**The Sales Process Practice of Food and Drink SMEs**

**A Holistic Conceptual Framework: Steps, dimensions, barriers and enablers**

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**Abstract**

**Purpose –**The research examines the sales process practised by SMEs, and barriers and enablers that hinder and support effective selling practices from the selling organisation’s perspective in Scottish-based Food and Drink firms.

**Design/methodology approach -** – The paper adopts an interpretivist perspective with qualitative data gathered through face-to-face semi-structured interviews. 20 people involved in selling activities were interviewed from 15 SMEs across Scotland. Thematic analysis established key findings regarding the sales process practice.

**Findings** – Five themes emerged that affect the operationalisation of the selling process: the owner manager has considerable involvement in the sales process, SMEs with some degree of sales knowledge take a more systematic approach, SMEs lack awareness of how CRM technology can assist them, power is tipped in favour of the buyer and, the geographic location of the SME places constraints on how SMEs conduct business

**Research limitation/implication** – Thematic analysis was chosen over other more traditional methods due to the lack of relevant quantitative data. The phenomenon of the research and research methodology means that it will not be possible to repeat this study and replicate its findings. However, the process that has been adopted does provide a basis for future research.

**Originality/value -** The paper identifies areas where future research is required in the field alongside suggestions where policy makers and government business agencies might focus intervention to assist SMEs improve delivery of the sales process and selling effectiveness.

**Paper type –** Research paper

**Keywords -** SMEs, sales process, effective selling, food and drink sector, effective selling

**Introduction**

The Food and Drink industry is economically important to the Scottish economy (Scottish Enterprise, 2012). The sector faces many challenges; particularly in the area of effective selling. The organisation Scotland Food and Drink (SFD) is tasked to assist in profit improvement in all businesses working in the Food and Drink industry in Scotland. SFD was set up in 2009, as the industry’s leadership organisation funded by Scottish Enterprise (SFD, 2012). The challenging target to be achieved for 2017, in a highly competitive sector, is a sales value of £12.5 billion (SFD, 2012). Food and Drink SMEs, therefore, need to be pro-active if they are to attain this sales target and be supported effectively to achieve it.

This paper is about selling and the sales process from the Small and Medium-sized Enterprises’ (SMEs’) perspective. It investigates the sales process between SME manufacturers/ distributors and Food retail/ Food services buyers/ customers in a new and in a modified selling task situation in the Food and Drink industry. This paper aims to critically understand barriers that hinder, and enablers that support, effective selling in the sales process practised by Food and Drink Sector SMEs**.**

**Literature review**

*Development of selling*

Selling is a societal as well as a business activity and can be defined quite simply as “making a sale” underpinned by a number of techniques and personal skills according to Jobber and Lancaster (2009, p.4) across a variety of tasks and selling situations (Moncrief and Marshall, 2005). The sales function within a business is responsible for the crucial generation of revenues, delivers economic stimuli and forms the vital bridge between a business and its customers (Ingram *et al.,* 2010). Business relationships rely on individuals and how they deal with customers, making the buyer-seller interface a highly variable interaction (Donaldson, 1998). How the person with sales responsibility in a firm performs, usually affects a firm’s performance (Zoltners *et al.,* 2008). Over the last few decades, selling has evolved from focusing on short-term seller needs to focusing on longer-term customer/buyer needs. The role of the salesperson has evolved from one of provider, to persuader, to prospector, to problem solver, to value creator (Wotruba, 1991). The activities involved in selling have also evolved, from the taking of orders and delivering products and services, to persuading customers to purchase products, to aligning available offerings to customer needs, to creating novel alternative options that match customer needs with the capabilities of the salesperson (Weitz *et al.,* 2007).

*Sales process*

The sales process is best described as selling activities delivered by the selling function as stated by Churchill *et al.,* (1997) or carried out by sales people (Moncrief 1986; Marshall *et al.,* 1999). The traditional sales process has changed to Moncrief and Marshall (2005), with more automation anticipated due to technological advances (Sheth and Sharma, 2008). The focus has shifted towards a customer-orientation away from a sales-oriented focus with the role becoming more relational in nature. The focus of the objective of selling is now more likely and necessary to be one of relationship building and creating value for customers according to Rackham and De Vincentis (1999), and less of just satisfying customer needs and closing a sale (Weitz *et al.,* 2007). Changes in the selling environment, with more emphasis on the relationship-oriented sales approach, and a number of technological advances increase both the salesperson’s capabilities and the customer’s expectations (Bush *et al.,* 2000; Moncrief and Marshall, 2005; Piercy, 2010; Johnston and Marshall, 2013).

