish their goals. These practices have implications for sales professionals, sales managers, and sales organizations. For salespeople, the concept of being a serving salesperson provides a basis for practices that can lead to mutually beneficial outcomes for themselves and their customers over the long term. These relationships are potentially more resilient, offer opportunities for increased margins, and may ultimately be more satisfying than those that are less mutually beneficial. For sales managers, there is an opportunity to assist salespeople in developing serving capabilities to support the longer-term view of relationships by setting and rewarding relational goals, utilizing tools such as customer profiles that include customer beliefs and goals, and creating a culture of serving on their teams. For sales organizations, the opportunities include identifying and selecting serving behaviors as a point of difference for the organization.

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The purpose of this article was to apply the principles of servant-leadership into the sales field and to serve as an initial attempt to define the key practices of a serving salesperson. A qualitative study with a convenience sample of salespeople who fit an initial profile of a “serving salesperson” was conducted. The responses were self-reflections of their own serving salesperson attitudes and behaviors. From this data, we created a list of serving sales practices.

Given the nature of the study and the sample, the findings may have limited generalizability. Yet, it serves as a starting point for future research. An attempt to replicate these findings with a larger, more cross-sectional sample can help verify, validate, or refute these findings. It would be helpful to know differences by age, gender, or experience as well as by industry type and selling setting—business to business or business to consumer.

An interesting followup to this study would involve conducting a similar type of data collection with those involved in purchasing to see how closely the attitudes and behaviors match up with those of the salespeople. It would also be useful to distinguish this approach from adaptive or relationship selling. There may be two related areas of difference that could be



tested by future research. First is the genuine nature of caring for customers that serving salespeople demonstrate. It may be that other types of selling demonstrate this caring only to the extent that it helps achieve sales volume targets within the salesperson-customer dyad. This may tie to concepts such as emotional labor and sincerity. The second area is that serving salespeople may prioritize the customer's needs over their own. This prioritization may be a distinguishing point for serving sales approaches compared to other approaches. Future research may also determine what type of training methods can be used to accelerate the learning of serving sales approaches. It would be useful to know whether these behaviors can arise from achieving a level of comfort and security that comes with experience and having established careers. Is being a serving salesperson a luxury that only salespeople who have otherwise established themselves can afford? Or is it a means to achieving sales success by prioritizing customer beliefs and goals? Finally, the information from these qualitative studies could provide a foundation for developing a "serving salesperson" scale similar in nature to the SLBS scale developed by Sendjaya and Cooper (2011). Such a scale could be useful for managers and sales professionals who seek to use a serving sales approach.

A natural extension of the servant-leadership construct is to apply these same principles of serving into the field of sales. Just as a servant-leader "serves" his or her associates, the serving salesperson truly does serve his or her customer base. This research identified seven distinct practices of serving salespeople. Salespeople can become familiar with these seven practices and endeavor to put them into practice in their daily activities. To some, this behavior will come naturally; others will have to extend more effort. However, the evidence reported here appears to indicate that those who do adopt these practices can truly experience the joy of serving.

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