Appreciative Selling – Unleash Client Potential to Increase Sales
By Ralph Weickel, Performance Management

With early sign that the economy globally and nationally is improving, it is time for sales managers to review their sales practices and processes. Are these practices going to capture a growing market share, will they be able to identify customer aspirations and more importantly will they deliver results – I hope so and if they are not it is time for a revolution in sales and sales management – the practice of Appreciative Selling. Appreciative Selling will unleash your client’s potential for increased sales and bring out the “best” in the sales team and the client relationship.

The Classic Sales Process- its strengths and limitations
Sales and the business of selling continue to be the driver of business and salespeople the link that generates business. While the business climate and environment has changed dramatically in the last ten years, the sales profession has changed, slightly primarily tweaked itself and re-inventing a new name for old processes. The sales profession still relies on the "classic" steps of the sales process:

a.) Prospecting/cold calling
b.) Assessing opportunity
c.) Identifying solutions
d.) Building advocacy
e.) Negotiating
f.) Closing

The strength of this process is that it is easy to implement, measure and monitor, allowing sales managers to check behavior against a set of expected actions. The process even works for some industries, albeit in limited quantities, such as commodity products or services where price and availability are frequently the primary drivers. In addition, salespeople can follow these steps using the "numbers" to achieve a modicum of success if they make enough calls.

The limitations for this process are obvious; from not being reflective of today’s more complex sales environment, to customers revolting over the process of “being sold,” and a sales staff that is de-motivated. In working with a sales organization, the sales leader would ask for a minimum number of daily and weekend calls; publically displaying the results. This in a business where the average sale was six figures. Results were abysmal. The sales staff went through the motions, as opposed to getting results. It is an example of the classic process fueled by the classic sales manager - having poor results with negative ripple effects.

It is time for a change. More than a change – it is time for a revolution in the sales process, the action of sales staff, and sales leaders.
Appreciative Inquiry: A Generative Process for Sales Success
Appreciative Inquiry is a relational tool that allows people to interact in a manner that fosters the “best” in relationships. It is the art and practice of asking the unconditional positive questions that strengthen a system’s capacity to apprehend, anticipate and heighten positive potential. Instead of negation, criticism, and spiraling diagnosis, there is discovery, dream, design, and destiny. It works from accounts of the “positive core” of organizations or systems. The practice of Appreciative Inquiry has its origin in large-scale change initiatives where it has had immeasurable success. As Appreciate Inquiry evolves, its application is being used in a growing number of applications and disciplines from leadership and coaching to IT implementation and sales.

This article addresses the application of Appreciative Inquiry practices to sales and sales management and lays out a systematic process for strengthening individual and organizational sales skills. The premise for this is based on a series of interviews conducted with high performers (top 5% of their respective organizations) from a broad cross section of industries along with the thirty-year sales experience of the author. These interviews, conducted in 2010 and 2011, provide the data, which is the basis for the development of the concept of Appreciative Selling that marries the principles of Appreciative Inquiry and the discipline of sales. The industries that participated in the interviews include: healthcare, tele-communications, publishing, education, pharmaceutical, outplacement, agri-feed, and manufacturing. Individual interviews were conducted with sales staff, sales managers, regional sales managers, and global sales managers. The interview protocol was based on a series of questions, which included:

- A highpoint sales experience
- Unique sales attributes
- Significant influences on sales career
- How sales brings forth the best individually
- Bringing forth the best in clients during the sales process

The responses from these questions became the basis for Appreciative Selling. It is noteworthy that the patterns and similarities emerged quickly and are striking across multiple industries.
Lessons Learned from Sales Success Stories
The interviews with the high performing sales individuals brought forth specific behaviors that were engaged consistently. While some of these behaviors will seem obvious, it was their method of application and their consistency that allowed them to enliven the sales process. The identified behaviors were:

- Looking for and believing the “best” in a client
  “…having the ability to walk in the client’s shoes and see the opportunity.”
- Establishing “deep” relationships while achieving an unparalled understanding of the clients business
  “…the relationships were uplifting and the meetings transitioned to focusing on the future.”
- Asking opportunity questions
  “…asking the focused question and those opening the door to potential.”
- Painting a vivid picture of the desired outcome
  “…communication allowed customers dreams to become real.”
- Focusing on the success of the client and enlivening the client’s “best”
  “…having the highest expectations of the client’s best brought value.”
- Providing the unexpected
  “…we did not expect this and as a result brought them back.”

