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***An MBA should consider including a subject on ‘Selling and Sales Management’***

**Warwick Kirby<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract**

Selling is an important part of a business enterprise. Nevertheless, globally there are not many MBAs that include subjects on selling or sales management and in fact none in Australia at all. Consequently, this research study explores the question of whether a sales unit should be included in MBA programs, and if so how it could be developed. An online survey and interviews were used to gather views of senior managers. They affirmed that an MBA sales unit should be offered and gave prioritised topics that should be covered in such a unit. Implications for developing such a unit at business schools are developed, as is an example unit.

**Keywords:** sales, selling, sales management, MBA

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## **Introduction**

Education and training on professional selling is a potential sizable market. Books and courses are offered by individuals and companies to improve sales effectiveness. For example, organisations have specialised in delivering a variety of proven sales processes such as Solution Selling®, Value Based Selling®, Miller-Heiman®, InfoMentis®, Signature Selling®, Target Account Selling™ and Spin Selling®. The extensive range of sales books in airport bookshops emphasises the interest in selling. Indeed, \$800 million is paid to sales forces in the United States each year.

There is no doubt that sales are an important aspect of business, possibly the most important aspect after marketing: ‘The entrepreneur and the manager must ... embrace the fact that the ability to sell is the *single most critical success factor* of any enterprise, whether new or ongoing’ (Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth 2009). However, sales training has been lighter on theory and research than most other academic disciplines and, as a consequence, it could be viewed as not being an important part of MBA programs: ‘It is sad that something as important to the economy as sales shows up as a footnote in the ‘principles of marketing’ course at most graduate business schools (Alsop 2006, quoting A Zoltners, a professor at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management).’ Indeed, of all the 311 Australian MBA, DBA and graduate management specialisations listed in Hobson’s (2009, p. 205) *The Good Universities Guide to MBA and Management Programs*, not one offers a unit that covers sales as a separate in-depth unit.

Consequently, this research study aims to establish whether a sales unit should be included in MBA programs. Secondly, it investigates what should be included in such a sales unit. Its contribution will add to the body of knowledge on the topic.

This report starts from the base position of the general objectives of an MBA from a business school’s perspective. It then defines what is meant by an MBA ‘Sales Foundations and Principles’ unit, or a ‘sales unit’, and identifies some issues to guide data collection and

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analysis. The methods of data collection via a survey and interviews are then described, followed by data analysis. This report concludes with recommendations on the inclusion of a sales unit in an MBA program.

### **Background**

The objectives of students undertaking an MBA is an expected salary increase of around two thirds on graduation. ‘The MBA has become a prerequisite for many of the world’s most desirable jobs’ (Hobson 2009, p. 21). In turn, business schools aim to develop the appropriate skills to fulfill these expectations. For example, the Gibran Learning Group (2010)—now called the Australian Institute of Business or AIB—supports the importance of practical and critical thinking skills, for it aims to:

develop practical and critical thinking skills in the various disciplines of business and management. Through work-based and applied assessment techniques, AIB programmes deliver graduates who are knowledgeable and ready to work in a wide range of business professions.

Similarly, the Macquarie Graduate School of Management (2010) emphasises rigour and relevance in its research and teaching for its development of successful managers:

MGSM's mission is to provide internationally recognised post-experience graduate management education to enable people of high potential to become successful leaders who are capable of bringing prosperity to their organisations and communities and to support these objectives by combining rigour and relevance in the School's research and teaching.

In its objectives, the Australian Graduate School of Management (2010) adds management time and decision-making skills, along with other management skills:

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AGSM MBA Programs teach participants how to manage in today’s complex business world, how to make better decisions, juggle priorities, work in teams and influence outcomes. AGSM MBA programs help participants to develop self-awareness and self-confidence and improve inter-personal, problem-solving and communication skills.

From these and other sources, it can be summarised that an MBA curriculum aims to provide a learning environment that will enable people to understand themselves, and develop critical thinking and other skills around a range of business and management disciplines. That is, an MBA provides opportunities for graduates to extend and develop their careers into leadership and privileged positions. With the additional knowledge of the theory and practice of sales and sales management, would some MBA graduates become even more effective in the business world?

