An international MBA program can produce a ‘global road warrior’

It is interesting how intelligence is gathered when a salesperson travels on business.

One of the places that might seem unlikely to reveal clues to the strategies and methods of different competitors and cultures is in the breakfast room of a hotel. Many international salesmen have told me about an interesting consistency that shows up.

The final planning for the big customer visit is done over breakfast. The restaurant is the final staging ground. The players meet to finalize objectives and roles and to polish their presentation.

Typically, the Japanese sales
International MBAs empower the U.S. global salesman

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team needs a large table. There may be as many as five or six team members. There may be a high-ranking technician, a service support manager, a financial wizard, a parts guru, a regional salesman and high-ranking decision-maker to pull it all together. They all have important roles to play in this compartmentalized team, although some roles may only be their presence.

The Europeans may need only a table for four. The team may consist of two to four people, usually a technical person, the responsible salesman, a service support guy and a senior manager.

Over in his corner ("her corner" is becoming more and more prevalent), reading the regional international edition of the Herald Tribune, is the American salesperson, the ultimate global road warrior.

Why are there such different approaches to international sales?

I do not claim to have the answer for all the examples. For the American salesperson, however, I do have a theory.

At the turn of the last century, in 1900, financier Edward Tuck made a generous contribution to Dartmouth College to start a five-year business program. The first three years were to acquire a bachelor's degree, and the next two for a master's degree in business.

In 1902, seven young men earned the Master of Commercial Science diploma, the predecessor to the Master of Business Administration.

Some years later, the United States entered into the First World War in Europe. This experience opened the eyes of future American businessmen and educators to the world market.

Many graduate programs of business began adding international and import/export courses. International business education began to develop.

Slowly the programs gathered around the MBA name. But within this name were many flavors of an MBA. Some were generalist in nature, churning our business managers, while others became specialized.

An example would be a financial MBA program to supply Wall Street with analysts.

In the 1940s, the United States was engaged in the Second World War, which introduced future businessmen to the Pacific and Atlantic cultures. The United States also became the dominant world industrial power, largely as a result of the industrial buildup for the war, and the fact that our industrial infrastructure was not destroyed as a result of the war.

More internationally oriented businessmen were urgently needed.

In the mid-1940s, several colonels who were retiring convinced Gen. Barton Kyle Youn, Commanding General, Army Air Forces Training Command, that Americans needed to be educated in international business.

He acquired an Army Air Corps training base in the Arizona desert, Thunderbird Field, and founded what has since become known to business leaders across the world as Thunderbird, then called the American Institute of Foreign Trade.

This was the first school dedicated to the teaching of international business.

In the early 1970s, Thunderbird changed itself to a graduate school offering the Master of International Management (now the MBA in International Management) diploma. Hence the Global Road Warriors concept began. (This is a free advertising plug for my Alma Mater.)

The concept spread, and continues to do so.

Three years ago, Dean Joyce Elam of the College of Business Administration of Florida International University responded to the rise of Miami as a "world city" by establishing an International MBA program, one of the more recent additions to Global Road Warrior production. (Free plug for the program of which I am director.)

FIU joins a number of leading universities across the country offering increasing options for businesspeople interested in the global economy, including Duke University, the University of South Carolina, Columbia, Michigan and others.

The purpose of these internationally oriented MBA programs is to turn out globally savvy managers. Many times the route to senior management leads through the sales channel.

These programs are typically general in scope, providing learning in marketing, finance, management, organizational design, information technology and systems, and international business environment. This list is not all-inclusive, as many schools offer varying international MBA degrees.

Also, the MBA is not just for business undergraduates.

Many MBA candidates have technical or engineering degrees, but any undergraduate degree can lead to an international MBA.

Last year we had a classical music undergraduate go through the MBA. He could end up as president of a musical instrument manufacturer or director of a major orchestra that plays all over the world.

A technical background is actually an asset for the global businessperson.

If we may, let us return to the beginning of this article. Remember the Japanese team? Now look at the preceding paragraphs. The MBA program, with origins and concept in the United States, has been able to reproduce the team in one individual.

This person can discuss finance, supply chain management, and IT, and is probably empowered with the authority to make changes and take decisions. That is the power of the MBA-educated salesperson.

The International MBA salesperson is also culturally adept. Probably speaks several languages. Can operate with minimum support anywhere in the world. In short, a power to be reckoned with, a Global Road Warrior.

Of course, success leads to imitation. Business people from every country in the world have come to the United States for an MBA degree. Now MBA education is proliferating throughout Europe and the rest of the world.

Perhaps we will be seeing ever smaller teams at the breakfast table, especially with the high cost of international travel.

As corporations become more global in their scope and management mix, there is much more need for internationally oriented talent. The International MBA will continue to grow throughout the world because the need is there. I probably will not live to see the Galactic MBA, but I am sure it will come.

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