*Steps of selling in the sales process*

The sales process is a series of interrelated steps, often referred to as the seven steps of selling: prospecting, preapproach, approach, presentation, objection handling, the close, and follow up (e.g. Dubinsky, 1980/81; Hite and Bellizzi, 1985; Ingram, 1990). As figure 1 shows there is an assumption that the steps are the same for SMEs as for large companies. Hugely successful global sales training companies place ‘process’ at the centre of success in selling. They claim that sales process knowledge and the discipline of ‘sticking’ to that ‘process’ assists firms in the delivery of strategic sales objectives and supreme sales performance (Sandler, 1995; Rackham, 1998; Miller and Heiman, 2011).



*The sales process and sales process dimensions*

Dimensions impact the sales process; the type of customer (big or small), the type of relationship (transactional or relational), the time perspective (short-term or long-term), the type of problem to solve (simple or complex) and the sequence of stages in the sales process (sequential/linear or simultaneous/non-linear). Backstrom (2008) maps these dimensions onto sales processes he investigated (Wilson, 1975; Shapiro and Posner, 1976; Plank and Dempsey, 1980; Persson, 1999). The sales processes reviewed are all unique and effectively describe very different selling situations. In understanding sales processes it is important to note that too narrow a definition is not generalisable beyond its specific remit and, too wide a definition is not relevant to a specific selling situation - new selling task, modified selling task or repeat sale.

*The sequence of stages in the sales process (sequential or simultaneous)*

Moncrief and Marshall (2005, p.13) offer an up-to-date expression of the steps of selling within the sales process as “customer retention and deletion, database and knowledge management, nurturing the relationship (relationship selling), marketing the problem, problem solving, adding value/satisfying needs and customer relationship maintenance” – a simultaneous approach (see Figure 2). They choose to eliminate the prospecting step from their model despite the obvious need for businesses to attract new customers to fill the pipeline. The starting point in their model is a business that already has customers – this is not necessarily always the case but pushes the emphasis towards a emphasising a relational model, away from not a transactional one.



Moncrief and Marshall (2005) point out that for many large companies, the sales process is often no longer a linear process, but non-linear, where a number of activities as described by Marshall *et al.,* (1999) are connected to the process and are happening non-sequentially. For many firms, the relationship management process, embedded throughout Moncrief and Marshall’s (2005) model *is* an appropriate sales process for the selling firm.

*Selling and SMEs*

Despite the importance of selling and the sales process to SMEs, there is a scarcity of empirical evidence/academic research according to Mantrala *et al* (2008) though there is no lack of practitioner interest (Zoltners *et al.,* 2008). It is posited by Veludo *et al* (2001) that it is difficult to capture the complexity that is business seller-buyer interaction. There is growing recognition of the importance of selling and the sales process in SMEs in Scotland (Douglas, 2013; Rutterford, 2011; McCourt, 2011). Recent research reveals that while SME owners rely upon networking as an important source of sales introductions and leads as stated by Carson *et al.,* (2004), they lack selling competencies according to Douglas (2013) and Hill (2001a; 2001b). In previous research into this area it was found that personal selling skills and knowledge of what is involved in a successful sales process to close sales deals and build relationships with trade buyers, was lacking (Douglas and Brodie, 2010). Tom Hunter (foremost Scottish business person), in his foreword in the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) Scotland 2005 states “if an entrepreneur (by implication a SME) cannot sell, he/she (the firm) cannot succeed, period” (Levie, 2006, p.3). Selling skills and sales knowledge are fundamental in helping ensure that SMEs survive and thrive and succeed (Burns, 2007; Jobber and Lancaster, 2009; Douglas, 2013).

Investors in SMEs rate selling skills and sales process knowledge highly alongside the make-up of the management team and financing the new venture (Liu, 1995; Huang and Brown, 1999). McCartan-Quinn and Carson (2003) attribute high failure rates of SMEs to weaknesses not only in financial management but in particular to selling. The ability to make sales, especially in the harsh economic climate, is vital. This knowledge gap appears to be a constraint on SMEs growth and profitability, which has a knock-on effect on Scottish economic performance.

