

# Blending Customer-Orientated Sales, Servant Leadership, and Biblical Principles of Servanthood into a New Sales Framework: The Serving Salesperson

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper blends the philosophical concepts of customer-oriented sales and servant leadership together and combines that blend with biblical principles of servanthood to propose a “serving salesperson” framework for sales. After examining the literature on customer-oriented sales and servant leadership, the paper employs the results of a qualitative survey of a sample of Christian salespeople to identify the characteristics of a “serving salesperson.” The paper then goes on to offer a set of seven practices of the serving salesperson. Biblical illustrations of each of the seven practices are then offered.

## INTRODUCTION

The practice of customer-oriented selling (COS) has been defined as the implementation of the marketing concept at the level of the individual salesperson (Saxe & Weitz, 1982). COS has as its main premise that salesperson’s activities should focus on satisfying the customer’s needs rather than simply selling a product. Employing a customer orientation rather than a selling orientation has been found to assist organizations to increase customer loyalty and commitment (Rozell, Pettijohn, & Parker, 2004) as well as to increase sales performance (Jaramillo, et al., 2009b). Since it has been proposed as a concept, COS has been found to be a key practice in the era of relationship and consultative selling and has assisted salespeople in creating a competitive advantage by developing long-term relationships with their customers (Guenzi, DeLuca, & Troilo, 2011; Goad & Jaramillo, 2014).

A managerial philosophy that has been gaining recognition in the leadership arena that would parallel the customer-focused principles of COS would be the concept of servant leadership (Greenleaf 1970). 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 (Lanctot & Irving, 2010; Parris & Peachey, 2013). A number of studies have shown that servant leadership is conducive to creating an employee-friendly work environment that is evidenced by a high level of concern for others and a genuine desire to serve the customer (Hunter et al., 2013; Jaramillo et al., 2009a; Walumbwa, Harnell, & Oke, 2010). Servant leadership has been shown to foster a service climate where priority is placed on serving the customer, which ultimately results in higher performance (Hunter et al., 2013; Jaramillo et al., 2009a; Walumbwa, Harnell, & Oke, 2010), as well as promoting a collaborative environment that generates employee creativity and innovation (Yoshida et al., 2014). A connection between the elements of COS and servant leadership has been shown in a number of studies that found a customer-oriented culture positively affects salespeople’s COS (e.g., Cross et al., 2007; Flaherty, Dahlstrom, & Skinner, 1999). In a related vein, Siguaw, Brown, and Widing (1994) found that a selling firm’s marketing orientation positively affects the customer orientation of salespeople. Therefore, the blending together of the philosophies of servant leadership and customer-oriented selling into a new “servant selling” approach could set forth a framework for a sales force to reap the positive benefits of both approaches.

## OBJECTIVES OF PAPER

The concept of a “serving salesperson” was introduced by McQuiston, Lad, and Downey (2013), who conducted a qualitative research project and proposed seven practices of a serving salesperson based on that research. The objectives of this paper will be to 1) expand upon the McQuiston, Lad and Downey paper and show how those seven practices are rooted in biblical principles of servanthood and Scripture, 2) to show how the concepts of customer-oriented selling and servant leadership can be blended together to propose a servant selling framework for sales, and 3) to contribute to the field of Christian business education by providing Christian business educators with a scripturally based framework of servant selling that can be integrated into business classes in marketing and sales.

## BACKGROUND OF CUSTOMER-ORIENTED SALES

The concept of customer-oriented sales was introduced in the seminal paper by Saxe and Weitz (1982) to contrast with the traditional high-pressure approach to sales. The paper’s impact has been significant in that it was recognized as one of the “Top Ten” influential sales articles of the twentieth century (Leigh, Pullins, & Comer, 2001). Saxe and Weitz (1982) developed their selling orientation — customer orientation (SOCO) scale to assess the extent of a salesperson’s COS. That authors post that COS is related to a salesperson’s “concern for others” and “need satisfaction/problem solution selling approaches” (p. 344). Conversely, a selling orientation (SO) indicates a “concern for self” and is evidenced by generally aggressive sales behaviors that can lead to short-term sales. Those sales, however, are generally achieved at the expense of customer satisfaction (Saxe & Weitz, 1982).

