

S E L L I N G T O

BIG COMPANIES



J I L L K O N R A T H

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Several years ago my sales training business came to a screeching halt. Within a several month period, I lost 95 percent of my work when my two biggest clients put a moratorium on all outside consulting. Because I was working with multiple divisions of these corporate giants, I thought I was safe. Unfortunately, when Wall Street started putting pressure on them to deliver better results, they made across-the-board cuts.

Contracts stopped midstream. Instead of having the next five months fully booked, I had nothing on my plate—and I mean nothing. Yet I found it impossible to pick up the phone and make sales calls.

Why? For the previous ten years, my business had grown with virtually no effort on my part. By doing a good job, one project quickly led to a second and a third. My name was passed on (with glowing praise) to different divisions and business units. When I met with prospective buyers, they were ready to start working. Over time, as I became an invaluable resource for my clients, they asked me to help in areas outside my expertise. Initially I declined, but before long I was leading strategy sessions, doing future scenario planning, and working in market development. All this was a big stretch from helping companies shorten time-to-revenue on new product launches. I loved it! It challenged me beyond my wildest dreams.

But it also wreaked havoc on my value proposition. If someone asked me what I did, I could go on for days about everything I was capable of doing for marketing and sales. As a sales trainer, I knew I needed a strong value proposition to capture the attention of corporate decision makers. Mine was so all over the map that I couldn't make calls. After over a decade of running a successful training firm, I was back at ground zero again trying to determine the direction of my company.

During that same time period, I did a pro bono project for a small magazine that catered to small and emerging businesses. Captivated by their impact on the economy, I spent hours online learning as much as

I could about the entrepreneurial market sector. I was stunned to discover that 75 percent of small businesses shut their doors because the owner was working too darn hard for the amount of money coming in.

For someone with my background, it was clear that they had a severe sales and marketing problem. I researched the available resources for these small firms that wanted to sell their products, services, and solutions to the corporate market and was appalled at how bad they were. I wanted to help, but I had no idea how I could impact these widely dispersed, cash-poor businesses.

One day it hit me: I'd create an online resource for these firms called SellingtoBigCompanies.com. On this site, they'd have access to the same quality information and training that was currently available only to large corporations. For almost a year, I poured my heart and soul into creating this resource for entrepreneurs, salespeople, independent professionals, and consultants.

During that time I did minimal consulting work and burned through nearly all my cash reserves. When the Web site was up and running, I was finally ready to return to my sales training business with renewed vigor and a full complement of new service offerings. I targeted companies I wanted to work for, found out who to contact, and started "dialing for dollars." I fully expected to land a few good clients in no time flat—just like I had in the past.

Boy, was I in for a shock! I couldn't reach a living soul. No one answered the phones anymore. All my calls rolled directly into voice mail. I agonized over leaving messages—should I or shouldn't I? It didn't seem to matter either way because no one called me back.

I was stymied. I'd never experienced problems getting in before. For someone who prided herself on her sales skills, it was incredibly humbling. At first I thought it might just be me—that maybe I was over the hill and no one wanted to talk with me anymore. But after checking around, I discovered other sellers were facing the same problem.

The struggle to get in was reaching epidemic proportions. Every person I talked with was having major difficulty setting up appointments with corporate buyers. It didn't seem to matter if they worked for a major corporation with huge name recognition or if they were a small one-person consulting firm. Sales approaches that had worked for years were no longer effective. In fact, they actually created more obstacles.

Sellers were scratching their heads wondering what to do next. If they couldn't get in, there was no way they could sell anything. I knew exactly how they felt. My bank account was running low, and I needed business.

Fortunately I love difficult sales problems, which is exactly what I was faced with. I challenged myself to figure out what it took to get into big companies again. I interviewed numerous people. I experimented with multiple techniques and strategies. I sharpened and fine-tuned the approaches that held promise. Then I focused on eliminating the obstacles I encountered along the way.