Carson *et al.,* (1985); Carson *et al*., (1995) and Hill (2001a; 2001b) have explored the importance of networking as a sales tool and aspects of SME marketing used in the early stage of sales development. Successful SMEs tend to be close to their customers and quick to adapt to change, but ultimately the operationalisation of selling techniques and tactics need to directly correspond to management capability, key individuals’ backgrounds according to Liu (1995) and resource constraints (McCartan-Quinn and Carson, 2003; Douglas, 2013). The focus of SMEs’ selling tends to be a combination of transaction, relationship, and network marketing according to Brodie *et al.,* (1997) and Gilmore *et al.,* (2001), that is often determined by the *modus operandi* of the owner manager (Hill and Wright, 2001; Douglas, 2013).

SMEs need to adapt to meet the competitive pressures created by the growth, particularly of supermarkets, or identify alternative sales channels and understand what is required to get new business and sustain relationships in alternative Food and Drink industry outlets. The increasing hold of supermarkets on the grocery trade in the UK/Scotland, the increasing power of Foodservice distribution giants and the reducing number of independent and specialist outlets serving the Food and Drink industry delivers both a challenge and an opportunity to Scottish-based Food and Drink SMEs (SFDF, 2012).

**Methodology**

Following an analysis of existing literature on SMEs, the sales process and the Scottish Food and Drink industry, a semi-structured qualitative thematic analysis approach was adopted to understand the phenomenon under investigation (Miles and Huberman, 1994). An interpretative approach relies upon interaction between interviewees and interviewer (Myers, 2009; Bryman and Bell, 2011). Open ended questions were used to interview 20 owner managers and sales personnel from 15 SMEs (Kvale, 2007). The Interview data was transcribed verbatim, coded, categorised and analysed to support the interpretative approach employed by the researcher to understand what SMEs do during the sales process (Poland, 1995; Cresswell, 2009). The analysis of the interview questions focused upon addressing the main research question. Barriers and enablers from the SMEs perspective, emerge from the data gathered.

**Findings and discussion**

*Prospecting – STEP 1*

Few businesses can afford to lose established customers. It is important to build, protect and grow business with existing customers according to Dalgic and Leeuw (1994) and Hill (2007) and keep the sales pipeline full (Anderson, 2000; Ingram *et al.,* 2010). But, in a shrinking economy, the most capable companies have become vulnerable to the mobility of accounts and migration of business. Various selling efforts bring new customers to a business or by the actions taken by a business, the business to a customer (Johnston and Marshall, 2013). The sales job is not just about making sales calls but about creating customers (Gschwandtner, 1995). Prospecting is a fundamental step in the sales process. It can be defined as engaging with potential clients either by phone, by email, or in person.

SMEs lack sales resource and the prospecting step is generally undertaken by the owner manager or a nominated sales resource within the SME. There is a degree of frustration because many SMEs *do* know what is required to seek out new business even if they are *not* very good at it (Carson *et al.,* 1985; Carson *et al*., (1985); Chaston and Baker, 1998; Hill, 2001b; Gilmore *et al.,* 2001; Verhees and Meulenberg, 2004; Carson *et al.,* 2004; Liu, 2005)*.* An important avenue for seeking out potential new business in the data is via enterprise development support agencies such as SFD, with a focus on larger customers. Attendance by SMEs at SFD ‘Meet the Buyer’ events (SFD, 2012) return mixed results with one having a positive experience from the engagement and two declaring it a complete waste of their valuable time “I did once have a meeting with a big supermarket buyer through one of those ‘Meet the Buyer’ events… It was a disaster”. The SME was ill prepared for engaging with such a large customer.

What is evident is the lack of consistency in how SMEs approach a fundamental and important part of the sales process, prospecting for new customers. If SMEs were to adopt systematic prospect planning as evidenced by Stritch (2012) then it may deliver results. Prospecting in SMEs in this study is barely an organised activity and certainly not a ‘mindset’ as posited by (Boe, 2007). This step in the process for SMEs would be better referred to as *Find Customers and/or Revisit Customer* *STEP* to accommodate both new and modified selling task situations.

*Preapproach – STEP 2*

The preapproach step relates to activities that take place ahead of the customer/buyer visit or meeting (Johnston and Marshall, 2013). A number of activities comprise the preapproach step including: - identification of buyer needs through continuing research into both the buyer and their organisation, communication with ‘gatekeepers’ or the buyer for securing a meeting and preparation and rehearsing for that meeting or presentation (Fleschner, 1999; Agry, 2002).