Research has found that COS positively affects salesperson performance through various processes that involve employee attitudes, adaptive selling, stress, and engagement (e.g., Jarmillo et al., 2009b; Zablah et al., 2012; Grisaffe, VanMeter, & Chonko, 2016). Other studies have shown that having a COS leads to positive behavioral outcomes such as increased job performance (Franke & Parke, 2006). COS has also been found to help create an important class of relational selling behaviors (Flaherty, Dahlstrom, & Skinner 1999; Martin & Bush, 2003) and has been found to play a key role in implementing a company’s market orientation (Langerak 2001; Siguaw, Brown, & Widing, 1994). In addition, research has also generally found a negative relationship between SO and job performance (Goad & Jaramillo, 2014).

## BACKGROUND OF SERVANT LEADERSHIP

Servant leadership was introduced into the organizational leadership area through three essays by Robert Greenleaf: “The Servant as Leader” (1970), “The Institution as Servant” (1972a), and “Trustees as Servants” (1972b). Greenleaf’s description of servant leadership from his original essay, “The Servant as Leader” (1970):

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. (p. 15)

The concept of servant leadership has gained an increasing amount of influence in a broad spectrum of organizations around the world. In a systematic review of the literature on servant leadership, Paris and Peachy (2013) concluded that “servant leadership is a viable leadership theory that helps organizations and improves the well-being of followers” (p. 377).

Other researchers (Speers 1995, 1998, 2004; Laub, 1999) have proposed frameworks that further identify the characteristics of servant leadership from Greenleaf’s writings. 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 (2008) puts it very succinctly – a servant leader is very simply “a leader who is focused on serving others” (p. 9).

## SERVANT LEADERSHIP IN THE SALES ARENA

An increasing number of researchers have studied the impact of servant leadership in the sales arena. Jaramillo et al. (2009a) found a servant leadership approach by sales managers positively impacted a customer orientation of salespeople, which in turn drove sales performance outcomes. Schwepker and Schultz (2015) propose that servant leadership appears to be an appropriate method for attempt-

ing to create value for the customer in a sales situation where relational selling is growing in importance. Grisaffe, VanMeter, and Chonko (2016) found a servant leadership sales approach produced incremental gains in salesperson performance, organizational citizenship behaviors, and corporate social responsibility.

### COS AND SERVANT LEADERSHIP

COS and servant leadership are related in that the philosophy of servant leadership fosters a service climate that ultimately results in higher employee performance, including salespeople (Hunter et al., 2013; Jaramillo et al., 2009; Walumbwa, Harnell, & Oke, 2010), and customer-oriented selling transfers this same philosophy to the actions of the sales force (Guenzi, DeLuca, & Troilo, 2011). Bande et al. (2016) found that servant leadership enhanced the adaptability and proactivity of salespeople by positively affecting their self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation. The connection between servant leadership and COS has progressed to the point where both practitioners (Pink, 2013) and academic researchers (Jamillo, Bende, & Varela 2015) are calling for more research to examine the connection between these two philosophies. Pink (2013) puts it this way:

The time is ripe for the sales version of Greenleaf's philosophy. Call it servant selling. It begins with the idea that those who move others aren't manipulators, but servants. The serve first and sell later. (p. 217)

Therefore, it would appear that if a firm can blend together the customer-focused philosophies of customer-oriented sales practices with those of servant leadership, a sales framework could be created within the sales force that provides the firm with opportunities to develop a competitive advantage in the marketplace.

### THE SPIRITUAL SIDE OF SERVANT LEADERSHIP

Robert Greenleaf's Quaker roots are clearly present in his writings on servant leadership. In addition, the principles behind servant leadership are found in the teaching of many of the world's religions as well as statements of a number of great leaders and thinkers (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002). Keith (2008) points out that the concept of servant leadership is found in the messages of such notables as Mother Theresa, Moses, Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and a number of other religious, historic, and current leaders.