Lo and behold, I finally started getting appointments with key decision makers. I kept at it until I knew the process worked for anyone in business-to-business sales, regardless of their specific market focus. Since that time, nearly all my speaking and training has focused on what it takes to get into big companies. It's a huge issue that affects sellers across every industry. They don't have a clue what to do differently—which is why I wrote this book.

SELLING TO BIG COMPANIES OVERVIEW

It's a whole new world out there right now. New approaches are required for success in today's crazy marketplace. Doing more of the same old thing won't get you anywhere—and especially not into a large corporation. *Selling to Big Companies* shows you what it takes to get the attention of corporate decision makers today.

Part I: Accept the Challenge

In Part I you'll learn more about what's happening in the corporate world today that's causing you all these sales difficulties. You'll be introduced to:

- marketplace trends impacting your sales today, as well as your own self-defeating behaviors;
- how to break large corporations and your offering into bite-sized chunks so you can get your foot in the door;

- the world of the corporate decision maker and how to best break through their wall of resistance; and
- the new sales paradigm where you become the major differentiator.

Part II: Build the Foundation

This section of the book covers those key elements you need to have in place to move forward in today's sales environment. You'll learn how to:

- target the big companies where you have a high likelihood of sales success;
- evaluate your current value proposition to determine its effectiveness;
- strengthen your value proposition so it's highly appealing to corporate buyers;
- research big companies and uncover critical information that can help you advance your sales efforts; and
- leverage existing relationships and create new connections that can help you get in.

Part III: Launch the Campaign

In this segment of the book, you'll discover how to integrate what you've learned about your value proposition and targeted prospects to:

- identify who makes decisions for your product or service within the big companies;
- craft a multitouch account entry campaign that breaks through all the marketing clutter;
- create and deliver enticing voice mail messages that attract the attention of corporate decision makers; and
- develop customer-attracting letters and e-mails that stand out from the crowd and incite a positive response.

Part IV: Break Through the Barriers

This portion of the book focuses on overcoming the typical challenges you encounter in your attempts to get into big companies. You'll find out how to:

- engage in a business-oriented phone discussion with prospective customers;
- overcome common objections and obstacles to getting your foot in the door;
- turn gatekeepers into gate openers without the use of manipulative techniques; and
- keep your account entry campaign alive without sounding like you're desperate—even if you are.

Part V: Advance the Sale

The final section of this book is focused on when you actually meet with your prospect. Specifically, you'll discover how to:

- plan and implement a highly effective initial client meeting;
- converse with corporate decision makers regarding their critical business issues;
- advance the sales process to its logical next step—with ease; and
- turn yourself into a competitive advantage!

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Selling to Big Companies was written to be an ongoing resource for your sales efforts. Because so much has changed in the past few years, I recommend that you read it through at least once to get a sense of today's sales environment and what it takes to be successful. Because many of the concepts in this book build upon each other, it's important to read them in order too.

After the first reading, I strongly suggest a focus on your value proposition. If you can't clearly articulate the business results that customers

realize from using your product, service, or solution, then the rest of the book is a moot point. Weak value propositions are the most common root cause of ineffective selling.

Once you've nailed down your value proposition, then work on developing your campaign. It doesn't matter what you tackle first—voice mails, direct mail, or e-mail account entry strategies. Start in the medium you are most comfortable with and then work on refining your approach. This book is full of guidance on what you need to do to build your momentum.

The Account Entry Tool Kit in Appendix A will help you better implement the concepts and ideas presented in the book. Also, you'll find a variety of resources you can use to increase your sales effectiveness.

I wrote *Selling to Big Companies* to help you get your foot in the door of large corporate accounts and win big contracts. May it provide you with all the insights you need to achieve your goals. Have a great year selling!

WHY NOBODY CALLS YOU BACK

Selling to big companies is tough. Really tough. It seems as if those big corporations have erected huge impenetrable fortresses around their offices just to keep you out. Decision makers' names are shrouded in secrecy. Phone calls are nearly always routed to voice mail. It's next to impossible to talk to a real live human being. And don't hold your breath if you're waiting for someone to call you back!

Yet, if you're like most people, you look at those big companies and think, "If only I could get my foot in the door." Visions of large contracts or sizable commission checks swirl through your head. You'd give anything for a few long-term corporate relationships with a highly profitable and consistent revenue stream.