The Key Findings from the Interviews
Appreciative Inquiry is a generative process, which allows for deep relationships that are based on trust and a mutual interest in learning - who each person or organization is - at their best. It is an inquiry into what gives life and energy to the organization and allows it to reach its potential. The 4-D Model of Appreciative Inquiry is the framework for the generative process and is

- Discover – who we are at our best or highest performance
- Dream – envisioning the ideal state
- Design – implementing the social architecture to support the dream
- Destiny – monitoring and supporting the new process/structure

The Appreciative Inquiry 4-D Model served as the basis for creating the Appreciative Selling Model and Processes. The generative nature of appreciative inquiry is what is the foundation of the Appreciative Selling Model – a generative appreciative conversation that facilitates a new relationship between client and salesperson.
Appreciative Selling
Appreciative Selling is defined as – “the ability to unleash client potential in a creative manner that embraces the strengths of the client and salesperson to reach new heights of sales success.” Appreciative Selling is focused on positioning oneself as THE person or business to engage regarding a particular solution or need. It is about being perceived by clients as the “best” resource to partner with to achieve the desired outcomes. Appreciative Selling is about responding in a manner to opportunities presented by clients that nurture and energize the “best” in both while strengthening sales revenue.

These behaviors when married with the 4-D model of Appreciative Inquiry provide a new sales model – Appreciative Selling:

Discover – the best of the client, the business, and past success
- Looking for and believing the “best” in the client contact
- Establishing “deep” relationships and achieving an unparalleled understanding of the clients business
- Asking opportunity questions

Dream – a vivid image of future success
- Painting a vivid picture of the desired outcome, which addresses both business results and future strategic objectives

Design – identifying the solutions that unleash the client’s potential
- Providing solutions that enlivening the client’s best and builds on their organizational strengths

Destiny – implementing the solutions in a cooperative process
- Focused on the success of the client
- Providing the unexpected

The Appreciative Selling Model and the accompanying process creates a new relationship between client and salesperson along with the salesperson and their sales manager ➔ all are now engaged in co-creating their desired futures through an aligned methodology that results in increased sales.
The interviews clearly identified the value of the Discovery process for it is where a tremendous amount of time and energy were spent. To paraphrase one individual – “until I understand my client’s business better than they do, I have no business making any recommendations or proposing solutions.” The discovery phase is the foundation of appreciative selling as it provides the information necessary for the subsequent steps in the Appreciative Selling process. To take a step back, Appreciative Selling is a sales process and it was clear from the interviews that high performing sales people have a process they utilize to achieve success. There is a plethora of business literature that outlines a multitude of sales processes and provides tools for the application of such processes. The fundamental difference between these processes and the Appreciative Selling process is the unwavering focus of Appreciative Selling on unleashing the client’s potential and bringing their aspiration to fruition which will
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increase sales and revenue. Appreciative Selling is a mind-set as much as it is a collection of tools.

High performing sales people not only had the client’s best interest as their focus, they wanted the client to unleash their potential and be their best. How is such a mindset achieved and then expressed in communication with the client? Individuals engaged in Appreciative Selling have an internal conversation regarding the client and the sales engagement around what is in the best interest of the client, what will unleash their potential, and what will make them wildly successful? The internal dialogue is asking the unconditional positive question regarding the client’s potential, needs and opportunities, recognizing this will results in stronger sales. The data supports these statements, as the focus was not on obstacles or hindrances by the salespeople when interacting with clients. The high performing sales people saw the sales engagement as a series of opportunities to deepen the relationship with the client and demonstrate their value and enliven future states. These individuals did not view themselves as ‘salespeople’ rather as partners or consultants who position themselves as a resource that provides support and addresses opportunities. The differentiation of appreciative selling is based on the internal dialogue, which allows these individuals to position themselves in the mind of clients as partners and a trusted resource.

Appreciative Selling is about building relationships and market position with the client. The classic vision of sales is perceived as being geared to the salesperson achieving their objectives or sales goals often with limited regard to the client’s needs. Appreciative Selling is completely focused on the client and establishing mutually beneficial relationships. The market position of an Appreciative Salesperson is as a partner or consultant that the individual achieves through addressing and seeing the potential in any given situation. This relationship is achieved through Appreciative Conversations where the salesperson not only learns the business of the client; they learn the motivators of the contact and are able to bring the appropriate ideas and resources to the discussion. As one individual stated in their interview - “I never ask for the order as my client will ask me for the product or service they need – then I deliver what they need; it is all based on my conversations with the client and having a thorough knowledge of their current and future goals and strategic position.”