A number of other scholars have used Jesus Christ's teaching both—to His disciples and the crowds He addressed

— as the ultimate example of servant leadership (Ebener & O'Connell, 2010; Lanctot & Irving, 2010; Hamilton & Bean, 2005; Winston, 2004). In her dissertation, Patterson (2003) proposes her leader-follower model of servant leadership where the interaction starts with the leader's *agapao*' (love for others) where she uses the seven beatitudes of Jesus' sermon on the mount in Matthew 5 as her basis for this *agapao*'—being teachable, showing concern for others, demonstrating discipline, seeking the greatest good for the organization, showing mercy in actions and beliefs with all people; meeting the needs of followers and the organization, and creating a place where peace grows within the organization. Parris and Peachy (2013) concluded that earlier studies (Winston, 2004; Dingman & Stone, 2007) have confirmed the applicability of the following variables in both of these models: trust, empowerment, vision, altruism, intrinsic motivation, commitment, and service. As with the fundamental principles of servant leadership, this spiritual dimension is based on an all-encompassing desire and willingness to serve others in the same manner that Jesus taught.

In addition, two recent publications have appeared with the titles "Selling the Right Way Prayerfully God's Way" (Abraham, 2011) and "Selling God's Way" (Hamer, 2015). Both authors propose similar frameworks for engaging in the sales process, and their frameworks are similar in that both encourage the salesperson to begin with a Christ-centered focus. They both then proceed through their frameworks, Abraham with his BUILDER model and Hamer with his seven-step process. Both authors support their respective frameworks with scriptural passages.

### THE SERVING SALESPERSON

The major premise of this paper is that blending the customer-focused approaches of COS and servant leadership together can produce a framework for a serving salesperson. These philosophies would posit that such a salesperson engages the same type of serving behaviors that have been found in research in the COS and servant leadership arenas — having a customer orientation, showing a genuine concern for customer, listening, being authentic, and demonstrating empathy, to name a few.

Robert Greenleaf's definition of a servant leader was reflected in the serving attitude of the leader that was cited above. With acknowledgement to Greenleaf, the following definition of a serving salesperson using a format similar to the one he used to define a servant leader is proposed:

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 his or her customers to the best of his or her 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 the sales quota, or gain some personal recognition. The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the serving salesperson to ensure that the 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 that the chosen term here is a "serving salesperson" rather than "servant salesperson." The reason for this terminology is that "serving" is an active verb, signifying the salesperson is continually taking proactive measures to meet the needs and wants of his or her customer base. While other theories of sales behavior are traditionally defined by what the salesperson *does*, the serving salesperson is defined what the salesperson *is*, by their character and complete commitment to serving others.

## METHODOLOGY

In an effort to better define the constructs of the serving salesperson framework, a qualitative research project was undertaken to attempt to gain a better understanding of the key components and practices that are exhibited by serving salespeople. According to Yin (2003), case studies can be helpful in providing more complete details of a phenomenon and can assist researchers in defining or modifying explanatory models. This study uses Yin's single-case revelatory study approach to define the attributes engaged in by those individuals identified as serving salespeople.

Through the personal experience of some thirty years of teaching sales and marketing, the author identified four salespeople who are committed believers with a strong spiritual foundation. The author also knew from personal experience and observation that these four had a personal philosophy of engaging in a serving attitude with their customers. Open-ended interviews were conducted with these four salespeople 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 to conduct further research was developed (see

Appendix A). 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 and suggested a few changes to the questionnaire, which were implemented.

Personal interviews with these same four individuals were then conducted, focused around obtaining their responses to these questions. After these interviews were 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 who they felt also exhibited the qualities of a serving salesperson. As the intent of the research was to obtain a biblically based approach to serving the customer, a stipulation was that all subsequent interviewees would also have to be known to be committed believers.

Once the contact information for these additional respondents was secured, they were sent an e-mail explaining the purpose of the research and asking for permission to interview them for the project. If an interview time was not set up in the initial email, the individuals were contacted by telephone and an interview time arranged. The potential respondents were then sent an additional email confirming the date and time of the interview along with the list of the questions they were to be asked in the interview.