The majority of SMEs engage in some form of preapproach activity and gathering of data about the buying firms they present to. Many resort to Google for secondary information to assist in preparations. Several of the SMEs in this study recognise the importance of accessing data (marketing dynamics and trends) about the industry and are actively using this in their presentations to buyers, particularly larger customers. However, for many SMEs the cost of purchasing data is prohibitive, it can be very expensive. The most important item to prepare to take to a meeting is a product sample to taste. SMEs recognise the value of the face-to-face encounter but getting meetings with buyers is difficult. The means to achieving this, often via an introductory phone call, is a stressful experience and SMEs in this study shied away often from making calls, thus extending the time between making contact to getting a meeting. The logging of calls and approaches to prospects are not recorded and for most SMEs there is no consistent approach to this part of the sales process. This step is mostly about getting ready to engage with the buyer/customer and could be more aptly referred to as *Prepare for the Meeting STEP*.

*Approach – STEP 3*

The Approach is simply expressed as the first contact with the buyer (Johnston and Marshall, 2013). First impressions matter and can make the difference between success and failure in an approach to a buyer (Henthorne *et al.,* 1992; Chaney and Green, 2004).

SMEs in this study recognise the importance of first impressions but these are mostly taken for granted. Building rapport and relationships with buyers/customers whatever their size, matters, but is not essential. Personal chemistry is not a prerequisite to have but could improve the relationship. Some of the SMEs are able to adapt to the buyer behaviour to help the relationship form. The study suggests that the SMEs are more comfortable in front of smaller customers. Trust is important and is represented by the SMEs being able to offer and deliver quality product to specification, make deliveries on time and generally ‘do what they say they will do’. The content of the Approach STEP is inextricably linked to STEP 4, the Presentation *STEP* that is analysed in the next section. The approach to the presentation, the meeting and the initial social contact, therefore form part of the *Presentation* *STEP*.

*Presentation – STEP 4*

Effective sales presentations matter in the seller-buyer interaction as they make up the main body of the sales meeting, according to Moncrief and Marshall (2005) and are often regarded as the most important step in the process (Cicali *et al.,* 2012). Greenberg (2012) posits that not only is the presentation step the crucial step but that usually the process involves multiple presentations. Getting a sale or having the opportunity to return for a further face-to-face meeting signals a successful presentation (Weitz, 1981; Cicali *et al.,* 2012). Ingredients of a great sales presentation include a successful delivery of the value proposition and benefits to the customer as suggested by Anderson *et al* (2006), with both oral presentation and non-verbal communication through power point presentations and written proposals (Brexendorf *et al.,* 2010).

In this study, the presentation step in the process varies considerably from SME to SME and is not differentiated when delivering to either a small or larger customer. The outcome being sought from the SME is the same, a listing. The key focus is on the listing with little regard for extracting information concerning the needs and wants of the buyer. Every SME prepares for, and delivers their presentation differently in a sales meeting, there appears to be no evidence of any knowledge or understanding of what may make one presentation more effective than another. SMEs market the product and present themselves as they ‘see fit’ – contingent on the moment. The presentation step can better be expressed as simply *The Sales Meeting STEP*, since the presentation to the buyer is one part of a sales meeting.

*Handling objections - STEP 5*

Negotiation is about discussion and compromise and not about conflict, so, negotiating through customer objections is an important part of the sales process (Chakrabarty *et al.,* 2010). There are many reasons why buyers deny the sales person the opportunity to close (Johnston and Marshall, 2013). But, listening skills play an important role in anticipating and overcoming objections according to Marshall *et al* (2003) and particularly, active listening (Ingram *et al.,* 1994; Acuff and Wood, 2004).

SMEs in this study recognise the importance of listening, but do not listen enough to understand buyers’ needs and consequently how they might address problems and take advantage of opportunities.In this study some SMEs express some knowledge of the importance of overcoming or negotiating through objections buyers may have, by preparing in advance (Campbell and Davis, 2006; Lee, 2007). This however is the exception, and not the rule. There is a greater emphasis on endeavouring to persuade the buyer of the merits of the product being presented rather than adapting a product for a client based upon understanding more about what the buyer needs, or what a solution for a buyer might consist of. This suggests a leaning towards a sales-oriented and not customer-centric approach (Lehtimaki *et al.,* 2012; Hill, 2001). Handling objections take place during the presentation itself and therefore are part of the meeting between seller and buyer. Therefore, Steps 3 (Approach), 4 (Presentation) and 5 (Handling objections) could be merged and referred to as the *Sales Meeting* *STEP* in the SME sales process based upon this study.