Besides that, having prestigious firms like P&G, BP, or 3M as customers would be proof positive to other prospective buyers that your sales offering is world class. Deep inside, you know their stamp of approval would simplify your other sales efforts.

But how do you get into these big companies? What does it take to get a meeting with a decision maker? How do you get in if you don't know even one single person who works there? Or, if you're not quite

ready to tackle these corporate behemoths, how do you penetrate firms larger than you're working with today?

THE OVERWHELMING CORPORATE MYSTIQUE

The very thought of working with big accounts is often overwhelming for many sellers. Even the most accomplished professionals become tongue tied when they think about contacting a corporate bigwig.

Besieged by self-doubt, they question if they could possibly bring any value to a business relationship with a big company. They stress over how to handle pricing issues or competitive objections. They obsess over how to avoid sounding stupid to those bright, talented people who work for big companies.

I know because I've had all these feelings myself. When I first started selling, I worked a geographic territory for Xerox that excluded the large corporations. For three years, I had exceptional success selling copiers to small-sized and medium-sized businesses.

When I finally got promoted, I was terrified. I imagined my new decision makers to be imbued with superhuman qualities. In my mind, they were savvy businesspeople with no time for peons like me who were just learning the ropes. It didn't help matters either when one of the top sales representatives in my firm said to me, "Now you're playing with the Big Boys, Jill. We'll see how good you really are."

It took me a long time to realize that decision makers in big companies were normal human beings. They just happened to work for a large firm.

I had to relearn this lesson five years later when I started my sales training business. For some strange reason, I assumed that big corporations employed their own top-notch sales trainers whose skills far surpassed mine. It took me a while before I realized that they didn't have all the answers. My expertise complemented and extended their existing sales training capabilities.

In order to find that out, though, I had to meet with corporate decision makers. I needed to discover that their programs did not address all their sales training needs. That's where we come smack dab back to the questions that haunt everyone who sells to big companies: Who do

I see? And, what do I say when I get there? These selling challenges are even more complicated today because it's so difficult to get face-to-face meetings with prospective buyers.

SAIL INTO THE “PERFECT STORM”

If you've been trying to get into big companies, you know just how tough it is. The truth is that it's only going to get harder in the future. What you're facing now is a situation caused by the convergence of multiple market factors that have, in effect, created a “perfect storm” for sellers.

What's happening in the business community that's making it so hard to sell today? These are the current trends impacting your sales efforts:

- Big companies keep getting bigger and more global. They're constantly restructuring, reorganizing, and rightsizing. This continuous state of flux leads to an overworked, stressed-out workforce with a strong aversion to any more change.
- Corporate decision makers continue to embrace technology in order to enhance communications, educate themselves, protect their time, and prevent interruptions in their already overcrowded schedule.
- Competition gets tougher all the time as copycat products and services pop up virtually overnight. Prospects don't believe any company can maintain its competitive edge for long.
- Bombarded by a daily onslaught of marketing, corporate buyers are increasingly immune to even the slightest hint of self-promoting puffery by salespeople. This storm isn't going to blow over any time soon either.

These trends will make it even more difficult for you to:

- figure out where decisions are being made and who is actually involved in the decision process;
- entice stressed-out customers to take time from their busy schedules to meet with you;
- differentiate your offering from competitors without destroying your profit margins; and

- bring exceptional value to client meetings—so much so that decision makers will want to work with you despite higher pricing.

To be successful in this rapidly and radically changing sales environment, it's imperative to rethink your account entry strategy. Your first job is to examine your current approach to big companies to determine where changes are needed.

STOP SOUNDING LIKE A SELF-SERVING SALESPERSON

Let's take a look at what you might do today to set up an appointment with a corporate decision maker. If you're like many sellers, just the thought of picking up that phone to call strangers turns your stomach. All you can think about are those disgusting telemarketers who interrupt your evening meal and read from a canned script. Words like sleazy, slimy, and manipulative pop into your mind. Vowing to be different, you agonize over what you're going to say so you don't sound so "cheesy."

