

How to Permanently Increase Salespeople's Ability to Gain Access to Big New Accounts

By Jill Konrath and Michael Webb

In January, Jill Konrath and I conducted a webinar around a crucial topic for business-to-business sales organizations: How to prospect well enough to generate new sales opportunities in big new accounts. This challenge is one of the toughest ones sales organizations face, and one that many salespeople live for.

While there were many requests for the files and recordings of that webinar, unfortunately a technical problem prevented me from creating a replay of the event. This article will suffice as a review of the content Jill and I covered until we have an opportunity to schedule a redo.

Jill is a gifted salesperson and author of "Selling to Big Companies." This book has been a top seller in the sales field for more than three years. It was selected by Fortune magazine as one of the top eight must read books of 2008.

Jill had a highly successful career at several high-technology companies. She was great at prospecting opening new accounts and operated as an independent consultant for 15 years with long-term clients and ongoing project work. However, something changed shortly after the last recession around 2002.

Something in the Market Changed

She found that when she refocused her business and started prospecting again, something had changed. Fewer people answered the phone more calls went to voicemail and fewer people called her back. This was a shock to her successful sales psyche.

Part of what makes Jill successful is her unwillingness to give up. This newfound resistance in the market was a challenge, and she became determined to overcome it.

Jill learned that a combination of forces had increased the stress of work environments. People were more resistant to traditional sales prospecting. Part of the cause was the advance of communications technology, making it much easier for people to find information when they wanted it, rather than depending on relationships with salespeople. Part of it was increased global competition and economic pressure.

With greater pressures on their time, prospects didn't want extra "friends" (a common sales approach). They did not want to hear about the salesperson's business. They did not want to have to tell the salesperson about their business. They did not want to sit through a product dump. They did they have patience for self serving verbiage. They were just too busy.

The truth is, these were always problems before, but prospects thought they just "came with the territory." With the advent of the Internet and search engines, they realized they didn't need to put up with all that any more.

What Prospects Really Want

What prospects needed instead were things that would make life easier for them. Things that helped them achieve their goals and objectives. Ideas that would make a quantifiable difference. Prospects needed for their suppliers to help them think. They needed someone to do some thinking for them, because they didn't have time to be proactive.

In our discussion, Jill provided an example of a traditional kind of voicemail message that is so effective at turning prospects off:

Good morning Mr. Smith. My name is Jill Konrath. I'm the account executive for absolute relocation. We specialize in relocation management services.

Currently working with firms like eBay and E. and M. C. To develop and administer customized relocation programs. We help our clients to do three

things: attract and retain talent, reduce the cost of relocation and focus on their core business principles.

I'd like to set up a time to talk with you about what you're doing and share with you how we handle relocation services.

I know you're a busy person so I'll be glad to meet with you at a time that would be convenient for you. My new number is XXX. Please call me at your earliest convenience.

If you were a prospect and heard that message on your voicemail when would you hit the delete key.?

Many people said they would hit the delete key when they heard the company name "Absolute Relocation." Others said the first time they heard the salesperson use the word "I" Jill Konrath pointed out that many people would hit the delete key upon hearing the words "Good morning Mr. Smith," because salespeople are the only ones who say that.

The entire message is self-serving. It reveals the salesperson has done no homework. If you let this person into your office, they are likely to tell you a bunch of information about themselves and their company. Is that what you need?

Jill analyzed this script by doing a "failure analysis" (similar to a tool in the six sigma toolkit – the FMEA, or "Failure Mode Effects Analysis" – although Jill's approach was much simpler).

First: The entire script uses the wrong approach. It focuses on the salesperson and what they do.

Second it reveals inadequate preparation. The salesperson simply picks up the phone, barely knows the prospects name, and starts telling them about him or herself.

Third, in all likelihood, the salesperson that the salesperson simply left but one message. In today's market salespeople have to try again and again to be able to reach someone in a large company, especially if they are a senior level person. That's the reality.

Finally the salesperson is in all likelihood trying to reach a single decision-maker within the company. Again there are many people to call on especially in large organizations. An effective campaign will target multiple people. That's what you have to do if you're going to get in the door.

Engineering an Approach that Works

To make this script more effective you have to ask some questions:

- How can you increase the relevance quotient?
- How can you demonstrate credibility immediately?
- How can you intensify the urgency so that the prospect feels as a reason to call you back?
- How can you peek their curiosity while sounding like a professional that they want to meet with and not a self-serving salesperson?

Obviously, answering these questions requires insight to the prospect's context as a business person, and as a human being. Jill provided a great example of a much more effective style of script. It is interesting to analyze this by comparing it with the old one:

Bob. Jill Konrath calling. 651 -- 429 -- 1922. I've been researching your company and have some ideas on how you can save significant dollars in your relocation program

One of my recent clients to save one third of 1 million cousin we found errors and other service providers are doing things.

With today's tight budgets this is money you don't need to throw away. Lets talk.
Again this is Jill Konrath at 651 -- 429 -- 1922

Now, let's analyze the differences.

Instead of opening with "Hello Mr. Smith," Jill demonstrates she knows his first name and is getting right to the point. She leaves her phone number early in the message and again at the end. Her business-like manner implies "Here's my phone number (I'm important), and you're going to need to call me back."