*Close - STEP 6*

The definition of a ‘close’ is “asking the buyer to say yes or no” (Jobber and Lancaster, 2009, p.267). It does not matter whether a sales person ‘closes’ after one sale or many visits, what does matter is – have the buyer’s needs been satisfied and has value been added in the transaction/sale (Robertson, 2009). This win for the buyer is complimented by a win for the sales person through the mechanism of repeat orders, which usually suggests customer loyalty (Rackham and de Vincentis, 1999).

The SMEs in this study, often because of lack of resource, are constrained in their flexibility to visit again and again the same customer. Because of this there is a tendency to lean toward a traditional ‘close’ step of endeavouring to conclude the deal when first in front of the buyer. It is however recognised that this cannot always be the outcome, especially with larger buying groups and more complex sales. In any event every meeting has to have a ‘close’ of some description. This could be better referred to as *Action Points* *from the Meeting STEP* since SMEs in this study did exactly this no matter the outcome of the Sales Meeting.

*Follow up - STEP 7*

Successful selling companies concentrate as much on the after sale service as they do on the sale itself (Ingram *et al.,* 2010). Customer expectations are high according to Levitt (1983) and Raz (2003), so selling firms that do not follow up effectively are short sighted, since repeat business through retained customers matters (Stevens and Kinni, 2007). Selling firms that demonstrate the ability to add value win repeat sales (Armstrong and Kotler, 2003).

The final step of the process is important whether a sale is made (usually to a smaller customer) or further additional meetings are needed to progress potential business (usually to a larger customer). This is important so that SMEs and their customers can keep each abreast of developments and keep relationships intact. SMEs are required to provide the follow up notes as a rule, the buyer never offers to undertake this duty irrespective of the size of the customer. SMEs may organise internal meetings with other team members to allocate action points to ensure deadlines and agreements made at meetings are delivered on time and as agreed between parties. Relationships need to be maintained and a mechanism for this is ongoing contact whether a further meeting is required. One method of keeping in touch is the act of gift giving particularly at Christmas time. Both small and large customers are given cards/gifts but usually only larger clients, hospitality. In this study there are mixed views expressed concerning the morality, necessity or usefulness of this activity. This final step is more than just a follow up, it is about maintaining contact and thus could be referred to as the *Maintain contact STEP.*

**Steps of selling (in the sales process)**

In this study of SMEs in the Food and Drink sector, it is evident that a truncated version of the steps of selling best express the phases/stages SMEs experience during the sales process: Step 1 – Find Customer and/ or Revisit Customer (in literature known as Prospecting), Step 2 – Prepare for the Sales Meeting (in literature known as the Preapproach), Step 3 – The Sales Meeting (in literature known as Approach, Presentation and Handling objections steps merged), Step 4 – Action Points from Meeting (in literature known as Close) and Step 5 – Maintain Contact (in literature known as Follow up) (see Figure 3).



In this study, the steps in the sales process are neither wholly specifically sequential (linear) nor simultaneous (non-linear). What is evident is that finding new customers in some shape or form starts the process, be it of a proactive or reactive nature, and a follow up or maintaining of contact of some kind occurs at the end of any one sales meeting, but this does not necessarily signal the end of the process. Finding New Customers and/or Revisit Customer is therefore Step 1 in the sales process practised by Scottish-based Food and Drink SMEs.

The traditional preapproach before a sales meeting and the plans for how to deliver a sales presentation/meeting can be more precisely labelled as Prepare for Meeting step, Step 2.

The presentation step, that includes the initial few moments of social contact, the outlining of features and benefits, or marketing the product as referred to by Moncrief and Marshall (2005), cannot be disentangled from problem-solving and the handling of objections during the presentation/meeting itself. Relationships are nurtured at two steps in the process; one of them is during the face-to-face presentation/meeting. So, the presentation stage encompasses a number of ‘traditional’ steps and activities that occur simultaneously. It does not simply consist of the presentation or demonstration of the product, though this is, of course, very important. The Sales Meeting is therefore Step 3 in the sales process practised by Scottish-based Food and Drink SMEs.

Every meeting has a ‘close’ step or ends with a list of actions to undertake. A sale is made, or a sale is still possible where the SME has to provide more information and/or return for a further meeting or no sale is made. In the final scenario the SME needs to decide on its priorities as to whether or not to revisit the prospect at a later stage to keep the process ‘live’. Action points from the Sales Meeting, is, Step 4 in the sales process practised by Scottish-based Food and Drink SMEs.

