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Sales

The Innovative Sale

Unleash Your Creativity for Better Customer Solutions and Extraordinary Results

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Why do sales teams tend to repeat the same approaches and offer customer solutions that lack new ideas? Why do sales leaders gravitate to “the way we’ve always done it,” leaving the organization vulnerable to competition? Regardless of whether you think of yourself as a “creative person,” your job as a sales professional demands creativity and innovation. If you want to join the top echelon of performers, you (and your team) need to blend both left-brain and right-brain thinking to develop better answers for your customers or market that differentiate you from the competition.

In *The Innovative Sale*, sales and creativity expert Mark Donnolo provides a fresh, dynamic approach for addressing your customers’ needs while expanding your entire way of thinking. *The Innovative Sale* arms you with everyday tools you can use to push your thinking and develop better ideas, create winning strategies and grow revenue.

Most salespeople veer toward one of two extremes: operating analytically ... or by the seats of their pants. This groundbreaking guide equips you with the proven, results-oriented techniques you need to incorporate creativity into your sales practices, better understand your customers, and develop stronger value propositions. Prepare yourself for a sales innovation breakthrough!

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- How to recognize and use functional creativity in sales.
- The six Innovative Sale principles and their practical applications in business.
- How to define sales challenges, destroy false constraints, and mine parallel situations for fresh solutions.
- Apply Innovative Sale principles to create better value propositions and assess your team’s Creative Quotient for Sales.



by Mark Donnolo

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THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: THE INNOVATIVE SALE

by Mark Donnolo

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The Sales Innovation Dilemma

Almost everyone has perceptions about what creativity is and how innovation is born, based on their own experiences. Teresa Amabile is the Edsel Bryant Ford professor of business administration in the entrepreneurial management unit at Harvard Business School and a director of research there. According to Amabile, creativity is not necessarily the result of an eccentric personality or of art, or even a sign of intelligence. Neither, she wrote, is creativity inherently good.

This insight highlights an important point: Misperception about creativity and innovation are common and may lead the sales organization in the wrong direction or prevent you from incorporating creativity into your sales practices altogether.

There are some surprising ways creativity can be applied to the sales environment. But first, let's look at a few perceptions and realities.

Perception: You have to be born with creativity.

Reality: Most creators and innovators have learned how to be creative.

Perception: Creative ideas come from eureka moments.

Reality: Creative moments are usually the culmination of a creative problem-solving progression.

Perception: You have to work in a heralded innovative organization in order to be creative.

Reality: Any organization can adopt innovative practices, and any individual can use creative methods independently.

Perception: Innovation doesn't apply to sales.

Reality: Innovation wins deals.

Perception: Creativity is creativity; it's all the same.

Reality: All creativity is not created equal.

When you think about creativity and innovation, names like Jackson Pollack or Walt Whitman may come to mind. These talented people were famous for their artistic creativity.

Artistic creativity has limited application in a sales environment, which is marked by goals, expectations and objectivity. Sales organizations demand a different type of creativity. Functional creativity is defined by its objective outcomes. With functional creativity, there *is* a right answer. In art school, everyone in a class can feel something different about a project's end result; but in a sales environment, you want everyone to see the same picture.

The Dilemma of Constraints

To solve the sales innovation dilemma, it's also necessary to make peace with the many constraints and limitations in the work of a sales organization, such as customer requirements, organization limitations, supplier capabilities, time, price, quota, competitive environment and cost.

Constraints enable creativity. It sounds like a paradox, but think about it. Without constraints, options are unlimited. For example, if your customer needs a new customer relationship management (CRM) system and has no budget or time constraints, it would be easy to sell them a product. It's more likely your customer has a tight budget, a three-month time frame, and must get approval from the CFO, who may or may not be a fan of your product. It will take creativity to devise a sales strategy



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to close the deal. When a team is faced with constraints, it often pushes a little harder to come up with something more creative than it might not have otherwise developed.

The Dilemma of Personality

Innovative ideas for sales organizations require the best of both brains: the left brain's ability to work within the constraints of a process and sales context and the right brain's inclination to think freely. But salespeople often overemphasize the pipeline and analytics or work too intuitively, shooting from the hip. Or, a sales organization over-rotates, bringing the right-brain artistic ideas to the forefront and promptly confusing everyone.