Forty-four people were contacted initially and asked to participate in the study. Ten either declined or were unavailable during the time period of the research. The remaining 34 agreed to be interviewed. Thirty-three interviews were conducted. Eight interviews were conducted in person with the remainder being conducted by telephone. Interviews ranged in duration from seven to 53 minutes, with the average interview lasting just under 20 minutes. Of the respondents, 25 were male and eight were female. The age range was from 27 to 62. Twenty-six of the respondents were Caucasian, three were of Latino heritage, three were of Asian heritage, and one was Afro-American. 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 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 reviewed

the notes and clarified any points, quotes, or examples given by the respondent. When all the interviews were completed, responses were collated first by respondent and then by question. The responses were then content-analyzed first by the author and then a colleague. The analysis of the results indicated that there are seven basic practices that serving salespeople engage in during the course of their selling activities:

- Set Serving as their “True North”
- Carry a Passion for Selling
- Sharpen their EQ (Emotional Quotient)
- Grow the Trust
- Meet the Unmet Need
- Create the Wins
- Share the Joy

These practices mirror many of the basic attributes that previous research showed are exhibited by customer-oriented salespeople and serving leaders. Each practice will be described and illustrated by paraphrased quotes from the respondents. Verses from Scripture will then be provided that further illustrate the biblical nature of serving.

### THE SEVEN PRACTICES OF A SERVING SALESPERSON

#### *Practice One: Set Serving as Your “True North”*

Just as there is a natural law of true north, so does each individual need a “true north” to guide his or her everyday activities. For the serving salesperson, this comes directly from having a COS orientation and exemplifies a steadfast, unchanging, and unwavering philosophy of serving his or her customers and having as their primary motivation an overarching desire to meet their customers’ needs to the best of their ability.

**“The greatest among you will be your servant” (Matthew 23:11).**

The practice of a salesperson setting his or her “true north” around serving the 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, 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.

**“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but each of you to the interests of others.”**  
Philippians 2:3-4

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

A lot of it is praying before you go into a meeting, and let God take over what will happen in a meeting. It may go totally different than you had planned. Lots of time I ask questions, have an open mind and let the meeting go wherever the Lord wants you to go. (machine tool salesperson)

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)

I have my own personal mission statement, and part of my own mission statement is to bring honor and glory to God and that I will love and encourage all that I come in contact with on a daily basis. Personally, if I’m not doing that, then in all that I do I don’t feel fulfilled. (franchise manager)

**“Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2).**

#### *Practice Two: Carry a Passion for Serving*

Once the serving salesperson has set the true north of serving the customer, they must find the motivation to fulfill that vision. Research has shown that having a passion for sales is a factor in successfully setting sales goals (Jensen, 2004), in evaluating successful job candidates (Jia, Xu, & Wu, 2014), and in developing a customer-oriented sales approach (Han & Hwang, 2012). 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.

**“Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord” (Romans 12:11).**

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.

**“Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Corinthians 9:7).**

This passion to serve shows itself clearly when the sales process is not going well for either the sales person or the customer. Through this adversity, the sales person 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 increase the lifetime value 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:

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)

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)

My passion is Christ, and to serve, and I know this is where I'm supposed to be. I really try and follow my calling, and I felt that God was working through others to move me to another place. KYEOJ – Keep your eyes on Jesus. The abundant life, the fruit of the spirit, the only way you can get that is by abiding in the vine. That fruitful life has nothing to do with your income. (business consultant)

**“Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you” (Matthew 5:42).**

### ***Practice Three: Sharpen Your EQ***

Just as individuals have an IQ (an Intellectual Quotient) telling them how “intellectually smart” they are, they also

have an EQ (an Emotional Quotient) that tells them how “emotionally smart” they 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.

**“Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms” (I Peter 4:10).**

Emotional intelligence in sales people has been linked to longer-term customer views and customer orientations that lead to higher levels of sales effectiveness (Rozell, Pettijohn, & Parker, 2004), and salespeople with higher emotional intelligence employ more customer-oriented sales practices (Kidwell et al., 2011).