The maintaining contact step is vitally important, is driven by the SMEs and occurs whether a sale is made, deferred or there is no immediate prospect of a sale being completed. After every sales presentation/meeting a SME needs to decide how much effort can, or should be put into the follow up activity. It depends upon the priorities each SME sets itself for each customer/buyer. The follow up step, is another step that particularly, and importantly can involve relationship building through keeping in contact with the customer/buyer. Maintaining Contact is therefore Step 5 in the sales process practised by Scottish-based Food and Drink SMEs.

**Dimensions that impact the steps of selling (in the sales process)**

The selling process has a number of dimensions that impact it. The type of transaction varies, from being relatively simplistic with standard product, to being a little more complex with customised product or seasonal ranges that bring specific challenges. It varies from being a straight forward shorter-term transaction that either achieves a sale or not, usually with a smaller customer, to being a longer-term process with a larger customer, where a close does not necessarily constitute a sale but a further iteration of the process, that eventually achieves a sale or not. This study reveals that the emphasis on the sequential and simultaneous steps/ approach in the sales process or steps of selling when SMEs engage with smaller customers is not markedly different to when they engage with larger customers. There is a time perspective difference between the two sizes of customer, and differences in emphasis between types of relationship (transactional and relational) and types of orientation (sales and customer).

Dimensions that impact the sales process in Scottish-based Food and Drink SMEs can be summarised as follows. If the SME’s customer is larger (a supermarket Food retailer or national Foodservice distributor), then the relationship type tends to be more relational, with the time perspective being extended due to not just one but a number of meetings before a decision to proceed (or not) can be taken. The type of problem tends to be more complex with product being distributed to a number of outlets and not just one or two outlets. The sequence of stages, or steps, in the sales process, is more likely to be both sequential and simultaneous. Whereas if the SME’s customer is smaller (one or two independent outlets, for example, a delicatessen or café), then the relationship type tends to be more transactional, with the time perspective being limited often to one meeting where an outright ‘yes’ or ‘no’ decision is preferred due to lack of resources. The type of problem tends to be simpler with product being required for only one or two outlets. The sequence of stages, or steps in the sales process are sequential and simultaneous.

Based on the above the following figure shows the dimensions that impact the sales process in SMEs (see figure 4.



**Enablers and barriers that present challenges (in the operationalisation of the sales process)**

This study reveals enablers that promoted, and barriers that worked against selling effectiveness in Food and Drink SMEs. The study evidences that there are five important enablers/barriers that present challenges to SMEs during the sales process. They either directly or indirectly affect the effective operationalisation of the sales process in SMEs. They are as follows:

*Theme one*

It is evident that the owner manager of the SME cannot be detached from the sales process, he/ she actively engage in the sales process either by necessity (there is no one else) or it is too expensive to hire someone else (Carson, 1990). Their involvement appears not in question (from their perspective), in fact their presence or visibility in the process enables them to bring enthusiasm and passion that they believe is difficult to replicate in employed staff or outsourced/third party agents or distributors. Their instinct and intuitive feel for their business as emphasised in Carson *et al* (1995) adds value to the process. Very importantly, they control the ‘purse strings’, are the final arbiter of how their product looks, where it is offered for sale and how much it can be sold for. With the role they play come ‘downsides’, in the form of relationships with their own sales resource (some resistance to being overriden) and what value the buyer and/or buying organisation places on the owner manager’s involvement or interference (a need to be more professional in their approach).

*Theme two*

The level of sales knowledge uncovered in the study reveals just how inconsistent SMEs are in their approach and delivery of a sales process. Sales knowledge in SMEs was generally underdeveloped. Only those SMEs whose owner manager had some sales experience or who engaged professional sales people or agents were able to present a credible explanation of a sales process. Despite this, those SMEs who did express an understanding of the sales process and the importance it might play in more efficient sales effectiveness failed in most cases to deliver a *consistent* sales process. Only three SMEs in this study were able to articulate the benefit of aligning the selling process of the SME to the buying process of the customer (Manning *et al.,* 2010). Several SMEs expressed a strong desire to employ professional sales resource but most confirmed an inability to afford the expense at this time.

*Theme three*

This study evidences supportfor the use of basic everyday technology e.g. emails but, discovers, that SMEs lack awareness of how Customer Relationship Management (CRM) software technology can help deliver an improved sales process. When it comes to use of technology, SMEs in the Food and Drink sector have not yet embraced many technological advances as outlined by Piercy (2010). CRM software packages can be very useful. Though many of the SMEs recorded the importance of recognising who the target customers are, and the gathering of information about them, not one of the SMEs interviewed expressed an interest in, or has invested in CRM systems and technology to assist in the relationship selling process (Tanner *et al.,* 2005).