Finding equilibrium is an important step in solving the sales innovation dilemma. The truth is, salespeople usually lean either toward analytical or intuitive thinking. Some are hybrids. These lucky few do an impressive job of balancing both kinds of qualities in their work. But for the most part, salespeople, sales teams and sales executives tend to operate either analytically, reproducing the same answers and working the numbers, or intuitively, selling without a methodology they can use consistently. ●

The Innovative Sale Principles

There are six Innovative Sale principles — inspired by principles of art — and each one has three imperatives that explain how the principle applies to developing solutions in a sales environment.

Principle 1: Pattern

In sales, pattern refers to our instinct to find related ideas in any given situation. Faced with a problem, our minds first begin flipping through our own portfolio of experiences; finding no suitable solution, we may jump to stories we've heard from those around us or examples from the past. We are seeking a match, preferably one that carries an answer we can apply to our current situation.

The following three imperatives offer some specifics on how a sales organization can use pattern as a foundation for innovative thinking:

1. Get Comfortable with Feeling Lost: In challenging customer situations that demand something different to keep the business or win it in a competitive situation, sales teams typically lock in on an answer from a menu of choices they've used before. If they temporarily step off the map of their expertise, they quickly retreat. Don't retreat too early. When you've exhausted your first round

of typical solutions, tally up the hours spent. Then take an additional 20 percent of those hours, and commit to working beyond where you stopped. Being temporarily lost is often part of innovative thinking.

2. Combine Unrelated Ideas: There are countless examples throughout history of new inventions that are the combination of two previously unrelated ideas, such as Johannes Gutenberg's combination of a coin punch and a wine press to create the first moveable-type printing press. Combining ideas and significant accomplishments from another industry, culture or even period in history and retrofitting them to your unique sales problem can spark original answers.

3. Become a Student of History: This can give you a rich inventory to source those unrelated idea combinations. History builds the hooks upon which you can hang new ideas and quickly create new associations. Without this knowledge, you'll operate with limited vision. Know the history of your business and sales model. Understand how your customers' businesses evolved. Look for patterns and trends that may continue ahead and give you additional insight.

Principle 2: Variety

Variety describes the dissimilarities or contrast in design, and the same idea naturally applies to innovative thinking in sales. You are more likely to have the elements of the right solution for your customer if you work with abundance. Variety also offers diversity. Innovation is born in the diversity of ideas that sometimes can only be produced within the safety of quantity. This is true not only when you're pitching new ideas to a customer but when you're brainstorming new ideas with your team. The following three imperatives offer ways to work with variety in your sales innovation practices:

1. Produce an Abundance of Ideas: Idea generation is critical early in the creative process. At the beginning of your sales innovation process, focus on creating numerous ideas rather than trying to generate the perfect idea. Don't self-edit your ideas or narrow your options too soon.

2. Think in Divergent Directions: After you've generated your initial idea options, lay them out in an array from left to right either on a whiteboard, spreadsheet or paper. Put them in any order. Then select and reposition the ideas you think are the most likely answers in the middle. Place the most conservative ideas to the right and the unique ideas to the left. Assess the divergence of your ideas. Based on the most important factors you're trying to address for your customer, are the ideas on the left at least

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50 percent different from the ideas in the middle? If not, continue broadening your range of options.

3. Know That Less Is More: As you begin to converge on your answer, subtract the nonessential elements. Test how much you can remove to increase the clarity of your solution while still retaining the core ideas. At what point of subtraction does your solution no longer work? Creativity does not mean complexity.

Principle 3: Unity

In sales innovation, unity refers to how all of the elements work together to make a whole. With a sales innovation team, the collaboration of diverse individuals creates energy and output that's greater than a single point of view.

The following three imperatives of unity explain how a sales organization can work as a whole while valuing its individual parts:

1. Assemble the Right Team: A team where members are well prepared and focused on a single objective can have an exponential effect on developing a great creative solution. As you pull your team together, avoid going for the comfortable arrangement of friends with similar views. Leverage roles, personality types, and the right level of familiarity to create a dynamic team.

