Susan-Says®:

There's a Big Customer in Your Future.

By: Susan Wilson Solovic, CEO, SBTV.com

Most successful small business owners know the exact moment when their struggling company turned the corner and headed down the road toward success. Frequently, that moment comes when they land their first really big deal, or as Steve Kaplan says, "They bagged an elephant.

"I remember exactly where I was when I got the call from my own first Elephant. It was the second year of my business. Swamped with debt, my company had been struggling to survive. My confidence was as shaky as my bank account," he says.

Then Kaplan received a call from an assistant brand manager at Procter & Gamble which changed his life. "He told me the company had decided to give me a shot at marketing one of its products, explains Kaplan. That was only the beginning. Since then, Kaplan has racked up deals with some of the most respected brands in the country. And he believes every business can do the same so he's written a book in which he shares many of his secrets: "Bag the Elephant: How to Win and Keep Big Customers."

Margaret McIntyre is the founder of Candy Bouquet, International, one of the fastest growing franchises in the United States. Many of McIntyre's franchisees understand the importance of bagging an elephant for their businesses. "I have franchisees who work with major corporations and supply candy bouquets for service anniversaries, birthdays and special events," she explains.

Of course, big deals don't land in your lap. In order to sell them in you must have a focused strategy.

- **Make a list of prospects**. Make a list of companies with which you'd like to work and then do your research. Learn as much about them as you possibly can. For example, how much money do they spend annually on products or services you offer. Kaplan suggests you think creatively when you build your list. Everyone is going to be after the obvious companies. Try to identify other firms who might also be interested in your offerings.

- **Look Big**. Large companies need to have confidence in your ability to perform. So you want to appear as professional as possible. In today's world, you don't have to be big to look big and it doesn't have to cost you a fortune. Invest in quality business cards and letterhead. Make sure you have a professional web site, not one that looks like your college-age cousin created. Look in the mirror. Is your company one in which you'd want to do business?
- **Network**. Look for opportunities to meet people who work for the companies you are targeting. It always helps if you have someone who can walk you in the door.
- **Get Certified**. If you are a women-owned or minority-owned business, certification may enhance your opportunities. Many large companies are looking for qualified women-owned and minority-owned businesses to become suppliers. To learn more or to see if you qualify, you may want to check with your local Small Business Administration office or Small Business Development Center.
- **Speak Their Language**. Every large company has its own culture and terminology. Understanding the language your big prospect speaks and using that language in correspondence and presentations will give you an edge. They'll be better able to relate to you and you'll seem like a good fit with their organization.
- **Look, Listen and Learn**. Big companies need you believe it or not. Small companies are more flexible and innovative, so big companies often look to them as a means to get things done more quickly and efficiently. Therefore, your job is to look at the opportunity, listen to what they need and then learn how to provide it to them. That's right, ***learn*** how to provide it. Many times a large prospect with tell you exactly what they want and how they need you to deliver it. So turn off your standard sales presentation and close the deal.

Once you have landed a big elephant, remember they need care and feeding. Don't make the mistake of not delivering what you have promised because they won't give you a second chance. Also, it's important not to rest on your laurels once you have landed a big one. Large companies go through management changes on a regular basis and if that happens, you may have to start from square one. So diversify your client list and make sure if one customer goes away you won't be left with only the crumbs.