

# **Supermarket Buyers' Perspectives on the Sales Process Effectiveness of Food and Drink SMEs in Scotland**

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## **Abstract**

**Keywords:** SMES, Sales process, Effective selling

## **Objective**

This paper explores the sales process approach of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in the Scottish Food and Drink (SFD) sector from the perspective of supermarket buying organisations. The study investigated how SMEs currently approach and engage supermarket buyers, and the supermarket buyers' perceptions about the most effective way SMEs could present themselves and their products for sale.

## **Prior Work**

Recent research reveals Scottish-based SMEs' approach to the sales process is highly complex with each selling interaction seen as a unique opportunity – presenting a new selling task situation to the seller. There is some limited empirical research evidence of SMEs approach to the sales process in the Food and Drink sector in Scotland but no empirical research evidence from the supermarket buyers' perspective. This paper bridges this gap.

## **Approach**

The paper adopts an interpretivist perspective with qualitative data gathered through interviews and a questionnaire with open questions that elicited rich data from the supermarket buyers' perspective. Buyers from four global supermarket groups were questioned between 2013 and 2014. Buyers were located in Scotland and acted as regional buyers for their respective organisations.

## **Results**

Research findings reveal that according to supermarket buyers, Scottish-based Food and Drink SMEs adopt a phased sequential sales process approach comprising three steps when engaging with supermarket buyers in a new selling task situation. The steps are articulated as the following: The initial approach, the meeting and the close and follow up. The study additionally provided new knowledge concerning what supermarket buyers considered important issues when SMEs engaged in initial meetings; preparedness, awareness, realism and communication.

## **Implication and Value**

To conclude, the paper identifies areas where future research is required in the field alongside suggestions where policy makers and government agencies might focus interventions to assist SMEs to improve the delivery of their approach to the sales process and their selling effectiveness with supermarket chains.

## 1. Introduction

The food retail sector in United Kingdom is dominated by four major retail giants: - Tesco, Sainsbury, Asda-Walmart and William Morrison. Together they account for circa 90% of the market in the UK (Traill, 2006; Hughes *et al.*, 2009; BBC news, 2015). The fortunes of these supermarket companies have fluctuated over the last few years. Currently, food and drink inflation is negative (BBC news, 2015). Tesco has been rocked by financial scandal (since the departure of long term CEO Sir Terry Leahy), and lost its favoured status with its loyal followers. Sainsbury's unbroken run of increased sales and profits (while under the stewardship of Justin King) has come to an end. Asda-Walmart has failed to seize the initiative over the resurgent German-based discount operators Aldi and Lidl (who are on a market share growth trajectory) and Wm. Morrison was late to internet shopping and loyalty schemes, has sacked its CEO and needs to improve (The Grocer, 2015).

What the aforementioned supermarket groups have in common is, that, in addition to stocking major household brands, each introduces hundreds of new branded and private label products every year onto their shelves to seek to differentiate *themselves* from each other, while enticing *their* shoppers to return as loyal customers and/ or to spend more each time they shop. So, the role that many SMEs play in this process, are as generators of new product concepts, putting their wares in front of supermarket buyers in order to access consumers and build their businesses. For SMEs to succeed, they need the support of the major supermarkets, and in turn the supermarkets need SMEs to develop and deliver portfolios of new products. Recent research reveals Scottish-based SMEs' approach to the selling as reported from their perspective, is complex, with each selling interaction in a new selling task situation unique (Douglas, 2013). There is some limited empirical research evidence of SMEs approach to the sales process in the Scottish Food and Drink (SFD) sector in Scotland but *no empirical research evidence from the supermarket buyers' perspective* (Douglas and Brodie, 2010). Scotland Food and Drink (2015) on its website provides its members with useful lists of what might be required of a SME when approaching a supermarket buyer. However, this is anecdotal evidence and not underpinned academically. It is therefore critically important that further research is done to support SMEs.

The research in this paper sets out to address this lack of knowledge and seeks to explore how Food and Drink industry SMEs in Scotland go about introducing themselves and their products to prospective buyers – from the buyer's perspective. The main aim of the research presented in this paper is to understand the sales process currently practised by Scottish-based Food and Drink SMEs from the supermarket buyer perspective. In so doing this paper seeks to determine from the buyers' perspective what SMEs do well and, at what they could perhaps do better, when presenting themselves and their products for sale to buyers of supermarkets in the Food and Drink sector and, to provide practitioner recommendations to support a more effective sales process for Scottish-based Food and Drink SMEs.