Given these common objectives, many business schools’ curricula are somewhat similar; for example, they have a similar range of seven or eight core units, including marketing and strategic management. A sales unit would have to fit into those curricula. Table 1 shows the core units for three example business schools.

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**Table 1 Core units of three MBA business schools**

<b>AIB</b>	<b>MGSM</b>	<b>AGSM</b>
Leadership	Organisational Behaviour (Some HR)	Organisational Behaviour (Some HR)
Strategic Management	Foundations of Management Strategic Management	Foundations of Management
Strategic Marketing	Marketing for Management	Marketing Management
Strategic Legal & Social Issues		
Strategic Operations Issues	Operations Management	Operations Management
Strategic Finance Issues	Accounting for Management Financial Management Economic Content of Management	Accounting Economics Finance
Strategic HR Management	HR Management	
	Information and Decision Analysis	Data Analysis & Decision Making

Source: 2009 web sites of each business school

These core units are the foundations on which a business school is based and electives flow from them. These electives cover areas like succession planning, franchising, new product management, marketing communications, managerial psychology and managerial development. However, of the 44 business schools in Australia, there is currently no business school providing an MBA elective involving an in-depth sales or sales management unit. Some of these schools, such as the AIB, do address selling and sales management as part of a Bachelor of Business. But an MBA subject would need to cover the concerns of senior and middle management rather than those of junior management.

A sales unit elective could extend material covered in core MBA units, and an example of how this could be done is shown in Table 2.

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Table 2 Extension in a sales unit from the MBA core units of a business school

Core Unit	Alignment
<b>Strategic Marketing</b>	This unit would extend the following: Topic 2: Marketing planning – to develop territory, account and opportunity plans Topic 3: Know your customer – to develop customer-centric selling and SPIN questioning techniques. Also extending to buyer behaviour and close techniques Topic 4: Marketing demand – to drive pipeline Topic 5: Segmentation – to develop industry, geography, product and team structures
<b>Strategic Legal &amp; Social Issues</b>	This unit would extend the following: Topic 1: Governance in the company context. This study will address the overlap of compliance and revenue recognition rules such as Sarbanes Oxley Act 2002. Ethics and ‘ethical selling’ will also be covered in such a study
<b>Strategic Finance Issues</b>	Forecasting and budgeting for sales would be in the unit
<b>Strategic Management</b>	This unit would extend the following: Topic 1: Sustainable competitive advantage Topic 2: Setting Objectives and initiating corrective adjustments Topic 3: External market forces (Porter’s 5 Forces) Topic 4: SWOT and ability to compete Topic 5: Aligning the five generic competitive strategies to an actual sales opportunity.
<b>Strategic Operations</b>	This unit will align with a business workflow.

Source: Developed from AIB course materials.

In conclusion, there are two main questions about the inclusion of a sales unit in an MBA program that need researching:

1. Should a sales unit be included in an MBA program? In particular, would a manager or recruiter find an MBA qualification with a sales unit valuable when interviewing candidates?
2. What sales topics should be included in an MBA sales unit?

## **Data collection and analysis**

Case study research methodology was used to collect and analyse data. Case study research is ‘a strategy for doing research which involves empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence’ (Robson 2002, p.178, quoted in Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2003, p.147). In particular, it is useful for exploratory research about a new and future situation (Yin 2008).

### *Data collection*

The data collection began with an online survey followed by interviews with selected respondents. The online survey was sent to 65 people, 24 of whom replied (37% return rate). The following purposive (Patton 1990) target list of candidates for the survey was compiled:

- 12 recruitment managers
- 31 managers or senior directors from technology organisations
- 7 managers from financial services
- 10 small to medium enterprise managers or owners
- 5 managers from manufacturing, retail or distribution organisations.

All respondents had been involved in the recruitment process of assessing a person’s ability and credentials to fulfill a role in their organisation and exposing the relative values that their organisation places on an MBA qualification and on sales process experience. Most invitees were based in Sydney, with a small number from Melbourne and one from Adelaide. All candidates had busy roles and so no pressure was put on anyone to participate.

