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Meet the MasterMinds: Jill Konrath Can Help You Sell to Big Companies

Jill Konrath is the President of LEAPFROG Strategies and the author of [Selling to Big Companies](#) and [Winning More Sales](#). She's an expert in complex sales strategies and creating value for business-to-business sales organizations.

We asked Konrath to tell us her strategies and ideas for how to target prospective clients in large companies who need our help, break through the barriers that protect decision makers, and sell to them successfully.

MCNews: Why has it become more difficult to sell services to large organizations?

Konrath: Corporate executives, fearful of Wall Street's judgments, are constantly restructuring, reorganizing, and rightsizing trying to find the right formula for success. Staff has been cut to the bare bones. Employees are stressed out, overworked, and overwhelmed.

Executives have become fearful and risk averse. They don't want to stick their necks out to make any decision that may be unpopular.

Time is corporate decision makers' most precious commodity and they'll do anything to protect it. They let their calls roll to voicemail and often don't return those calls. The last thing they want to do is talk with salespeople who won't stop blathering about their services.

MCNews: Who is the toughest competitor for those attempting to sell to large companies?

Konrath: Unquestionably, your toughest competitor is the status quo. Corporate decision makers don't want to create more work in their already busy lives. It takes time to determine if a change is worth it and would provide the appropriate ROI. Then they have to select a firm. Next they need to bring the consulting firm up to speed on their operation. Finally they have to implement the change—a job that is often fraught with systems issues, people problems, and more.

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Because of all that, most decision makers would rather settle for the status quo. Even if it's not perfect, living with the hassles, bottlenecks, and extra costs often seems more desirable than the alternative.

MCNews: When consultants have difficulty gaining access in large organizations, is there a root cause for that?

Konrath: Inadequate strategizing and thinking. For a start, they're not able to clearly articulate the difference their services make. Then, trying to keep all their options open, they refuse to narrow their focus down to market segments that have a high potential for success.

They don't invest enough time researching targeted accounts prior to initiating contact. They can't identify which high priority business imperatives they could have a significant impact on. Nor are they aware of triggering events that occur in their prospects' companies or industries.

Because consultants don't invest this time upfront, when they initiate contact with a corporate executive they're unable to come up with a compelling reason for them to meet.

MCNews: What's the best way to get a meeting with an appropriate person in a big company?

Konrath: Think in terms of an account entry campaign. It's going to take seven to ten contacts to set up a meeting with a corporate decision maker. These contacts can include voicemails, faxes, letters, e-mails, invitations to seminars, white papers, and more. Each contact needs to focus on business issues—not the consultant's service offering. In fact, consultants need to realize that no one ever wants what they have.

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I've never had a client say, "I would love some sales training because it would be enjoyable." What they want is better sales results, shorter sales cycles, and increased profitability. Sales training is simply a means to that end.

Consultants need to realize that and drop all mention of their offerings in their "getting in" campaigns. Instead, they need to focus on business results related to priority issues or strategic imperatives. If they do, prospective clients will clear an hour on their calendars for them.

MCNews: Networking at local and professional association events is often held up as a great way to build your business with large organizations. Do you agree?

Konrath: In major metropolitan areas, corporate decision makers rarely attend local organization or chambers of commerce meetings. To them, networking is about interacting with their compatriots in other divisions in their company. Or, it means meeting with their colleagues in related business functions.

The best place to find corporate decision makers out of the office is at industry functions. These typically cost more to attend and are usually out of town. But that's about the only chance to find these people in open settings. Unfortunately when they go to such events, sellers who are trying to get into their organizations mob them.

MCNews: What's the best way for a consultant to start thinking about selling to a big company?

Konrath: You need to think small, not big. Basically your goal should be to get an initial project that gives you a chance to prove your value and establish a relationship with someone in the company.

With that in mind, review your portfolio of services and ascertain which might be the easiest to get as a first project. It shouldn't have a huge price tag.

And, it's best if you don't try to immediately dislodge a consulting firm that has a long-term relationship with the company. Instead you need to think about a possible business issue that the incumbent may have overlooked and slip into the account under the radar.

MCNews: Consultants are often advised to have an “elevator speech” ready to quickly describe what they do. Are elevator speeches useful?

Konrath: Consultants invest way too much time fretting about elevator speeches that end up sounding something like this, "I'm a management consultant specializing in leadership development. We offer executive coaching and a wide variety of programs in the areas of x, y, and z."

These short spiels are absolutely worthless. They're a total turn-off to corporate decision makers who get hundreds of similar voicemail messages each month.

MCNews: What do you recommend instead?

Konrath: To be effective, consultants need a strong value proposition—a statement of the business outcomes that clients get from using their services. They need to use the language of business too, focusing on terms like "shortening time-to-revenue" or "increasing sales velocity."

To make their value propositions even stronger, consultants need to add specific percentages, dollar amounts, and time frames to make it more concrete. Lacking their own quantifiable business results, they can use relevant industry statistics to support the business case for change.

MCNews: What's your view on the use of e-mail to get in front of a client? Does it work? What are the common ways to improve an e-mail message so it gets a response?

Konrath: E-mail is the preferred method of communication for many people these days, so sellers need to integrate it into their account entry campaigns. It works, if you do it right. In order not to be perceived as spam, you must immediately mention how you got the person's e-mail address and say something very specific about the company.

Initial e-mails must be brief—totally visible within the preview screen—which means about 100 words. Your whole goal is to engage the person in a discussion, so don't explain everything your firm does. Keep it focused, short, and sweet. Remember too, it's all about the client's business issues, objectives, and needs.

MCNews: If you were to give a consultant selling to a big company one piece of advice, what would it be?

Konrath: Actually, I have two pieces of advice. The first is more of an overarching principle: Focus on making a difference for your clients and on helping them understand what that difference is. If you keep that in mind in all your communications, you'll increase your sales.

Secondly, preparation is absolutely essential in every step of the sales process. You can't wing it any more. You have to know a lot about your clients first so you can develop a customized approach.

You need to come up with ideas for improving their operations and helping achieve their desired business results. You need to be prepared for voicemail, gatekeepers, and talking to an actual decision maker. You have to be ready to handle the obstacles such as "We're already working with Generic Consulting" or "We're too busy."

While it's tough to gain access to decision makers in big companies today, it's not impossible. It takes tailored approaches to targeted accounts, multi-touch account entry campaigns, and a focus on business results and the difference you can make. That's what works.

MCNews: Thanks for your time.

To find out more about Jill Konrath, her book, services, and blog, visit www.sellingtobigcompanies.com and www.leapfrog-strategies.com.