## 2. Selling and the SME Sales Process

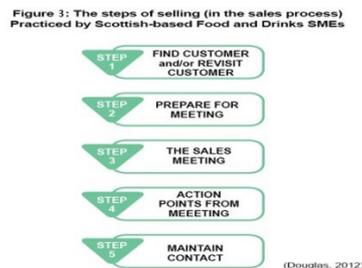
There is growing recognition of the importance of selling and the sales process in SMEs in Scotland (Rutterford, 2011; McCourt, 2011). Previous research into this area found that personal selling skills and knowledge of what is involved in a successful sales process to close sales deals and build relationships 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, thrive and succeed (Burns, 2007; Jobber and Lancaster, 2009). However, with much training and learning is the decision of the owner manager, and funds are simply not available according to Kitching and Blackburn (2002), so it tends to take play *in situ* (Lyons and Mattare, 2011). Despite the importance of selling and the sales process to SMEs (2013), there is a scarcity of empirical evidence/academic research but, according to Mantrala *et al* (2008), no lack of practitioner interest (Zoltners *et al.*, 2008). The lack of research, as posited by Veludo *et al* (2001), is because it is difficult to capture the complexity that is business seller-buyer interaction.

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). 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). Investors in SMEs rate selling skills and sales process knowledge highly alongside the make-up of the management team and financing the new venture (Huang and Brown, 1999). McCartan-Quinn and Carson (2003) attribute high failure rates of SMEs to weaknesses not only in financial management but also 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. With the shift to customer-centric relational selling approaches and the increased availability and use of technology, it is no surprise that selling activities have changed somewhat over the last few decades (Johnston and Marshall, 2013). Traditional selling

activities that required ability to prospect, overcome objections and close a sale have had a number of new success factor activities added. These include; listening skills, follow-up skills, ability to adapt sales style, tenacity, organisational and oral communication skills (Marshall *et al.*, 1999). Despite changes in the selling environment and the advent of modern technology, it is personal or face-to-face selling that is regarded as the most effective form of selling, with the presentation step in the sales process considered of significant importance (Moncrief and Marshall, 2005; Cicali *et al.*, (2012).

Many researchers focus upon large organisations and highlight the importance of the steps in the sales process used to professionally engage in selling activities (Dubinsky, 1980/81; Moncrief and Marshall, 2005; Ingram *et al.*, 2010). The sales process is a series of interrelated steps, often referred to as the seven steps of selling and made up of prospecting, pre approach, approach, presentation, objection handling, the close, and follow up (Dubinsky, 1980/81; Hite and Bellizzi, 1985; Ingram, 1990). 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.

In previous research (Douglas, 2013) identified the steps in the sales process as neither wholly specifically sequential (linear) nor simultaneous (non-linear) in SMEs. What is evident is that finding new customers in some shape or form starts the process, be it of a proactive or reactive nature. **Finding New Customers and/or Revisit Customer** is **Step 1** in the sales process. The traditional pre approach 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. It does not simply consist of the presentation or demonstration of the product. The **Sales Meeting** is therefore **Step 3**. Every meeting has a ‘close’ step or ends with a list of actions to be undertaken. 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. **Action points from the Sales Meeting**, is, **Step 4**. Finally, 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. 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** (Douglas, 2013).



### 3. Methodology

Supermarket Buyers from four different global supermarket groups were interviewed between 2013 and 2014. The buyers were based in Scotland and were regional buyers for their respective organisations. Buyers were both male and female and have worked for more than five years in a buyer-related role. A purposeful random sampling method was chosen. This approach to sampling was selected to increase the credibility of the research and not specifically to foster representativeness (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The interview and in depth questionnaire consisted of both open and closed questions and provided rich data about the approach made by SMEs to supermarket businesses when looking to trade for the first time, allowing for any new themes to emerge. In adopting an interpretivist philosophy, detailed insight and a clearer understanding of the SME sales process from the buyers' perspectives were gathered. This approach focuses upon the interaction of the researcher and their interviewees according to Mingers (2001) with knowledge flowing from the interaction since “findings are literally created as the investigation proceeds” (Guba and Lincoln 1994, p.111). The approach supports the construction of a conceptual framework of SMEs sales process from the buyer perspective. Cresswell's (2009; p.185) stepped approach to data analysis in qualitative research was adopted utilising a thematic analysis approach (Boyatis, 1998; Roulston, 2001). Miles and Huberman's (1994; p.35) guidance on data reduction was followed “condensing and interpreting” what was heard from the interviews and in effect the collected data was “co-authored”. The transcripts were studied to see if any meaningful patterns emerged in order to identify frequency of codes and code combinations (Myers, 2009). Each theme