The online survey questionnaire excluded any indication of a preference or bias in that participants were prevented from completing the survey until each previous section was completed.

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In turn, interviews were conducted with 11 of the respondents, a number within the normal range for a small qualitative research project (de Ruyter & Scholl 1998). McKinsey & Company (2010) discuss the justification of using case studies as part of their practice and stress the value of case interviews; for example, they can provide a vehicle to reach sound conclusions with limited facts in a short time. The interviews were conducted over a seven-day period and lasted 20–40 minutes each. Because the interviewees had already responded to the survey questionnaire, the issues were well understood.

Having been involved in sales and sales management for over fifteen years, and after reviewing many books, journals and articles, I could provide 17 possible topics as an ideas-starter for the survey and the interviews. Each of the 17 topics had one or more in-depth foundations and had supporting material. Four examples are:

- i. Process selling (TAS™ and STRATEGY™)
- ii. History of process selling (Sant 2006)
- iii. SPIN Questioning techniques (Rackham N 2001)
- iv. Competing to win (Page 2002).

The AIB’s ethical standards were followed throughout this entire process, including obtaining a signed informed consent form from each participant.

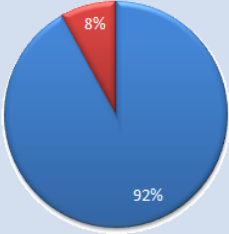


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*Data analysis*

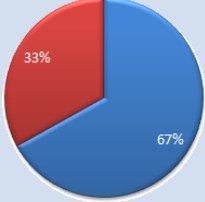
After the data was collected, it was analysed. Figure 2 summarises the data analysis, including the respondents’ positive valuation of an MBA in general (77% positive) and of an MBA with a sales unit (82%), plus a prioritised listing of the topics they thought should be in such a unit.

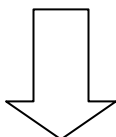
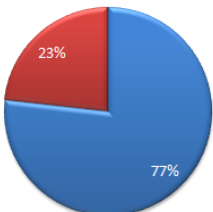
**Figure 2 Survey data analysis**

Question	Response
<b>Do you recruit in your role?</b>	 <p>Yes - 92% No – 8%</p>
<b>Average age</b>	48 Years
<b>Analysis:</b>	Most of the participants were involved in the recruitment process and would be able to provide informed and practical feedback on the degree of impact an MBA or similar qualification would have in being successfully selected for positions.

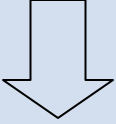
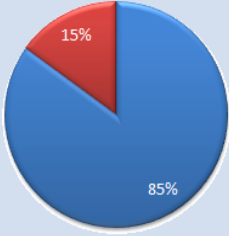
Question	Response
<b>Average age</b>	48 Years
<b>Analysis:</b>	This age group has had many years’ experience in the workforce with the majority in leadership roles. The age has no other major positive or negative impact on this research.