2. Collaborate as an Individual: It's important to find ways for everyone to integrate their own thoughts while working together. Healthy working teams avoid groupthink by encouraging productive disagreement. Establish a team culture of valuing ideas regardless of organizational role.

3. Understand Other Perspectives: It's natural to have a bias toward your ideas. When a customer or team member describes an idea, you may find yourself comparing it to your idea, listening for points to counter or support. Instead, try suspending ownership of your current idea in an effort to understand other perspectives and extend your range of thought.

Principle 4: Contrast

Contrast invites the sales team to critically question and push back against established practices. With contrast, teams also get comfortable with divergent opinions and the initial criticism that almost invariably accompanies new ideas.

The following three imperatives of contrast explain how testing boundaries and accepting criticism can lead to innovative ideas:

1. Break Rules: Look for two types of rules: operating and procedural. Operating rules are core to the survival and operations of the business. For the sales innovator,

these aren't the rules to break. Procedural rules govern the supporting processes of the business. While these rules are essential, they also can be broken carefully if breaking them improves the company's capabilities. Know your internal and customer rules, classify them, and then break them to see what possibilities are revealed.

2. Don't Accept the Accepted: Accepted truths are habits and practices a company has "because that's the way it's always been done" regardless of whether there is logic to support it. These practices are legacies: pseudo-rules created informally over time. Disrupting such legacies presents great opportunities for differentiation.

3. Get Comfortable with Criticism: If you're breaking procedural rules or accepted legacies, don't be surprised if your new idea runs into rejection from colleagues or customers. Try to get over the surprise and learn to be attracted to rejection.

Principle 5: Movement

Movement refers to the natural progression of ideas as we proceed through the problem-solving process. Unfortunately, innovative ideas rarely occur in a flash, and we have to be disciplined in our approach to development.

The following three imperatives offer ways to include movement in your innovative thinking:

1. Ask the Right Questions: Questions are more powerful than statements and are the fuel for divergent thinking. Effective questions follow a model of testing the objective, the constraints and the possibilities for direction. Use an effective questioning model as you begin your thinking, and keep questioning the customer and the team throughout the process.

2. Grow with the Flow: When your team finds that its rhythm and ideas are beginning to flow, the process becomes easier, and the work of thinking ceases to become work. Flow can happen at a personal or team level.

3. Walk Away from the Problem: Taking time away from the problem can be as valuable as the time focusing on it. The best ideas often come after a period of incubation. Let your subconscious chew on the problem for awhile.

Principle 6: Harmony

Harmony is achieved when there are several different but related elements in a composition. Sales teams can use the principle of harmony like a checklist to make sure what they've designed can be implemented by the organization. Do the elements of the idea work together in a cohesive way? How can we implement the new idea so it *works* for the customer?

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The three imperatives of the harmony principle that follow will help you implement your innovative sales ideas:

1. Keep Perspective: Context is critical in sales innovation to maintain a connection to reality and to other related sales disciplines. Remember to look at the big picture as well as its parts to keep your ideas in context.

2. Check Degrees of Change: Once you converge your thinking and finalize your solutions, you'll need to evaluate the degree of change your customers, partners and sales organization can handle. Before you implement, understand the magnitude of your proposed solutions, the relative value of the customer or segments with which you'll propose the change, and the risk you're willing to take relative to the positive outcome you expect.

3. Be Persistent: In most creative sales-solution situations, roadblocks and barriers appear. While innovation is marked with exploration, another critical characteristic of functional creativity is completion. Push the team during the process with an eye toward converging on the solution. ●

What's Your Problem?

The Innovative Sale process is a left-brained thinking process that helps to generate right-brained innovation. Sales organizations need the structure of such a method to address the range of variables that define sales challenges and constraints.

The Four-Phase Innovative Sale Process

The Innovative Sale process consists of four phases, and there are eight steps within the four phases. The six principles discussed above are at the center of the Innovative Sale process.