*Theme four*

This study discovers that the buyer is ‘king’ in the seller/buyer relationship in every sense; the ‘piper’ calling the tune to which the SME must ‘dance’. There is a clear imbalance in power evidenced between SMEs and buyers which appears to be tolerated or accepted as the norm, whether the buyer be a national supermarket buyer, as suggested by Hingley (2005), or a chef in a restaurant. So, both Food retail and Foodservice sectors and both smaller and larger customers evidence and expose this imbalance or inequality. Although the buyer is in charge, the SME can decide whether to deal with smaller customers, more like they are, or bigger firms who can make considerable demands upon a SME, stretching its resources. Either way, the buyer controls the decision to meet, to develop business, how much communication takes place in the relationship and how this is carried out operationally. Tolerance of seller-buyer power imbalance is the ‘price’ SMEs ‘pay’ to engage in business relationships.

*Theme five*

Findings from the study report the challenges SMEs face because of their location in relation to their customer base. Access to smaller customers and to bigger Food retail and Foodservice buying offices is particularly difficult from a Scottish base. There are considerable costs attached to this as well as implications for building relationships. In this study, the geographic location of Scotland provides some specific challenges for SMEs whether they are engaging with buyers from major supermarket accounts based in London (or further afield) or are having to deal with multiple smaller clients nearer home. There are costs involved in organising business visits to buyers with requisite planning and time constraints challenges. Constraints are also placed on the socialising potential of the SME due to geography and this impedes their ability to build relationships. This is further aggravated when buyers from outside Scotland see Scotland as a trip too far to make, despite the advantages to the SME of securing such a visit. The following figure 5 illustrates the connecting emergent themes that impact the sales process in SMEs in the Food and Drink sector.



A holistic conceptual framework can now be constructed to capture the:

1. 5 steps identified in the sales process: prospecting, preparation for the sales meeting, the sales meeting itself, the actions points resulting from a sales meeting and the maintaining of contact with the buyer/customer.
2. 5 dimensions that impact the sales process: type of customer, type of relationship, time perspective, type of problem and sequence of stages.
3. 5 emergent themes (barriers and enablers) that both directly, and indirectly affect the sales process: the importance of the owner, sales knowledge of the SME, the role of technology, the tolerance of the unequal relationship and geographic location (see Figure 6)



**Conclusion**

Overall, the evidence suggests that the majority of SMEs in the study lack consistency in their sales process and that SMEs without sales trained or educated resource particularly lack sales process knowledge. SMEs approach B2B selling in a haphazard way in both new and modified selling task situations. Some SMEs do consider the importance of trying to align the sales process to meet customer/buyer needs and there is recognition of the importance of relationship building as posited by Rackham and De Vincentis (1999) which is done, both, proactively or reactively. However, it is evident that the main focus of all SMEs is to get in front of a buyer/customer and to try and make a sale (Carson *et al.,* 1995). The focus is both sales-oriented on this basis but also client-focused by necessity; each situation and encounter customer-specific (Hill, 2001a; 2001b). The nuances and subtleties of adapting sales presentations to buyers’ preferred styles as posited by Saxe and Weitz (1982) for example, is evidenced by only a few interviewees. Overall there is clear recognition that undertaking personal selling activities are important to the furthering of business dealings as discussed by Melia (2000; 2001), despite the difficulties expressed in carrying these out by SMEs in this study. Literature extols both the virtues of, and challenges in marketing and selling collaboration (Donaldson, 2007) but for SMEs in this study, the term selling and marketing are interchangeable with many expressing the view that ‘selling’ is ‘marketing’ (Oakey, 1991; Murdoch *et al.,* 2001; McCartan-Quinn and Carson, 2003; Marcatti *et al.,* 2008).

In this study, SMEs express an overall positive attitude towards their customers. However, despite extensive references to the importance of the relationship and what that means in business terms, none of the SMEs referred to a ‘win-win’ approach, though mutual gain was implied. None of the SMEs in this study talk about value creation as posited by Wotruba (1991; 1996), yet SMEs did appreciate the benefits that valuable relationships bring. Trust in relationships is particularly important to the SMEs in this study. Many SMEs express difficulty in accessing, and keeping in contact with buyers/customers. There appears however, a general acceptance that this was how it has to be and there is little they can do about it, apart from being persistent and resilient. SMEs in this study express frustration, but in the main desist from being overly negative about prospecting for new customers, and interacting with existing customers both large and small.