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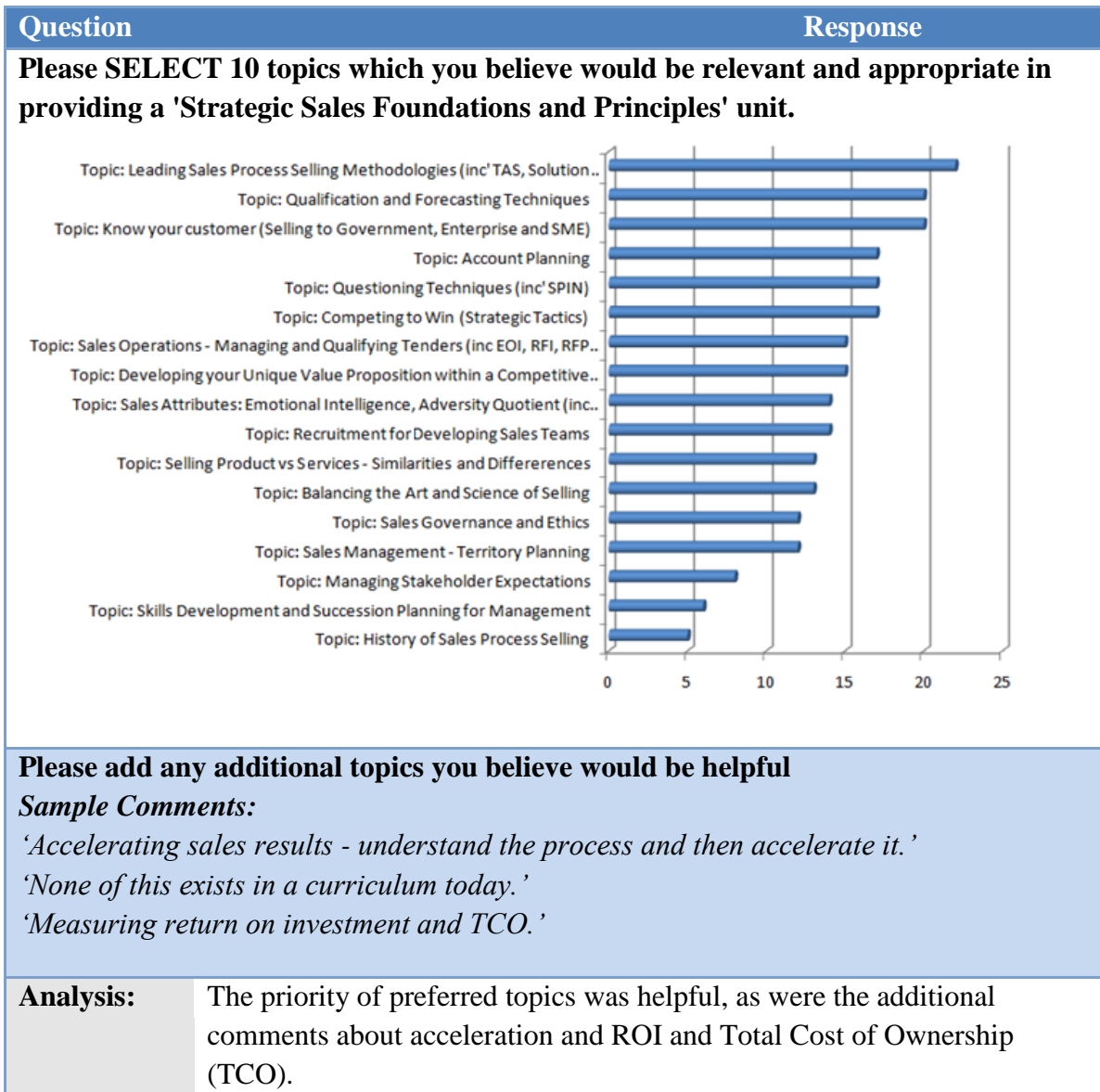
Question		Response
<p><b>Did you select strategic foundations and principles?</b></p>		<p>Yes - 67% No – 33%</p>
<p><b>Analysis:</b></p>	<p>This demonstrated that an in-depth sales component would be of interest to a significant percentage of participants and is worthy of further research.</p> <p>It is important to note that a significant proportion of the participants are involved in High Technology, ICT, Pharmaceutical or Services Industries including recruitment, all of which are accustomed to enterprise sales. This would have impacted the results favourably to sales. Questions arise whether this could be a target market should a Business School offer such a Unit of this nature.</p>	

Question		Response
<p><b>Do you believe an MBA qualification is of benefit to candidates today?</b></p> 		<p>Yes - 77% No – 23%</p>
<p><b>Sample Comments:</b></p>	<p><i>‘Currently do not see MBA as a benefit as they are not relevant to sales organisations.’</i></p> <p><i>‘Yes and No. If your first degree has little or no business subjects it is important.’</i></p> <p><i>‘Rounds out thinking, takes other people’s experiences into account and develops synergies with skill sets.’</i></p> <p><i>‘It is not essential but it is desirable. It demonstrates a higher level of thinking and operating but doesn’t guarantee one person will be better suited than the next.’</i></p>	
<p><b>Analysis:</b></p>	<p>A <u>qualified</u> Yes was very interesting. There was a general belief that a combination of experience with a qualification is of most benefit to candidates.</p>	