Phase 1 - Conditions: The salesperson defines the challenge through a challenge question, such as, "How do we defend shelf space and potentially increase it to grow revenue?" In this phase, any constraints or conditions that are important to consider are defined, including time, price or product specifications that the customer has requested.

Phase 2 - Known Approaches: Almost all of the brainstorming in sales organizations consists of this phase. Sales executives list their known approaches and then immediately jump to application to begin implementing their solution, but this can lead to a missed opportunity for discovery, or Phase 3.

Phase 3 - Discovery: This is where innovation happens. A sure sign you've hit the discovery phase is when

your team starts to complain about feeling lost. Sales organizations tend to resist discovery because it's uncomfortable, it's new, and because it takes work.

Phase 4 - Application: This is where we bring sales innovation in for a landing and make the solution work, check that the idea makes sense, and collaborate with the customer to implement it.

Step 1 of Phase 1: Define the Challenge and Constraints

When defining the challenge, the real mission is to redefine that challenge. We may end up confirming or validating it. Or, we may find we can understand the problem in another way, in a broader context, and open up new possibilities for a solution. Most challenges come with constraints, which are a vital part of functional creativity. The parameters are usually limitations within which we must work. Here are some examples:

- Our channel partners have always worked with this business model.
- We have to maintain the current territory structures.
- The solution has to be cost neutral.

In this first phase, we lay out the constraints but will come back to them later in the discovery phase, when it's time to test boundaries and see which if any of these rules we can break.

Step 2 of Phase 1: Gather Insight

The second part of understanding conditions is to gather insight about the larger context in which the challenge lies. This insight will typically come from sources that include the direct voice of the customer, input from the team, information from the market, and data from the organization. Central to this insight are the questions we ask.

There are three important questions to ask about a project's challenges, causes and its precedents to help gather important insight:

1. Customer Challenges: This set of questions gathers insight about the customer's challenges in terms of financial performance, its markets, its products and its resources. These questions deal with the business's priorities.

2. Causes: This set of questions addresses the causes behind the customer challenge. While the objective may appear to stand on its own, usually there are other drivers below the surface. Casual questions that ask "what" and "why" are one way to get to the root cause. If we start with the apparent objectives and work backward, we can often redefine the challenge.

3. Precedents: This category includes questions such as, "How has it been done before, either in our industry, in

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similar business models, or even totally different situations with some of the same characteristics?” ●

alternatives or compromises to that constraint; and then determine whether or not to destroy it. ●

Breaking Down Barriers

Typically, when we refer to brainstorming we're talking about the initial flood of ideas, which often turn out to be our known approaches. In the Innovative Sale process, real innovation doesn't come until the next phase, discovery, when we begin to think beyond the known approaches.

Step 3 of Phase 2: Create Initial Approaches

In step 3 of the process, we list all the current, obvious and tried-and-true solutions. All you're looking for in this type of brainstorming is to flush out what you've done before. It may be that one of these initial ideas turns out to be the answer. But you won't know that until you get through the process. Listing everything you've done before and picking one of those ideas is not innovation; it's just coming up with a quick answer.

Step 4 of Phase 3: Destroy False Constraints

Now we enter the discovery phase where we will depart from typical brainstorming into the next stage of sales innovation. In this step, we look back to the constraints identified in our first step and test the boundaries to see which constraints are solid and which might bend a little. In fact, we see if we can blow any of these up.

We can apply the Innovative Sale principle of contrast to take a look at the three major types of constraints: operating rules, procedural rules and accepted truths. Remember that operating rules are usually critical to the mission of the business, procedural rules are about how the business functions through various processes, and accepted truths are those legacy constraints that have become well worn and believed by many over time. Ask the following questions:

1. What constraint did we encounter?
2. What type is it? (operating rule, procedural rule, accepted truth)
3. What would happen if we destroyed this constraint?
4. Is there an alternative to this constraint?
5. What action might we take?

While it is usually risky to break an operating rule, many procedural rules and accepted truths are ripe for destruction. The team could identify a range of these constraints and then categorize them; estimate what might happen if each constraint were eliminated; identify

Where Are All the New Ideas?

One of the challenges in sales innovation is the belief that a good, creative strategy or customer solution has to be completely new. But with sales innovation, there is an abundant source of opportunity by combining parallels.

