



## School's out

### *Diagnosis*

An advanced degree seems like the best idea for your future.

### *Prescription*

Weigh your options, as pursuing one may not be right for you.

"I'm getting an M.B.A. to better myself and gain knowledge," said Julia Chong, a high-achieving sales consultant for Novartis. "It's not just for advancement." Chong is one of the reps in the pharma industry who believe that pursuing an advanced degree may be a key tool to help her advance up the career ladder. "I want to be the best manager and leader I can. Not knowing what the industry is going to look like in 20 to 30 years, I think it's a good idea to have one."

As Americans have increasingly embraced the pursuit of advanced degrees, their thoughts on the necessity of higher education have changed – more than ever before, having a master's degree, or even a doctorate, seems required and common in industries in which those degrees were previously rare or unnecessary.

But are they really worth it?

We decided to find out by asking some of the industry's experts.

Arlene Adoff is the vice president of sales and marketing training and development at Novartis. She says, "People talk about how it's important to run your territory like a business. An M.B.A. gives you more tools in your toolbox – if this was your business, how would you spend the money?"

Some sales representatives see higher edu-

Is getting that advanced degree really right for you?  
by Judi Glova

education as valuable currency to transition into a new career. "If you are a sales rep with an M.B.A., it will make it easier to move into marketing," according to Leslie Gaber, president of Leslie Gaber Associates. "But it's not a guarantee." Gaber has two decades of experience placing sales representatives in the pharmaceutical industry. She went on to say, "An M.B.A. can never hurt somebody, but it won't always help."

A former senior fellow at the Wharton School of Business agrees that while an M.B.A. can be valuable, it isn't always: "It's appropriate for the right person, with the right reasons at the right time and the right place. And the converse is true. It's all about the right fit," said Stan Bernard, M.D., M.B.A.

Chong, though, says her education is working for her: "I would recommend an M.B.A. to anyone who wants to go into management because an M.B.A. gives you a different mind set – so much more knowledge of business and management skills."

She is not alone in seeing the across-the-board value of an M.B.A. "The benefit of getting an M.B.A. if you are in sales or sales management is that you gain a better understanding of the business skills, concepts and strategies behind the company and its products. It can also give you more of an advantage to segue into a marketing role," said Shellie Caplan, a 28-year veteran recruiter in the pharmaceutical industry and president of Caplan Associates. "However, it's not going to be the thing that puts you over the top – your experience will usually outweigh [an M.B.A.] when it comes time for advancements in the sales arena."

With that said, an M.B.A. is not the only alphabet soup to consider.

### Expanding your options

Some reps want to pursue a more scientific route to transition out of sales.

"A higher degree helps [sales representatives] to expand their options in the biopharma and device industry," said Dr. Robin Winter-Sperry, president of Scientific Advantage. "An advanced scientific degree provides a sales representative with a greater range of opportunities." Winter-Sperry, who holds an M.D., adds, "They should plan their careers with the same skills they use in planning their

calls – what is their ultimate objective? And then they should devise a plan about how to get there." She says an advanced scientific degree is a large investment in time, money and effort and adds that pursuing one should be balanced against how much more "sellable" it's going to make them.


One area that has seen a huge increase is that of the medical science liaison, or MSL. Years ago, sales reps were able to take this route without an advanced degree, but today it's a different story.

"Advanced degrees are almost mandatory for those reps who want to transition into

## Degree or not degree

### Four questions to consider

Stan Bernard, a senior fellow at the Wharton School of Business suggests asking yourself the following questions to help you sort things out:

- 
- Where do I see myself five to 10 years down the road?
  - Why do I want an advanced degree? Is my primary driver about career building, a career boost or a career transition?
  - When is the best timing for me?
  - Where do I want to go to school?

a MSL position or manage that kind of team," Gaber noted. "Ninety-five percent of the time you must have a Pharm.D, M.D. or Ph.D."

### The competitive edge

Besides the M.B.A., Pharm.D., M.D. and Ph.D., there are other ways to gain that competitive edge. That edge comes from fine-tuning your capabilities.