As a seller, you most likely would rather go to the dentist for a root canal than make those dreaded prospecting calls. Inside, a little voice in your head keeps saying: "Why bother—no one ever answers."

When you can't put it off any longer, you finally make the call. Sure enough, your prospect's voice mail kicks in, "Hi. This is Terry. Please leave a message and I'll call you back as soon as I can."

Frustrated by another fruitless attempt to reach this decision maker, you decide to leave a message this time. You quickly sit up straight in your chair, smile, and muster up all the enthusiasm you possibly can as you say,

"Mr. Hope. This is Jane Manthey. I'm with Generic Strategies, a leading design services firm in this area. We offer a wide range of marketing communications and consulting services. In fact, we pride ourselves on offering our customers one-stop shopping for all their design needs. We recently introduced some exciting new state-of-the-art services that earned us the highest recognition from Krumstock Research.

“I’d love to set up a time to find out a bit more about your needs in this area and tell you more about these new services we’re so excited about. Please give me a call at your earliest convenience. My number is . . . I look forward to meeting with you.”

Hanging up the phone, you sigh in relief. Another call done. Over with. Truth be told, you’re rather pleased with your performance. Your message was gracious. You weren’t pushy—just informative. You demonstrated enough passion for your offering without going overboard. All in all, your call was very professional, if you don’t say so yourself.

Sound familiar? Well, if you left a message that was even close to the one above, you sounded exactly like every other salesperson trying to reach this decision maker. He or she probably has numerous other identical messages in his or her voice mail every single day.

While most sellers agonize over how to best describe their company and offering, they rarely stop to listen to what they say from their prospect’s point of view.

Take a moment to imagine yourself as a busy decision maker listening to the above message. Would you be interested in meeting with the caller? What would you get out of that meeting? Anything worth your time?

The only people who gain from getting together at meetings like these are the sellers. They get a chance to tell clients about their services—whether they’re of value to clients or not. That’s self-serving sales behavior, and it doesn’t work in today’s environment. While I don’t know any decision makers who would waste one second of their time with sellers who use this approach, it’s the approach almost every seller uses.

CRACK THE CORPORATE CODE

Much as you might fantasize that your phone is ringing off the hook with corporate buyers who can’t wait to learn about your offering, it’s not going to happen using the “same old, same old” approach. Nor do these prospective customers cruise down the streets or enter local office buildings looking for signs that say Great Technology Services, Bob’s Leadership Consulting, or Wonderful Widgets.

While you may be stymied by the barricades surrounding their offices, please realize that some sellers are getting in and being extremely

successful. Their products or services aren't any better than yours. They don't offer better value or cheaper pricing. They don't have superior promotional activities, huge marketing budgets, or work for a company with a household name. They've just learned what it takes to crack the corporate code in order to land a meeting with key decision makers. You can do it too. There's no magic involved, just a lot of rethinking of what you're doing.

Most sellers think that what happens when they're actually talking to a prospective customer determines if they get the business or not. They're wrong.

Successful sellers today spend significantly more time thinking, analyzing, researching, and preparing for their client meetings than average sellers do. They're extremely "thought-full," and this singular quality is what determines the outcome of all their interactions with customers.

If your "message" to customers is perceived as self-serving, no one will want to meet with you. Successful selling starts from a solid, in-depth understanding of your customers. You have to think, feel, sense, and evaluate from their perspective in order to develop and implement an effective account entry strategy.

KEY POINTS

- It's tough to set up meetings with prospective buyers at major corporations; the difficulty you're experiencing is not in your imagination.
- It's not going to get any easier for you in the future. Multiple marketplace factors are converging to create a "perfect storm" for sellers.
- Corporate decision makers are normal people who just happen to work for a large company. They are not imbued with superhuman qualities.
- The traditional approach to setting up appointments makes you sound like a self-serving salesperson who is interested only in your own success.
- To break through the barriers erected by corporate buyers, you need to develop new account entry approaches today.