Step 5 of Phase 3: Combine Parallels

Parallels are situations analogous to ours. They can come from a different company or industry. Parallels may not even come from business, but from other life situations. To combine parallels in the Innovative Sale process means to put different ideas together, like pieces of a puzzle.

Combining parallels is an exercise in gathering more raw materials for idea development. There are four steps to combine parallel ideas:

- **Look to the Generations:** Looking beyond your immediate environment can be the greatest source of parallels. Because each step moves progressively further away from your company and market, we refer to these steps as “generations.” The first generation contains parallels within your company — these can be surprisingly diverse, especially if you have other divisions, regions and functions. The second generation contains parallels within your industry, including what your competitors have done or are doing.

The third generation of parallels looks at businesses outside your direct competitors that have a similar way of generating revenue. The fourth generation involves parallels in companies with dissimilar business models. These parallels force a sales organization to look to solutions it may never have considered. The fifth generation contains parallels outside of business; examples may include sports teams and nonprofit organizations.

- **Deconstruct Your Challenge Question:** Now that we have an inventory of possible parallels from the five generations, we can break the original challenge question into parts to begin matching and combining. The idea is to find potential parallels for each part of the challenge.

- **Find Matches That Address Just 25 Percent of Your Challenge:** By looking at the pieces of the deconstructed challenge, we can look for parallels that might match just one part of the challenge. Odds go way up that we're going to find some innovation components that will change our thinking.

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• **Put the Pieces Together:** Now it's time to take the ideas generated by examining parallels and put them together to test their logic and potential application. Lay out the parallels, and see what new solutions come to mind. Combining parallels is the start of horizontal generation, which is part of the next step of the Innovative Sale process.

Step 6 of Phase 3: Explore Horizontally

Horizontal thinking creates an abundance of ideas across a divergent range of options. As the ideas come together through combining parallels, we can begin to evaluate them on a right (conservative) to left (radical) scale that ranges from the modest to the moderate to the most far-out ideas. Your options should move from the conservative to the far-reaching. While your ideas on the right might feel common, the ones on the left might be completely unrealistic, beyond the scope of what your customer would do. If the ideas don't feel that way, you're not pushing far enough. Once you've generated a good range and abundance of divergent ideas, it's time to go into vertical development. ●

The Attraction of Rejection

In horizontal-idea development you sketch your ideas. You're not worried about how the final solution will look. But when it's time to develop vertically, it's time to get serious about your solution, the practical ways it can work, and the details that can make or break it in the end.

Step 7 of Phase 3: Develop Vertically

Vertical development entails selecting the best ideas and then digging deep down to build out the solution. Pick the finalists from the list of horizontal ideas that will fit the customer situation. To help narrow down the pool, you can return to the customer challenge dimensions — financial, market, product and resources — to assess each of your solutions. Now you'll see which of your ideas have potential and which should be filed away for later use.

Many of your best ideas can be met with rejection. Not only is it important to accept and work with rejection from teammates, but also it's vital to expect and accept the rejection of your ideas from the customer. Rejection is just part of the creative process.

If the customer's company has an innovative leader, the customer will likely be open to innovation. If belief in innovation doesn't come from the top, the sales rep's job is that much harder. Determine whether you're going to press on if you think your ideas are defensible or if you're going to accept what they've said and modify your ideas

based on their input. As you commit to a solution, you have to make sure it will align with what the customer will need.

Step 8 of Phase 4: Implement and Communicate

The final step of the Innovative Sale process is to implement and communicate. Implementing and communicating the final solution inevitably requires managing change. Recognize the level of change your solution will require for your customer, and predict his reaction to that potential change. Is the customer change averse or change ready?

The longer your customer is involved in the solution development, the greater the customer's buy-in will be. As you implement and communicate, consider and manage these important components:

Understand the degrees of change: Each different component of the final solution options represents a degree of change. Each of these degrees of change represents risk and a communications opportunity.

Develop your positioning: There was a reason you went on this change journey for this particular strategy or customer in the first place. As part of your communication, you need to recapture that reason and position your overall thinking about why you took this approach and, most important, why it will benefit the organization or the customer.