**Academic and Practitioner Implications and recommendation**

The findings provide new knowledge concerning the steps of selling in the sales process practised in SMEs and factors that affect the operationalisation of the sales process. Academic researchers in the fields of sales and small business, together with owner managers of SMEs (as practitioners within the Food and Drink sector) and particularly SFD, who is tasked with encouraging and supporting SMEs, should find the research findings of this study useful. The conceptual framework which outlines the sales process practised by Scottish-based Food and Drink SMEs will hopefully encourage academics to pursue further studies in an area that lacks empirical evidence.

The emergent theme data and findings provide some new knowledge/evidence/literature about important enablers and barriers that affect the operationalisation of the sales process in Scottish-based Food and Drink SMEs. The information gathered in this study delivers a conceptual framework for the sales process practised by Scottish-based Food and Drink SMEs. This conceptual framework could now be tested in SMEs in other geographic territories and in SMEs in other industry sectors.

This new knowledge helps fill a gap in current SME selling literature. There is a paucity of texts that are academically underpinned and which deliver instruction on the sales process in SMEs. Findings from this study could usefully inform instructive academic publications. These include:

Case Studies, a new small academic text book on SMEs and Sales Process and could also usefully be distilled into a chapter in SME texts. Additionally, it could usefully provide learning materials for existing and new modules in Entrepreneurship, Small Business, Marketing and Sales subject group areas for Schools of Marketing and Management within University Business Faculties to impart new knowledge to students.

The contribution to practice can be summarised as twofold. Firstly, for SMEs and the owner managers of SMEs who are looking to increase their sales knowledge and improve their sales performance. Secondly, for SFD, the agency funded and tasked with the encouragement and development of improved performance across businesses (of all sizes) in the Food and Drink industry sector.

The role of the SMEs owner was clearly identified as important, at least in their own eyes. This study reveals that while intuition and instinct and enthusiasm and passion brought some benefits to SMEs in the sales process, the downside was an over reliance on these to the detriment of hard facts gained through gathering robust data on customers for face-to-face meetings. So, a more professional approach is required to be instilled in some SMEs.

Not all SMEs had sales knowledge within their firm. Many expressed a desire to not only improve their sales knowledge but also to engage professional sales people to assist them. A programme of sales training might assist in this area of sales deficiency.

This study highlights an underdeveloped understanding in the role and usefulness of CRM software and how best to captialise on the opportunities to utilise social media/technologies in B2B communications. Again, some form of sales training/ learning (one to one or workshops) could be considered either directly with SMEs or via SFD with monies or part monies provided by the Scottish Government who have an interest in helping SMEs improve their knowledge of this area.

The research underscored that it is the buyers who are in charge and SMEs struggle to be heard against the multitude of products vying for shelf space in a crowded market place. Rapport building and relationship selling is being activated by some but not all SMEs in the study. This is a specific challenge for SMEs that is clearly underdeveloped. Only two SMEs in this study engage in regular weekly contact with their existing customers. SMEs clearly need guidance in how to improve their approach to relationship selling.

SMEs in this study report a challenge based on their geographic location. Sending samples is expensive, delivering orders from more remote areas, organising multiple buying trips to smaller customers or one big meeting with one big buyer in say London are difficult and costly. Help is available from SFD in this area, but most results were mixed and different initiatives need investigation to help SMEs reduce costs in doing business. Perhaps ‘Meet the Buyer’ events need to be scrutinised to better determine what aspects of this intervention works, and what aspects do not. Therefore an acceleration of sales training/ learning (one-to-one or workshops) could be considered either directly with SMEs or via SFD with monies or part monies provided by Government who have an interest in helping SMEs improve their sales effectiveness.

**Future Research**

Research into SMEs is limited (Curran and Blackburn, 2001) and peer reviewed, empirical evidence concerning selling and the sales process, in SMEs, is simply not available. This provides a large gap in scope for further research into all aspects related to selling and the sales process and SMEs. There is some limited research that exists concerning challenges faced by Food and Drink SMEs when engaging with large supermarket groups; but no literature specifically on SMEs, selling and the Food and Drink industry specifically. The conceptual framework of the sales process practised by Scottish-based Food and Drink SMEs offers a starting point for more examination, investigation and understanding into themes relating to the sales process, SMEs and the Food and Drink industry.

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