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Question	Response	
<p><b>Do you believe an MBA qualification with a sales component would be of benefit to candidates today?</b></p> 		<p>Yes - 85% No – 15%</p>
<p><b>Sample Comments:</b></p> <p><i>‘Another Maybe answer. If the candidate is planning to work in a Sales and Marketing organisation, could be very valuable. Probably of little relevance to a person with a technical engineering focus as an example.’</i></p> <p><i>‘Yes, for any individuals who are currently engaged in a sales organisation or who aspire to work in one. In fact believe for senior roles could be mandated or prerequisite.’</i></p> <p><i>‘As I said previously the ability to sell is the backbone of tech companies and underrated in other industries.’</i></p> <p><i>‘Sales are a core foundation for any business [both externally and internally] and therefore a theoretical as well as a practical understanding of sales as a profession could only be viewed in a positive light.’</i></p> <p><i>‘Absolutely, as any business is based around the fact it must sell something to survive. The more education around sales there is for any person in the hierarchy the better.’</i></p> <p><i>‘Yes. Not enough people who understand the sales process in business.’</i></p> <p><i>‘Marketing and communications may provide insight and benefit into setting strategic performance targets but sales is needed to achieve them.’</i></p>		
<p><b>Analysis:</b></p>	<p>A predominant Yes was provided. Again, the participant profiles need to be taken into consideration.</p>	

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Consideration was given to some of the ideas that the interviewees provided. To the key question, *'Would an MBA qualification with a sales unit be of benefit to candidates today?'*, most managers believed a more detailed sales unit would be of interest to a larger audience. For example, a general manager of a sales line of business of a leading business software corporation said:

*Of course I would find it of interest. It could help me maintain my good people while I would be pleased that they would be learning something specific to their day-to-day job.*

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Similarly, a recruiter said:

*That’s smart. No one offers it from what I know. It is a different spin. By the way, they can afford it. From an On-Target-Earnings perspective, junior reps can earn \$100k, while the best reps can earn up to \$350k. One word of caution will be the management of time. Sales Managers don’t want reps that are not focused.*

Finally, a manager of a multinational technology and consulting firm said:

*It’s a good idea. Interesting value propositions could be developed, such as joint investment by the company and individual for larger scale attendees.*

There were also more measured and cautious responses. These responses particularly focused on the timing and intention of gaining an MBA. For example, another recruiter qualified his response saying:

*Not a clear cut Yes or No question - an MBA in isolation is not seen as a benefit by many employers, e.g. over qualified, too academic, too theoretical, won't fit into our hands-on environment.*

On the negative side, one recruiter said:

*An MBA in Australia is not seen as much value as the UK and America. Here they look at skills to do the role. Not so much paper. It might get you an interview.*

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To the next key question, *What should be in the sales focused unit?*, the interviews gave greater clarity to the topics which would be of interest and those which rated poorly. One manager said:

*You need to train reps on the true meaning of TCO (Total Cost of Ownership), ROI (Return on Investment) and not say it because it sounds impressive. They get caught out!*

Another manager said:

*As I said in my comments, successful professional sales people need to know tactics on how to accelerate a sales process. See if you can include content which includes this.*

## **Implications**

This research looked into determining why and how an in-depth selling and sales management unit would be of value in an MBA degree. Three main implications of the findings are discussed in this section. In effect, this section is an example of case study research's *analytic* generalisation that places the findings into theories about the topic; in contrast, a statistical generalisation merely checks if the findings are representative of a sampled population (Yin 2008).

The first implication is that the research has identified **a new target market** for business schools. Sales training has primarily been serviced by niche training organisations that offer diploma or certificate qualifications. The main target market for an MBA with a sales unit would be major corporations. The industry segments could include: telecommunications, high technology, pharmaceuticals, media and sales focused small to medium enterprises. Typically the on-target-earnings (OTE) for sales representatives at a minimum is over \$100K

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and can go to \$500K+. This segment of the market can afford the investment in an MBA, provided they see value in it.