It becomes evident that the “classic” sales process itself does not foster the type of relationships or market position that will allow either client or sales person to bring their “best” to the discussion/interaction. Appreciative Selling is not only about changing the sales dialogue; it is about using a completely new sales process. A process that will foster each party having honest and informative dialogue while nurturing the relationship to allow each party to have their needs met. The Appreciative Sales process can be distilled into the following:
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- Sales strength identification
- Account profile
- Inquiry/Appreciative Conversations
- Relationship Building
- Opportunity Discussion
- Collaboration
- Fulfilling the Ideal State
- Continued exploration

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Benefits of Appreciative Selling
The first focus of the Appreciative Sales process is to identify who the salesperson is at their best; and what sales scenarios bring forth their best. Identifying sales strengths and collating those to the ideal account profile allows the relationship between the sales person and the client to develop in a more holistic manner. The first interaction between the sales person and the client is focused on establishing the foundation of a long-term relationship through the inquiry of who the client is at their best; learning the strengths of the client and what scenario’s allow them to excel. During this stage the Appreciative Salesperson is asking questions that are unconditionally positive, which allows the client to state their ideal situation. This type of conversation fosters a level of discussion that allows for an exploration of possibilities and options. The Appreciative Sales process is expansive initially for it allows the client to explore options and re-define the opportunities. The Appreciative Salesperson is a keen listener during this stage and asks generative questions to gain maximum information.

The sales discussion moves from identification of opportunities to collaboration between the client and the salesperson. The research shows that Appreciative
Salespeople consistently are able to collaborate with their clients and are viewed as partners who work in the best interest of the client. The creation of a collaborative partnership changes the dynamics of the client – salesperson relationship and allows for dialogue that is future focused. The client now has a partner who is committed to their success and an advocate for their strategy. The actual sale becomes a simple culmination of multiple Appreciative conversations and is more of logical next steps as opposed to a negotiated process. The Appreciative Salesperson excels at continued exploration as he/she learns more about the client; focusing on continual inquiry regarding the client’s “best” and their strategic objectives. The exploration takes multiple forms and the research shows it is consistently executed in a manner that resonates and nurtures the client’s strengths.

Appreciative Selling is based on the belief and supported by research. Appreciative conversations between the client and the salesperson are the foundation upon which a long-term relationship that is mutually beneficial is built. This long-term relationship is what sets the high-performing salesperson apart from the rest and allows trust to be created and re-created during every interaction. The beauty of the Appreciative Sales process is that it creates long-term relationships based on honesty, respect and an appreciation of who each partner is at their best and a desire to nurture that. While the language may make a sales manager or two uncomfortable – the single greatest benefit is that the Appreciative Selling process delivers long-term results and reduces turnover in the sales staff and the client.

Applications of Appreciative Selling
Appreciative Selling is applicable in all sales scenarios from short sales cycles to long sales cycles, from complex sales to commodity sales. Through the application of the Appreciative Selling Model, the relational capacity of the sale is nurtured as two individuals first discover what is working and what the potential is before moving into crafting the ideal solution. Repeatedly, buyers and sales people have stated that they desire a relationship built on trust and a sense that they matter as individuals – this is were the Appreciative Salesperson excels – “…trust is created by focusing on the client and the long-term.” The simple beauty of implementing the Appreciative Sales process is that the engagement between client and salesperson will be forever strengthened and results improve – “When I do ‘right’ by the client regardless… the money always follows.”

The implementation of the Appreciative Sales process requires patience and acceptance that the mind-shift required will not occur instantly by the sales staff. Regardless, it will occur as sales managers stay focused. Sales managers need to have first their own mind-shift. Thus allowing them to focus on the best in the salesperson; and how to bring forth their strengths, in order to permit them to
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align accounts with those strengths. An Appreciative conversation between the sales staff and the sales manager is the genesis of the implementation process.

Conclusion
In a rapidly changing business climate, where pressure to perform is increasing and tomorrow’s competition unknown, Appreciative Selling provides a fundamental shift in the client/salesperson relationship, which together allows them to co-create the future that meets both their needs in a complimentary manner. Furthermore the Appreciative Selling shifts the conversation among sales person and sales manager to a co-creation of their strategic objectives.

Appreciative Selling Tools
When implementing the Appreciative Selling Model, the following tools will aid in the transition and facilitate a focus on desired outcomes and processes. These tools have been “field” tested and deliver results for the user.

- The Appreciative Conversation – the dialogue between the client and salesperson that is focused on discovering the clients strength, who they are at their best and what their desired outcomes are
- The Appreciative Sales Mind – the shifting internal conversation from what can I sell to how can I be of service
- Positive Questions – the questions that address potential, opportunity and what more is desired when all opportunities are captured
- Account Profiles – in addition to the classic (sales volume, products, profitability, etc.) items, topics such as strengths, industry opportunities, strategic vision and the ‘best’ state is included
- The Appreciative Sales Model – a sales process that not only unleashes potential it provides a step-by-step process for doing this
- The Unexpected – what can the individual sales people do to set them apart and move the client organization forward
- Success Metrics – establish metrics that address the client relationship beyond sales volume/profits and focus on long-term collaboration