Susanne Reilly, vice president of talent management at PDI, a sales and marketing services provider to the biotech and pharmaceutical industry, says clients often are looking for specific areas of expertise: "They are less interested in an advanced degree, per se, than they are in candidates with experience in certain therapeutic areas, such as diabetes, cardiovascular or other disease states."

And that expertise may come from individuals who haven't carried the bag. Reilly noted that clients may be looking for someone with a healthcare background, such as an RN, RN/B.S.N. or M.S.N., or for someone who has experience as a researcher in a particular area. They want to know, "Can this person touch on multiple points of access in a physician's office? Can they provide the kind of support that will maximize our brand?"

From the physician's perspective, docs also appreciate a sales rep who has gone the extra mile when it comes to enhanced specialty knowledge. Being well-versed in your product and in clinical knowledge is expected; however, if you can be a resource to them as it relates to the disease state they are treating, it's an additional advantage.

### Knowledge is power

Look for ways you can gain more knowledge about the key opinion leaders in your area, as well as their beliefs. Perhaps you can learn about the managed care plans your physicians are dealing with and the impact of formularies. Become familiar with health economic data, as well.

"It's really about initiative, as opposed to waiting for the information to come to you," emphasized Arlene Adoff. "Physicians have more respect for sales reps who raise their standard. Make yourself different from the other reps the physician sees when you walk through the door."

The unique skills that will make you rise up don't even have to come from within the pharma industry: Trends within small and emerging pharmaceutical companies show they are looking for sales professionals with a high level of basic selling skills, regardless of their background in prescription drug sales.

"I'm thinking of one of our clients who said, 'We need you to put together a team of 100 reps. Of that team of 100, we would like at least 50 percent to have pharma experience, but we are more flexible regarding the experience set of the other 50 percent,'" Reilly reported.

Reilly said some Pharma and biotech companies are impressed with professionals who have great B-to-B experience. She says some fast-rising stars are coming out of organizations with a strong customer-focused

orientation, where they learned important skills regarding relationship management, account management and consultative selling.

"I've heard a client say, 'If it's a smart candidate, we can teach them the pharmaceutical side. Bring me someone who is a great sales person regardless of their industry background.' That's where we are seeing some competition for the experienced sales representative. Sometimes they'll say, 'Hey, this candidate doesn't have pharmaceutical experience but they have five or 10 years in a relevant sales environment where they demonstrated high performance numbers and have the potential to learn the industry.'"

It's a win-win for managers. They know they can hire a candidate for a competitive salary because they are looking to get their foot in the door of pharmaceutical sales; candidates are motivated and managers have the opportunity to train them their way. No previous habits to break.

In fact, hiring managers within pharmaceutical companies have a different outlook than you might think.

"The stars I see are the ones who take their own personal initiative to continually learn and develop on the skills and knowledge they need to be best-in-class," remarked Adoff.

She also suggested going beyond learning facts and building relationships with your clients as well as your peers. Networking is vital. Look to your peers who have been successful. Find out why they are successful, what they are learning, where they are getting their information and how they are



doing it. Don't just rely on people inside your territory; network outside as well.

A trend not to miss is the decreasing number of sales divisions and regions. With so much consolidation in the pharma industry, there are fewer management positions, organizations are getting flatter and territories are getting bigger.

Having a competitive edge means more than just another degree. A wide set of skills is most important, however. Deciding whether or not an advanced degree is right for you is no longer choosing between black and white. Consider some advice from a mentor or coach who can provide you with an outside perspective and help you weigh your options. Other places to go "mentor-hunting" are professional organizations such as the Healthcare Businesswomen's Association.

Julia Chong is so enthusiastic about pursuing her M.B.A. that she's increased her course load from one class per week to two. She expects to graduate in 2009.

Judi Glava – founder of Pinnacle Coaching & Consulting – is a Certified Empowerment Coach (CEC), and adjunct trainer for the Center of Creative Leadership. Pinnacle's coaches and trainers enhance leadership skills and provide a strategic approach for on-boarding and retaining top talent through a customized behavior modification program that combines emotional and social intelligence development, coaching and workshops to improve interpersonal effectiveness, develop leader behaviors, build high-performance teams and accelerate business growth. She can be reached at [judi@ova@pinnacle-coach.com](mailto:judi@ova@pinnacle-coach.com).