Consequently, there is a clear market opportunity for a business school such as AIB to offer a sales focused unit as part of their MBA program to target markets. Organisations such as Oracle, IBM, Cisco, Microsoft, vmware, SAP, EMC, Semantic, Micro-systems, Telstra, Optus, AAPT and many others all have a Sales Line of Business. They are looking at interactive ways to demonstrate value to employees. They would look at ‘targeted potential’ employees participating in an MBA that incorporates a sales unit, and which respects management time constraints and yet offers best practice action learning MBA programs. This could be an exciting and refreshing value proposition for the Australian and ASEAN markets.

The second implication of this research refers to the question, ‘*What should be in the MBA sales unit?*’ The topics investigated had in-depth foundations and principles. The top five priority topics were:

- i. Leading sales process selling methodologies
- ii. Qualification and forecasting techniques
- iii. Know your customer
- iv. Account planning
- v. Questioning techniques.

These top five priorities identified by the participants are supported by some of the sales literature. Rick Page, founder and CEO of The Complex Sale organisation, sponsored a survey of over 250 companies on the sales effectiveness initiatives they were planning to undertake. Improving sales processes was the most frequent response (40.9%). Page (2008, p. 10) concluded:

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Many [organisations] now realise that in order to achieve their full potential, they need more than one sales or training process – they need skills training, account management and opportunity strategy processes and what they have addresses only some of these needed areas.

It was reassuring that our number 1, 4 and 5 priorities aligned with Page’s survey results. Nevertheless, a post-graduate MBA curriculum must include some in-depth principles balanced with practice skills. This balance can be achieved in five ways.

First, use **leading sales process selling** methodologies. Managers must implement a sales process and not ‘wing it’ (Miller 2009). Process-based selling models such as TAS, STRATEGY-Battleplan™, Signature Selling and Value Selling all have recommended process steps to match the craft and art of selling.

The second balancing step is to cover **forecasting techniques** in the sales unit. Bosworth’s (1995) *Solution Selling* emphasises control while forecasting. Bosworth recommends the use of defined milestones to enable sales representatives and managers to ‘predict the future’ so as to qualify and forecast accurately. IBM has for many years used the BANT approach for qualifying opportunities. BANT refers to budget, authority, need and timeframe. Target Account Selling and STRATEGY both use similar qualification frameworks which include questions such as: Why buy? What to buy? When to buy? Who buys? How to buy? Can we compete? Can we win? Is it worth winning? This demonstrates the need for theory to back up practice.

Next, Bosworth’s (2004) *Customer Centric Selling* reinforces the need for sales professionals to be aware of the sales cycle from the **customer’s perspective**. He stressed the importance of empowering buyers to achieve their goals, solve problems and satisfy needs. The key factor is to focus on the solution for the customer. Thomas’s (2006) *Value Selling* reinforces the importance of working to understand the customer. Value Selling™ stresses the need to



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understand the questions buyers ask themselves before making a decision, these being: Should I buy? Is it worth it? Can I buy? Am I convinced? She also highlights the emotional decisions buyers make for logical reasons, that is, WIIFM (what’s in it for me).

The fourth way of balancing principles and skills is to cover **account planning** in the sales unit. Page’s (2002) *Hope Is Not a Strategy* discusses the importance of planning a strategy and embedding the plans into a CRM system to support opportunity management for forecasting and pipeline management. Relatedly, sales professionals should appreciate the hierarchy of planning. Typically, a territory plan is established. Within this territory, there may be accounts worth managing and establishing engagement plans for, and within the account there may be multiple opportunities. ZS Associates (2009) also stresses the importance of quality account and territory planning processes and views it as essential in ensuring that the right effort is targeted against the right opportunities, at the right time (ZS Associates 2009).

Finally, **questioning techniques** should be covered in the sales unit. Rackham (2001) developed a sales approach called SPIN selling. In essence, it demonstrates the importance of questioning techniques for sales professionals. SPIN is a questioning approach that moves from the general to the specific ‘pain point’ and encourages the buyer to visualise the pain of not proceeding with the agreed solution. SPIN questioning techniques begin with S—situational questions, to P—problem questions, I—implication questions and N—needs payoff which shows the product or service meeting the explicit need.