**“You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love” (Galatians 5:13).**

Daniel Goleman (1998), 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 one's 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

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 ... this started a relationship where he eventually accepted Christ.” (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)

The willingness to understand and serve others has to be from God because we will become selfish and self-serving if we don’t. It’s only if we’re in a right relationship with Him that we can realize the eternal impacts of our actions with people that each of us are given different skills, abilities and gifts that are to be used for His purpose. Any other is our own selfish motives and intents. If we can’t keep in the forefront the number of people that have to be have an impact for cause of Christ, then it’s fruitless. (printing products salesperson)

**“We have different gifts, according to the grace given us ... if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully” (Romans 12:6-8).**

#### ***Practice Four: Grow the Trust***

A well-accepted maxim in sales is that buyers will buy from salespeople they like and trust, so establishing trust early on in the relationship is critical to establishing the salesperson’s sales effectiveness.

**“Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much” (Luke 16:10).**

Establishing trust in the sales process has been the subject of a number of different studies. In a meta-analysis of the literature on trust in the salesperson, Swan, Bowers and Richardson (1999) found that salesperson trust had a beneficial influence on the development of positive customer attitudes, intentions, and behavior, and that salespeople have modest influence over the development of trust between themselves and their customers. Guenzi, Johnson, and Castaldo (2009) found that in a retail setting, establishing salesperson trust with their customers resulted in positive evaluations of the salesperson and the brand. Doney and Cannon (1999) found that trust of the supplier firm

and trust of the salesperson influence a buyer’s anticipated future interaction with the selling firm. Hart and Johnson (1999) found that a salesperson who established trusting relationships with their customers were less likely to take advantage of those customers.

**“Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful” (I Corinthians 4:2).**

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. 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:

You want to treat people like you would expect to be treated and apply Christian principles. Don’t mislead, don’t misrepresent. If I say I’m doing to do it, I will. Everything gets represented at the same level of effort. (auctioneer)

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)

If you’re creating an environment that based around serving, then forcing something that isn’t right won’t be in the best interest of both parties and that destroys trust. Why do I need to worry about closing the deal? God is in the position to make it happen. If you’re going to be a servant, then you have to take what that gives you. If you’re dependent on Christ, then you have to trust Him and be willing to see where that leads you next. (physician)

**“But you must remain faithful to the things you have been taught. You know they are true, for you know you can trust those who taught you” (2 Timothy 2:14).**

#### ***Practice Five: Meet their Unmet Need***

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’ *primary 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 these recently learned 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*—their unmet needs.

**“Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men” (Colossians 3:23).**

Chang, Liu, and Haung (2013) found that by asking more questions in a sales presentation, they were able to identify opportunities for additional management development courses. Malhotra and Berger (2016) found that a company selling automotive equipment was able to sell more product by “digging deeper” to discover the additional needs of their distributors. Trim and Lee (2014) found that implementing a more intensive questioning strategy uncovered more sales opportunities for companies.

When the product (or service) is delivered to the front door of the customer, other than a few follow-up 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 (Whiteley & Hessian, 1996). 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. Thus, they may have unmet needs, which often center around discovering the best way to use the product's or service's key value proposition.

**“Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you” (Matthew 5:42).**

The serving salesperson recognizes this as an opportunity to meet their customers' unmet needs. Very often, the salesperson or the salesperson's company has adjacent expertise that can be adapted to facilitate the customers' value creation process. The serving salesperson realizes this and continues to ask questions, to seek ways to go the extra mile to help their customers meet these unmet needs.

The serving salespeople in this study realized the importance of meeting their customers' unmet needs:

You have to have a servant's heart to begin with. There's too many people who are just out to close the next deal. If I go into something what motivates me is that God put this on me. I have a great job that God put me in and this is what I am supposed to be doing. God wants us to be dependent on Him for 100% of

everything. If we're using John 14:10 as a motto, then with I look at a deal, I look at what I would want if that guy was talking to me.... (physician)

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)

You keep your passion by realizing that that is what I'm good at. God has wired me this way. For me it's always very exciting when I meet that unmet need and knowing that we were the people who got it done. (business consultant).

**“This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God” (2 Corinthians 9:12).**

#### ***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 there are only two parties affected by the outcome—the financial performances of both the salesperson's company and customer's company. 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.