was then analysed in view of the totality of evidence from the four in depth interviews and questionnaires (Lofland, 1971). Although this study, with its rich data, featured only four buyers from supermarket organisations, saturation of the data (themes) was deemed to have been achieved (Carson *et al.*, 2001). In terms of limitations of the research, only four buyers from Scottish-based Supermarket retailers were interviewed and completed a detailed questionnaire. More buyers from the Food Retail sector could have been interviewed. However, this was an exploratory piece of research and key themes were investigated and adequately articulated. The relatively new technique of thematic analysis was chosen over other more traditional methods of analysis due to the lack of relevant quantitative data on SMEs being available (Collis and Hussey, 2009). The phenomenon of the research and research methodology means that it will not be possible to repeat this study and replicate its findings. The process that has been adopted does provide a basis for future research.

#### 4. Findings and Discussion

##### 4.1 How SMEs currently approach, and interact with supermarket buyers

This research discovered that SMEs normally contact supermarket buyers by way of a letter, via the supermarket's website, by calling the buyer's Head Office and asking to speak to the buyer, occasionally at a 'Meet the Buyer' event organised by SFD and, less frequently, at an Industry Trade Show or Excellence Awards Ceremony. No one approach over another guaranteed more success for a SME getting a listing. Having a regional Scottish Office made the process simpler for smaller potential suppliers to make contact with supermarket buyers. It was sometimes hard for potential SMEs to 'get a hold' of buyers since they were very busy people. Despite this constraint, all supermarket buyers regarded themselves approachable and welcoming. Buyers stated that appointments were made generally by email or by phone. Buyers offered two forms of communication with SMEs; a face-to-face encounter or a scheduled teleconference. From the buying firm's perspective, SFD events were an efficient and effective method of meeting, for the first time, large numbers of prospective SMEs; up to 30 per day. 'Ranging windows' in part determined the time of year when it was most appropriate to see prospective SME suppliers. It was often easier for buyers to take product from existing suppliers. This did not mean that buyers would not see prospects. The data collected and analysed relating to SMEs making contact with a buyer forms **The Initial Approach STEP** in the sales process.

The typical length of a meeting with a SME in a new selling task situation is 30-60 minutes. The likely length of a meeting is usually dealt with at the beginning of the meeting. Information in advance of a meeting is requested but is not always forthcoming. Usually no agenda is provided in advance or at the meeting itself. SMEs tend to deliver a short presentation that incorporates a proposal. Sometimes market data is provided but not always. SMEs almost always provide a product concept or sample for tasting. Pricing information is generally not provided but some discussion concerning recommended retail price of an item is offered. Negotiations usually do not start till subsequent meetings. The buyer asks lots of questions in an initial meeting; ratio 60:40. SMEs tended to ask few questions with the focus of the meeting on their presentation; what they have to sell. Meetings come to a natural end, though it is often the buyer who takes control and brings the meeting to a conclusion. The data collected and analysed relating to SMEs meeting with a buyer forms **The Meeting STEP** in the sales process.

The SME is expected to provide notes from meetings after the meeting, usually as an email to the supermarket buyer. According to SB4 the SME needs to take the initiative to address issues that arose from the meeting; generally known as follow up or points to action. A list of action points is helpful according to SB1 and helps ensure that both parties agree with the content discussed at the meeting and clarity of actions outstanding following the meeting. Post meeting activity can result in an exchange of several emails between the SME and supermarket buyer. This ensures that a line of communication can be maintained following the initial meeting contact. The data collected and analysed relating to SMEs follow up and communication after a meeting with a supermarket buyer from his/ her perspective could be referred to as **The Follow up STEP** in the sales process.