DOING BUSINESS WITH BIG(GER) COMPANIES

While everyone dreams of selling to big companies, the harsh reality is that fewer sellers are getting in today than ever before. If you don't have many large accounts in your customer base, it's easy to imbue them with larger-than-life attributes.

From the outside of a big company you may envision a workforce of the brightest, most talented, and most motivated people on this earth. You picture them working in a well-oiled, flawless system. You imagine seamless integration between business units, subsidiaries, divisions, and even departments.

Knowing they have deep pockets, you presume they must have the latest and greatest technology as well as the most innovative processes. You suspect they have world-class training, well-run meetings, and access to whatever resources they need.

If you make these grandiose assumptions about big companies, you'll be in for a big shock when you actually start working with them. In truth, everywhere you turn there is room for improvement. Large corporations constantly look to outside resources to help them get better. They need fresh perspectives to meet their challenges. They want to use products that provide them with the best possible value for their investment. Opportunity is rampant, just waiting to be capitalized on.

THE ECSTASY OF CORPORATE CLIENTS

Every large corporation has the potential to be a gold mine for you and your company. Perhaps the biggest upside is that once you get in, there are so many places you can go to sell your product or service. For example, if your first sale is to research and development (R&D) in one division, it's so much easier to get into similar areas of other divisions. If you land a contract with a specific business unit, the second and third contracts to this unit come so much faster. Once corporate clients trust your judgment, quality, reliability, and integrity, they will invite you to participate in discussions that give you an insider's view of their operations. After a while, you almost become a fixture in their companies because you're there so often working on various projects.

My very first contract in a large global firm was for \$10,000. Eight years and \$500,000+ later, I was still doing work for the organization. During that time, I worked with a multitude of divisions doing a wide variety of projects in my area of expertise. Some were extraordinarily challenging, enabling me to develop skills I didn't even know I had.

If you keep doing a good job, your business grows exponentially. Marketing and sales costs become virtually nonexistent as you move from project to project. In some respects, big companies are a lot less price sensitive than smaller businesses. They recognize that good people and products aren't cheap. Plus, they're not spending their own hard-earned dollars. They don't have to decide between feeding their kids or contracting with your company.

THE AGONY OF CORPORATE CLIENTS

Of course, there are downsides to working with big accounts as well. When their financial picture isn't looking rosy, the Wall Street analysts put the pressure on and suddenly everything comes to a grinding halt. Budgets are immediately frozen, and across-the-board cuts are commonplace. If you have too many eggs in one basket, your personal financial picture may become bleak overnight. The same thing happens with the arrival of a new management team. Everyone goes into a "hold mode" until they know what's happening.

Shifts in philosophy also put long-term relationships at risk. I recently spoke with a print broker who handled 90 percent of the printing needs of a large corporation. One day the executives decided to spread out the work to mitigate their risk. A huge chunk of his business disappeared overnight. The same thing happened to another seller I know whose business came to a screeching halt when her biggest customer decided to implement reverse auctions—a “how low will you go” online bidding contest for suppliers.

Sometimes big corporations get arrogant too. They know the prestige value of having them as a client and how much you need them to keep in business. When this happens, they make suppliers jump through hoops to work with them, even dictating what they’re willing to pay for products or services.

Despite these drawbacks, the pluses of doing work with large accounts far outweigh the negatives. Because the sheer scope of available opportunities is immense, they drive you to take your business to the next level. They expect you to dig in and learn about their organization and their industry. They challenge you to tackle projects beyond your normal scope, knowledge, or experience level. Ultimately you develop a broader and deeper expertise that enhances your overall marketability. Finally, there’s nothing that beats having well-known corporations on your customer list.

BREAK BIG COMPANIES INTO BITE-SIZED CHUNKS

Most sellers create their own mental showstoppers that prevent them from getting into big corporations. Pursuing business with these large organizations can be really overwhelming at first, especially if you’ve never worked for one. To reduce the intimidation factor, you will find it helps to break the big company down into smaller units that you can get your arms and mind around.