**“Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you” (Luke 6:38).**

Bright, Fry, and Cooperrinder (2006) found that when business organizations work together to engage in transformative innovations in social, environmental, or ethical situations, both parties benefit. McCarthy-Byrne and Mentzer (2011) found that integrating supply chain elements across organizations resulted in greater efficiency for both parties.

A serving salesperson will seek to go much broader and deeper in creating mutually beneficial exchanges, rather than just creating a “win” for their and their customer's organization. The serving salesperson seeks to understand *all* the relevant stakeholders that 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 their own organization and its employees, the employees of the purchasing organization, the customers of the purchasing organization, the employees and the organizations 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 who will be impacted by the decision.

**“We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves” (Romans 15:1).**

The serving salespeople in this study addressed ‘creating the wins’ in this manner:

There was a day when I was very numbers driven and I worried about it all the time. I had to hit a number so I would earn so much. When the Holy Spirit came into my heart, I now knew that there was a God who loved me, and He wasn’t calling me to be successful; He was calling me to be faithful. Now my perspective has changed, and I learned His promises—seek first the kingdom of God to be an obedient servant. (machine tool salesperson)

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).

I try to be like Jesus, the humble and obedient servant, even in the littlest of ways—calling, telling the customer that I’m thinking about them. People want to have a relationship with others who show a genuine, sincere, caring attitude for them. God is faithful in His promises and provided for me, and I’ve learned to be much more content. (industrial parts salesperson).

**“Contribute to the needs of saints and seek to show hospitality” (Romans 12:13).**

### ***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 and meet their needs to the best of their ability.

**“Rejoice with those who rejoice” (Romans 12:15).**

Parasuraman and Grewal (2000) propose a framework for how companies can increase the satisfaction of

their employees by better serving their customers. Adams, Draper, and Hairston (2006) found that a number of counselors experienced great joy in serving their clients and were able to share that joy with them. Redmer (2009) found that even when a retail store was having great difficulty, the owners still found great joy in serving their customers.

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.

**“Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete” (John 16:24).**

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

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 (James 1:22). Give and it shall be given – if you give it away you get it back. It’s built in every human being that we’re built in the image of God and if we serve others we are serving Him. (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)

Absolutely, I find great joy in serving. There is a joy in finding a solution for them, in simplifying their life and having a product that’s going to free up their practice. God is your method throughout the sales process. You can get happiness from a big commission, but there’s no joy there. God wants to be your method in all things. (copier salesperson)

**“Well done, good and faithful servant!” (Matthew 25:21).**

## **DISCUSSION**

The philosophies of customer-oriented selling and servant leadership have been shown through research to

create a climate within an organization that demonstrates a high level of concern for others and a sincere motivation to serve the customer. Studies have also shown that establishing such a climate places a higher priority on serving the customer, which ultimately creates greater value for that customer. Blending these two philosophies together would achieve the best of both worlds, and by companies establishing a serving salesperson framework the chances of accomplishing that increase.

The McQuiston, Lad, and Downey (2013) study represented an initial attempt to define the serving salesperson concept and set forth seven practices that those individuals employed during their selling processes. As the salespeople interviewed for this study indicated, they were believers. This study attempted to describe the spiritual perspective these salespeople employed when using these seven practices. Examining their responses indicated behaviors that incorporated both the customer-oriented sales and servant-leadership philosophies and did so within a spiritual framework.

It is important to note that 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 like 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 objective of this article was to attempt to blend the philosophies of customer-oriented selling and 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, a list of serving sales practices was created. The fact that the respondents indicated they were believers and also given the fact that many of their responses had a spiritual nature to them indicates that being such a serving salesperson can be done with a biblical perspective.

Given the nature of the study and the sample, the findings may have limited generalizability and may also be biased toward the “serving” philosophy as the respondents had been identified as serving salespeople. 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 follow-up 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 like emotional labor and sincerity. The second area is that serving salespeople would in all likelihood 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.

**“For he is God’s servant to do you good” (Romans 13:4).**

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## APPENDIX A:

### 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 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.