

Jennifer Harris
Managing Director
JRBH Strategy & Management

JRBH is a strategic management consultancy with a creative, entrepreneurial twist. The company was established in 2002 and now has seven full-time and four part-time employees. Founder and Managing Director, Jennifer Harris, is a Cambridge graduate who won The Times' Young Business Woman of the Year in 2005 and was named in Management Today's top '35 women under 35' in 2006. Despite significant business success at an early age, Jennifer has encountered barriers to growing her business specific to her gender.

Barriers to Private Sector Contracts

The traditional male-dominated City network was not immediately open for a young female entrepreneur, so Jennifer developed her own way of winning new business. She believes her success is the result of determination coupled with her ability to build a team who can create genuinely original strategies for large corporations.

As a small strategic consultancy with a low profile in comparison to global competitors, networking is integral to the process of winning new business. Despite her hard-won success, Jennifer says that her gender presented a challenge when she was trying to break into the City. Maintaining relationships is also a far greater challenge for female entrepreneurs than their male counterparts, and one that would be particularly difficult for women with children due to out-of-hours time demands, she says.

Jennifer believes that women consultants start one step behind their male counterparts in terms of credibility simply as a result of their gender. "As someone who is both young and female, I don't conform to the stereotype of a middle-aged male consultant. I have found that women are 'guilty until proven innocent'," says Jennifer. "When I walk into a meeting, I need to work hard to overcome presumed incompetence, whereas the executive who looks the part, which a man is more likely to, is assumed to be competent from the word go". Fortunately, she says, this assumption of incompetence "makes us try harder and that's probably why we win the business that we do."

Barriers to Public Sector Contracts

Jennifer rarely bids for public sector contracts. Her opinion of doing business with the public sector was initially formed during the procurement process of an academic organisation shortly after Jennifer had set up the business, when she faced an aggressive and hostile panel of 10 male buyers. "I am used to knock-backs in the City – it is part and parcel of any business, but this felt like a personal attack," says Jennifer. "I was never going to get that contract and of course it's easy to say that it was because of my age and gender, but the panel members were outrageously patronising and dismissive."

JRBH is not well known and it is rare for the company to be invited to competitive pitches. Instead, JRBH identifies opportunities for potential clients and 'originates' the brief by approaching decision-makers directly and presenting a concept that the client had not considered. Jennifer's assumption is that public sector procurement (putting projects out to tender, or first being selected to a framework) would not be amenable to this type of approach.

As a result of her experiences, Jennifer has focused on private sector opportunities (public sector work accounts for only 15% of her turnover).

Breaking Down the Barriers

Any move to break down the barriers for female entrepreneurs must avoid positioning women as 'victims', says Jennifer, who fears initiatives such as positive selection policies could risk damaging the hard-won credibility of female-owned businesses. Instead, she believes that the creation of a powerful network of women-owned businesses could provide valuable business development and mentoring opportunities: "I'm a big fan of women helping women."

Jennifer also proposes that government funding be made available to promote large corporations and their female-owned business partners and encourage women to "blow their own trumpet" – a skill that she believes men are traditionally more adept at.

Louisa Moger Marketing Director Richard Edward

Louisa Moger and her mother run Richard Edward, a successful print specialist with a turnover of £5m and 47 employees. The family company was established 30 years ago and now specialises in print solutions and bespoke card-based products for use in games, toys, promotions, playing cards and education.

About five years ago, Louisa and her mother took the strategic decision to focus on public sector procurement.

Barriers to Public Sector Contracts

The decision to focus on public sector tenders was made to move the company into a less competitive sector of the over-serviced and commoditised UK printing industry.

Due to the complexity of public sector procurement, Louisa says significant investment was necessary to break down the two major barriers: creating a company that is 'fit to supply' and overcoming the enormous time burden of the tendering process. Louisa points out: "The barriers we faced with procurement in the public sector were not necessarily related to us being women-owned, but more to do with the limitations of our size as a small business."

Louisa employed a dedicated project manager to help the company overcome these barriers. An initial gap analysis was carried out to identify all the qualifications, accreditations and business processes required for a positive tender rating. "It was a big investment for us to take the public procurement path and the past five years have been spent developing and improving the company's tendering process," says Louisa. "It is not easy even after all the work we have done because tendering is still a huge undertaking - with no guarantee of work at the end of the process."

However, the company's investment in the specialist support that was required to deliver public sector tenders is now paying off, with recent procurement successes including contracts with The Learning Trust, The Royal Borough of Kingston-upon-Thames and Bath University.

Breaking down the Barriers

Government initiatives have already gone some way to addressing the barriers faced by SMEs in public sector procurement by providing valuable business support, says Louisa. Richard Edward took full advantage of the free advice available through government bodies such as Supply London, East London Business Place and CompeteFor. However, there are a multitude of different business support groups, often offering the same type of service and small businesses may find it easier to access business support if the Government simplified and centralised the offer, says Louisa.

Government has also helped the printing industry by creating a pre-audited list of approved printers, says Louisa. The Office of Government Commerce designed the list to reduce the public body average spend of £75,000 per tender. "The approved list of printers is an excellent resource for the industry," says Louisa. "But more needs to be done to promote the tool as many buyers in the public sector are unaware of its existence. Many still waste time and money going through the full tender process."