**4.2 How SMEs might improve their approach to supermarket buyers?** Supermarket buyers have clear expectations of how a SME should prepare for a meeting. Firstly, all the buyers would expect a SME to come with some or all of the following information: - the history of their company, numbers of employees, its product range, production facilities, technical accreditations, other customers it does business with, and how business might be scaled up if necessary. There is an expectation that information will have been gathered on the supermarket itself and the market sector or product category. There is definitely an expectation that the supermarket being presented to will have been visited by the SME and some form of audit of the relevant product range have been undertaken. The purpose of a meeting with a SME is twofold; for the SME to present product and to suggest to the buyer how it might fit into the supermarket's existing range AND for the supermarket buyer to make the prospective supplier aware of the requirements and costs involved in doing business with that particular supermarket. An agenda did provide some structure to a meeting and helped both parties work through the key issues. What SMEs failed to do, and needed to do, was to include in their presentation details about just how exactly the SME and supermarket might work together to achieve a win-win situation and how exactly the SME might add value to a prospective partnership. Three out of four of the supermarket buyers expressed the belief that an SME might consider engaging a 'low level' account manager/sales person with knowledge the world of supermarket buying. Overall buyers welcomed short presentations. The buyer expected the SME to have researched the supermarket and have knowledge of their product and the product category in question. According to supermarket buyers, SMEs came to meetings with insufficient understanding about the differences in offering for sales a proprietary brand versus offering as product to be sold under a supermarket label. SMEs were unrealistic in profit margin expectations. Many had not grasped the concept that volume equals increases contribution from the SME. Communication was important to maintaining a relationship with the supermarket buyer but many SMEs failed to deliver a timely response to requests made by supermarket buyers.

#### **4.3 Recommendations on improving the Sales Process**

The findings suggest that the sales process practice of Scottish-based SMEs in the Food and Drinks industry from the supermarket buyer perspective is complex in that every interaction is unique (Douglas, 2013). However, the sales process in a new selling task situation can be distilled down to, and expressed in three sequential stages. 1. The Initial approach, 2. The Meeting, 3. The Close and follow up. These three steps identified from the buyers' viewpoint appear to be a more simplistic version of that discovered in Douglas' (2013) research which identified five steps expressed from the Scottish-based food and drink SMEs perspective. This truncated version as described and explained by supermarket buyers starts with the 'Initial Approach' that brings together steps 1. (Find customer) and 2.(Prepare for meeting). The second step is 'The meeting'. This aligns with step 3 in Douglas' (2013) findings, 'The sales meeting'. The final step is 'The follow up', this brings together steps 4. (Action points from meeting) and 5.(Main contact) from research findings.

#### **4.4 Recommendations for matching expectations of buyers with SMEs during the buyer-seller process**

In this study supermarket buyers defined a number of requirements that they expected of a SME that wished to do business with a supermarket. The data gathered can be distilled down to four key actions to address:

1. \*Be prepared - Research the supermarket being presented to
2. \*Be aware - Understand the difference between brand and private label
3. \*Be realistic – Consider gross margin expectations (volume equals increased contribution)
4. \*Be communicative - Deliver a timely response to all requests made

**5. Conclusions and Implications** This paper explored the sales process approach of SMEs in the SFD sector from the perspective of supermarket buyers. It investigated how SMEs currently approach and engage supermarket buyers, and the supermarket buyers' views about the most effective way SMEs could present themselves and their products for sale. There are practitioner implications, academic implications, and future research. The significance of the study is the illumination of exactly what the initial engagement in the sales process practised by SMEs consists of, and how it might be improved upon, as reported from the supermarket buyer perspective. This research contributes in areas where literature is sparse. The research assists practitioners and government agencies, charged with the mandate to support SMEs, to better understand the sales process and its role in developing and growing SMEs in the SFD industry. The research also seeks to indicate tentative interventions to help improve SME selling capabilities. In a challenging and dynamic environment, 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 Food and Drink industry outlets. The increasing hold of supermarkets on the grocery trade in the UK/Scotland, and the reducing number of independent and specialist outlets serving the SFD industry, delivers both a challenge and an opportunity to Scottish-based SMEs (SFDF, 2015).

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