Let’s take a look at General Electric (GE) to get a better feel of the actual components of a corporate monolith. GE is a huge global diversified technology, media, and financial services company. With annual revenues in excess of \$150 billion, the organization operates in over 100 countries and employs over 300,000 people worldwide. Unless you’re a

huge corporation yourself, there's no way that you'll ever do business with all of GE.

When you start looking deeper, you'll see that GE is made up of six businesses: Commercial Financial Services, Industrial, Consumer Finance, Infrastructure, Healthcare, and NBC Universal. Each of these subsets of GE is its own multibillion-dollar business with thousands of employees, operations in multiple countries, and facilities across the world. The size and scope of these business units within a company can be downright overwhelming.

Let's say you decide to investigate GE Healthcare—a \$14 billion unit with 40,000+ employees. Breaking this business unit down further, you'll discover that it's composed of many different divisions. You could pursue work with any of the various clinical specialty units such as cardiology, oncology, or surgery. Or you could decide to target one of their solution areas, such as Biosciences, Diagnostic Imaging, Information Technology, Clinical Systems, or Services. Because they're contacted by far fewer sellers, it's typically much easier to get into these subsets of GE Healthcare. Finally, each of these divisions can be broken down into functional areas or departments. Within each division, you'll find marketing, sales, R&D, manufacturing, services, legal, information technology, human resources, and more.

The easiest and fastest way to get into a big company is through one of its functional areas.

Rather than being awestruck by the magnitude of a large corporation, break it down into bite-sized pieces that are more manageable for you to tackle. For many people, it's easiest to get in through a functional unit because they can:

- find the decision maker's name;
- conduct due diligence without being overwhelmed;
- figure out where the problems and gaps might be in their operation;
- determine the difference they can make; and
- implement a customized "getting in" strategy.

Breaking a big company into bite-sized parts is the best way to begin. It prevents you from becoming overwhelmed by the sheer complexity of the organization, enabling you to turn your dream into a reality.

EMPLOY A FOOT-IN-THE-DOOR SALES STRATEGY

I believe in making it as easy as humanly possible to get your initial contract with big companies. The best way to do that is to find and fill an immediate and urgent need for your prospect. It doesn't necessarily mean a huge contract. In fact, you can get started in a very small way and leverage that one piece of business into a highly profitable, multi-year relationship.

Once you're in, you're in! Do good work for your client and build your relationship. Keep your eyes open for emerging needs, other problems requiring resolution, and gaps between your client's desired future and today's reality. More business will materialize if you keep your focus on helping your clients improve their operations.

Find Your Most Effective Focal Point

When pursuing corporate contracts, most sellers want to ensure that decision makers know all about the full range of products, services, or solutions that they provide. This lack of specificity is extraordinarily detrimental to their sales objective and actually creates massive roadblocks for them.

Years ago, I discovered that it was much easier to get into big companies if I focused my entire "getting in" strategy around one very specific business problem related to the success of the new product launches. Many companies do a terrible job of preparing their field sales organization to sell the new products or services they're introducing. As a result, sales revenue typically lags far behind projections. Because the marketing and sales teams blame each other for the dismal results, they never really solve the problem.

My targeted customers clearly had an immediate, urgent need for help. The success or failure of a new offering is highly visible in the com-

pany. If the new product flopped, everyone knew about it. Careers were at stake. Windows of opportunity would be lost, market share could erode, and the lifetime profitability of the product would be seriously diminished.

Not only that, but companies have a lot more money at launch time. So despite the fact that I was capable of doing training on a wide range of sales skills, I chose to focus my “getting in” strategy on helping salespeople be successful at launch.

In my early meetings with corporate decision makers, I never confused my message by sharing with them the entire breadth of my services. The focus of our discussion was always on their product launch issues. Once I had a successful project under my belt, I let my clients know how I could help them in other ways.

How can you uncover your own foot-in-the-door strategies? Here are a several ways you can tackle that challenge.

Let Your Customers Tell You

Look at your existing customers to see if there are any similarities in how you got your first contract with these accounts. Ask yourself:

- Did you start out tackling a specific type of problem or opportunity? If so, what was it?
- Did you have some unique product, capability, or service that interested the decision makers? If so, why was it of interest? What value did it provide?
- Did they choose your services because they didn’t think their existing supplier could address some aspect of their business? If so, what were the gaps you filled?