Then she demonstrates this by knowing that you (the prospect) are spending lots of money on a relocation program, and would like to spend less. To prove her point, she tells you of a credible example where she saved another company in a similar situation a lot of money. She reminds you that this is important to you. At the end she leaves her phone number again (so you had an opportunity to hear it twice).

Isn't that much more effective? You bet it is. But it takes thought and preparation for salespeople to be able to pull this off. It requires facilitation skills as well as salesmanship to help a team work through the weeds to come up with something that works much better. Basically, it requires identifying what the value proposition is, and finding better ways to articulate it quickly succinctly and credibly.

Although Jill does very little of this kind of work any more (these days, she does more in the way of public speaking and sponsorships, and is writing a new book), you can definitely find skilled sales trainers who would be up to this task. (Note: This Is A Shameless Plug!) Oh, and Jill would be mad at me if I didn't point out that much of what she presents is also available in her book "Selling to Big Companies," and on her website in information products that detail exactly how she facilitates this kind of program.

You Heard That Right: 10 or 12 contacts!

If you are going to rely on **salespeople** to get in the door (at big accounts especially), you had better be prepared for a multistep campaign. These take planning and resources but they can be effective. Here are some of the characteristics of such effective campaigns:

Personalize each contact to the person you're trying to reach. Show them you really know something about them. For example, respecting the interests of people from different departments: leaving the same message for the financial controller and the maintenance manager is less effective than leaving appropriate messages for the different players. Most importantly, clarity in the business value of your offering is of paramount importance.

To increase credibility and urgency there are a number of tried and true techniques. Referrals, for example, can be an irreplaceable means of generating credibility. Doing your homework to understand your customer's business as it is presented on their website or in the trade magazines is very important. It helps a lot if you demonstrate that you are a player, by being familiar with the people and the issues in their environment, rather than just someone who is playing at it. Also leveraging triggering events such as the launch of the new product, the acquisition of a company, expansions or building plans, or layoffs or pending legislation enable you to connect with current topics.

You have to find something that has legitimate value and interest (for them). It can be contained in your value proposition, or unique selling proposition, but it can also be the sharing of an insightful idea, or dangling important information in front of them. This is the challenge of selling – whether it is in person, over the phone, or in copywriting for webpages, articles, or advertisements. You must communicate in a way that gets them to take an action.

The Role of Sales Kaizen

Kaizen is a commitment to continuous improvement. To accomplish it requires 1) a way of measuring the performance of the existing process and people, 2) of designing a better process, and better behaviors, and 3) a way of measuring the results.

There are actually two potential kaizen events in this material:

First is the improvement of prospecting skills, especially telephone prospecting skills. This makes a great kaizen event because most like-minded salespeople are very concerned about this problem. You can team them together to explore this problem, brainstorm solutions, practice them, and implement them immediately. In most environments, you can generate considerable enthusiasm once someone has shown that the new way actually improves results. It is actually a rather simple process improvement and readily measurable (did we get an appointment, or not?). Since her methods work, salespeople are more likely to appreciate and implement them.

Another slightly different focus for a kaizen event might be the development of a sequence of contacts for salespeople to carry out to open their new accounts. This means making a plan for who you will contact, when you will contact them, what media you will use, what your messages will be, and the timing of your messages.

Ideally you would convey a variety of different messages that are related in a logical way to a compelling value proposition. You would also use several media such as e-mail, phone, direct mail, and possibly referrals as well. When a prospect finds they are the target of a well-planned, intelligent, value-laden approach such as this it becomes difficult for them to resist granting at least a meeting.

One possible measurement, again, is simply "Did we get a meeting?" Run charts and check sheets might be the only measurement tools you will need to complete this project successfully.

Conclusion

Regardless of which alternative you choose, this kind of work involves bringing the team together to transmit the best practices and help them apply those principles in their own context. Kaizen provides the ideal framework for showing them that you are serious and

mean business, by providing common sense measures before, and after the event. It enables you to demonstrate that better performance can be identified and recognized. Further, incorporating these simple measures in the regular format of a weekly PDCA meeting between salespeople and their managers provides a baseline for sustaining salespeople's improved performance in a way that is credible to everyone.

About the Author

Michael J. Webb, president and founder of Sales Performance Consultants, is the foremost expert on sales process improvement. Michael has helped business executives of Fortune 500 as well as tiny start-ups to improve sales and marketing results by eliminating waste and making the sales funnel flow faster. His website, www.salesperformance.com supports the Sales Performance Improvement Forum, a professional educational society for the advancement of sales process improvement.

Michael delivered the keynote address to the first two conferences ever held on applying Six Sigma to marketing and sales. He has helped companies such as MAQUET, Thermo Fisher Scientific, Marriott, WaterFurnace, DDI, and many others to identify bottlenecks, change behaviors, increase close ratios, and improve forecast accuracy. He also has extensive sales training facilitation and field coaching experience with hundreds of sales people and managers in the U.S. and Canada.

Michael is the author of "Sales and Marketing the Six Sigma Way" (Kaplan, 2006) and numerous articles. He has held professional certifications with APICS, and ASQ, and has a BS in Mathematics from Southeast Missouri State University.