Operate your communications campaign: You need to communicate not in sound bites but in a campaign. We know from observing effective advertising that a great campaign is comprised of target audiences, pointed messages, communications vehicles, proof sources and message repetition on a schedule.

Manage resistance and push through: In any change initiative, you need to understand the change environment, the potential risks and resistance to change, and your team's tolerance for pushing through a challenging process to make the change work. As you embark, get a reading on your current situation, and know what it will take, where you can be flexible, and how your team can creatively lead through the implementation for a successful outcome. ●

Delivering a Better Value Proposition

One way to apply the Innovative Sale is by creating or improving a company's value proposition. Value propositions are not simple. How you convey your company's

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value depends on who you're speaking to, their specific needs, and your ability to meet those needs. A value proposition is a business or marketing statement that does the following:

- Addresses the needs that the customer knows and the needs they are not aware of.
- Demonstrates a clear benefit of working with your company.
- Illustrates how you can fulfill your value.
- Differentiates you from competitors.
- Is flexible enough to apply to the evolving needs of customer segments and situations.
- Convinces a potential customer that one particular product or service will add more value or better solve problems than other offerings.
- Helps maintain an economic moat around the organization.
- Is concise and appeals to the customer's strongest decision-making drivers.

Often, people mistake value proposition for an elevator speech, which involves the rep *telling* something rather than showing it or listening to the prospect. A better way to develop a value proposition is to match your capabilities with what the customer needs. A value proposition has two sides: what your company can do as a business and what the customer needs. Understanding your capabilities as related to your customer's needs offers direction on how to build a better value proposition.

Value Proposition Message Checkpoints

As you construct your value proposition, test it on the following six checkpoints:

1. We understand your business.
2. We understand your issues.
3. We're different.
4. We can execute.
5. We can help financially.
6. We know you personally.

The value proposition is not a statement of cherished corporate ideals that lives in the boardroom. Nor is it a declaration made by a rep at the introductory customer meeting and then forgotten. The value proposition is what you are selling and why the customer will buy from you. ●

The Innovative Sale Assessment

Assessing an organization's team is another way to apply the Innovative Sale principles. The Innovative Sale assess-

ment follows six dimensions of functional creativity and their corresponding imperatives. The assessment provides a score on each person's Creative Quotient for Sales for each Innovative Sale principle and imperative. The criteria for the scores are as follows:

Pattern identifies the team's creative context. Are its members oriented toward creative problem solving, or do they tend to simply move straight to a solution?

Variety tracks the ability to generate an abundance of diverse solutions for the customer. Is the team narrowly focused with relatively few options, or do they think broadly with a healthy quantity of ideas?

Unity considers how the team members work together to solve problems. Are they part of a cohesive unit?

Contrast evaluates how well the team pushes its thinking rather than settles for the status quo. Is there an aversion to new ideas?

Movement measures the team's ability to follow a natural progression of idea development. Does it get bogged down in linear thinking, or does it simplify the complexities of the problem?

Harmony considers the team's propensity to implement a new solution and manage change in a practical way. Do team members push a solution through that is disruptive and not likely to work, or do they consider the finer points of change management?

Once you understand your team's Creative Quotient for Sales and where your team and individual members can become stronger, use a stepwise approach to build your Innovative Sale capabilities.

By injecting The Innovative Sale into the way you solve problems, you can develop a natural method to unleash your creative orientation. With practice, the returns can be significant. Sales creativity is within you. The Innovative Sale will show you the way. ●

RECOMMENDED READING LIST

If you liked *The Innovative Sale*, you'll also like:

1. ***Rainmaking Conversations* by John E. Doerr, Mike Schultz.** The authors provide a proven system for leading masterful conversations that fill the pipeline, secure new deals, and maximize the potential of your accounts.
2. ***Snap Selling* by Jill Konrath.** Konrath offers four SNAP rules to win more sales, and she teaches us that sales is an outcome not a goal.
3. ***The Perfect Salesforce* by Derek Gatehouse.** The Perfect Salesforce is a return to people — different types of people who excel naturally in different types of sales jobs.