One of my clients is a small company that’s just gearing up for the big time. This firm has developed some software that makes it incredibly easy for companies to update their Web sites without the information technology (IT) department getting involved. Initially, the firm was willing to take on any project to fund its growth. Now, the management team is getting serious about taking the business to the next level.

In analyzing the company's past successes, it turns out that the best foot-in-the-door strategy also happens to be with product launches. One of its best clients started out as a \$50,000 launch project and grew to over \$500,000 in revenue in just a few years. From now on, the company will focus its marketing and sales efforts on product introductions despite the fact that the software could be used in a hundred different applications. It's a superb door opener for this firm.

Find the White Space

I strongly suggest taking a good hard look at your competitors too. Every single one has some weaknesses or limitations; no single company is great at everything. Look for the "missing links" in their offering and exploit them to get into the big company. Don't go head-to-head with existing competitors. Instead, find the gaps.

When I pursued new-product-launch opportunities, I never competed against any of the big training companies because the work was too customized. Nor did I compete with marketing communications firms because I created tools for salespeople, not customers.

A fairly large professional services client of mine is pursuing specific types of risk management projects now with large corporate giants. Why? Because the Big Four consulting firms are swamped with all the changes required by recent government legislation and can't handle these "less urgent" matters. Some day when the Big Four consultants wake up, they'll discover a formidable competitor in their accounts who has developed a strong toehold while their attention was focused elsewhere.

Take the Crumbs

When you're trying to get into a big company, be willing to take whatever project you can—even if it's not your favorite. My first project with a big division of a large corporation had nothing to do with my expertise. I helped create an internal document to "sell" their field sales organization on a new compensation program. The national sales manager was terrified of a potential uprising from the sales force when they saw the new compensation plan. It was his number one priority. Ultimately, this group turned into my best client for five years.

I know a printer who called on one big account for several years with no success. The decision maker was totally happy with the current supplier . . . until one day when the vendor missed a deadline. Suddenly the decision maker had an urgent problem and needed help. The printer who'd been positioning himself for this moment made miracles happen in his company to get the job done on time. The crumbs turned into a highly profitable relationship.

Make Big Decisions Smaller

If your product or service costs a lot of money, it's much harder to get the first contract with a big company. There are budgetary issues, sign-off hassles, tons of people involved, increased visibility, and a great deal of personal risk involved for the decision maker.

Recently I did a comprehensive yearlong project with a prestigious client. When we first started talking about what needed to be done, I could tell they were nervous about a number of things—the scope, the costs, and even if working with me was the right decision. Rather than proposing the whole enchilada at the onset, I broke it down into pieces. I recommended they just get approval for Phase I initially because of what we'd learn in working together. We could reevaluate Phase II when it was time. By making my proposal smaller, I got in faster. By the time Phase II rolled around, they trusted me and valued my work. My second proposal was accepted without question.

If it's at all possible with your offering, think about how you might create smaller decisions. The easier you can make it for your customers to get started using your product or service, the faster you'll get into the big company.

Don't let yourself be intimidated by big companies. Despite their immense size, they're really a bunch of small companies filled with people who are doing the best job they know how to do. They're not perfect by any means.

Start by pursuing business with a functional area within a division of a business unit. Try to figure out what part of your offering might be the best foot-in-the-door strategy. Think easy.

KEY POINTS

- Large corporations are constantly looking for outside resources that can bring them fresh perspectives and better value.
- Working with big companies can provide your firm with the potential for exponential growth. While landing the first contract may be tough, the second and third contracts can come virtually overnight.
- On the downside, losing a contract with a major account can be devastating to your business and financial picture.
- It's easier to get into big companies if you break them into smaller sections; pursue opportunities with functional areas or departments within divisions for the easiest account penetration.
- Figure out which portion of your own offering addresses your prospect's urgent and compelling needs and leverage that aspect to initially get your foot in the door.