Thomas (2006) also stresses the importance of thinking and planning questions prior to meeting the buyer. Her Open-Probe-Confirm Process opens up prospects to share information regarding their business. Probing questions are used to dig deeper into the detail to uncover specific conditions and requirements of the prospect. Confirm questions are used to ensure the sales professional has listened and that the buyer has confirmed the reflective question proposed; for example, ‘Is it correct to say that ...’

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In brief, balancing the sales unit with principles and practical skills can be done.

The third and final implication of this research is that having a sales unit in an MBA degree is worthy of **further research and analysis**. This research is exploratory. A more detailed consideration by an Australian business school to provide an in-depth sales unit could be a mutually beneficial step for students and for any ‘first mover’ business school. A random survey of potential students could be undertaken, and academics could be questioned. Any MBA sales unit studied would consist of senior selling and sales management issues including in-depth foundations, and would complement core units.

*Example*

In brief, there are several implications of this research on the potential for a new MBA sales unit that appropriately covers sales management principles and skills. An example sales unit might include:

***Purpose:*** *This subject is designed to provide participants with an in-depth knowledge of the sales management concepts, techniques and approaches to the strategic practice of developing a sales plan, aligning people to this plan and understanding the supportive processes which underpin the success of the plan.*

***Content:*** *This subject covers these issues within the ten topics below.*

*Topic 1: Fundamental sales and sales management concepts*

*Topic 2: Sales planning and execution – including team alignment to strategic plan (industry, geography and product structures)*

*Topic 3: Territory and account planning for management*

*Topic 4: Opportunity planning for managing sales teams*

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- Topic 5: Customer-centric selling theory and methodology*
- Topic 6: Sales management in demand generation and forecasting*
- Topic 7: Alignment of marketing lead sources to sales revenue*
- Topic 8: Effective recruitment strategies for management*
- Topic 9: Selection of best approach to standardise meeting and questioning techniques, and sales-close planning*
- Topic 10: Individual sales performance appraisal and improvement plans*

*There are core issues within these topics that should be mastered for a basic understanding of the respective subject. These core issues are:*

- 1. Importance of a sales plan for successful execution and components thereof.*
- 2. Management of territory, account and opportunity planning*
- 3. Understanding sales process methodologies*
- 4. Sales management budgeting and forecasting*
- 5. Marketing value for sustainable sales—aligning marketing sources*
- 6. Performance appraisals and development of a sales team*
- 7. Recruitment strategies for sales management*
- 8. Call planning and close planning*
- 9. The power of questioning techniques*

***Assignment:*** *Develop an account plan within your business or another business within your country or region with which you are familiar. Within this account plan, identify at least three sales opportunities which your business would bid, and then develop a summary opportunity plan for just one. You will need to cover:*

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***Account plan:***

*Executive overview*

*Background*

*Opportunities and pain points*

*Solution alignment to these opportunities*

*Company strategy and high level timeframe and resources*

*Key stakeholders—both internal and external*

***Opportunity plan:***

*What is the opportunity?*

*Why a decision will be made. Need, risk, timeframe, budget, value*

*How will the decision be made? Criteria, resources, process, execution*

*Who will make the decision? Hierarchy, sponsor, support, executives*

*How do you compare against competitors? Your strategy vs competitors’ strategies  
(for example, flanking vs defence)*

*Why will you win?*

*Do not go into too much detail because the objective of this assignment is to ensure you can differentiate between account and opportunity planning.*

**Conclusion**

Two questions have been addressed: ‘Should a sales unit be included in an MBA?’ and ‘What should be included in a sales unit?’ Because of the depth and complexities of postgraduate sales material, such a unit should be an elective. The research showed strong support for such an MBA sales unit and identified at least 17 prioritised topics that could be

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included in the unit. From these findings, a selling and sales unit within the marketing stream would be of interest and value to the participants. Further research could uncover the justification for the unit to become a core subject as possibly additional attention would need to be given to sales management. This focus on sales management would complement the other subjects of leadership, management, finance, marketing, human resources and legal issues.

In conclusion, the MBA degree aims to prepare middle and senior managers in a range of disciplines, to advance their career. Having a sales unit in the MBA would fit that aim and advance the careers of many MBA graduates.

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