

# An Interview with Gina Spadoni of Premera

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*Gina Spadoni is a Market Intelligence Consultant at Premera Blue Cross. She previously worked at Microsoft in a Market Research role. Her transition from a software to a healthcare industry role provides solid insight into what it takes to transition from one industry to another while leveraging broader focused market research or competitive intelligence skills.*

**Q** Tell us a little bit about your background and how you moved into your current role.

**A** When I received my undergraduate degree in journalism back in '93, the job market was not great. Unwilling to take a \$6 an hour job, I ended up where all good writers end up: in customer service and sales. I did that for a few years, and I knew I wanted something else, but I didn't know what it was.

One day, I saw an article in the *New York Times* that talked about how Microsoft had professional librarians working for them, doing research and intelligence work.

I thought that was really cool, and I decided I was going to apply to a Library and Information Science program. I looked around for the best program I could find, and I learned that Simmons

College was teaching competitive intelligence. At the time, it was the only program that had any kind of intelligence as a component of it.

That was really intriguing to me, and two months after making that decision I left Seattle and moved to Boston – it was crazy. I doubled up on all the classes and finished everything in less than a year. While I was there, I had several classes with Jerry Miller, who was on the SCIP board at the time. I loved competitive intelligence from the start, and it fit really nicely with my journalism skills, because of the emphasis on research.

We would have speakers in from the community, and a woman from DEC (the now defunct Digital Equipment Corporation) came and spoke to our class. I decided that DEC was going to be my stepping stone to Microsoft. They didn't have internships, but I talked them into making me an intern. My strategy actually

worked, because Mary Lee Kennedy, the director of the library program at DEC, was hired to be the director of the library at Microsoft *while* they were interviewing me for an apprentice position. I ended up moving back to Seattle, and everything just started to align.

I had an apprenticeship in the library at Microsoft, and in those days the goal was to add value to information, and really to drive the competitive intelligence discipline, which was a new idea there. I was part of the re-thinking of the library, as we looked at new questions. How do we drive intelligence into an organization? How do you become a person that can build on strategy, and really help people think through issues, rather than an order taker who gathers data and throws it over the wall?

**Q** **How did you end up at Premera after Microsoft?**

**A** I was at Microsoft for eight years. It's an incredibly fun, incredibly challenging place to work, but it also takes lots of hours. I needed a break, so I left Microsoft with the intention of taking some time off. But before I left Microsoft I wasn't yet sure if I was just going to look for another job first, or take time off.

It was during this indecision phase that I sent resumes for a few jobs that looked interesting. One was a CI position at Premera. I didn't hear from them for months, and then they called me. I was excited about establishing the discipline of intelligence in a company that didn't have much experience with it, bringing them into the new millennium with technology, and applying the tools and skills to something new.

**Q** That must have been a very interesting transition. Many CI people have to invest some effort to move away from simply filling requests. Also, it isn't easy to move from a pure analyst position to one where you strive essentially not to have an opinion. I heard a military intelligence analyst once say that a general had told him "I will have an opinion; you get to be an analyst."

**How did you make that transition, and how did you learn to take a bucket of data, present it, and make it actionable?**

**A** As I mentioned before, Mary Lee was a new director at Microsoft, and I had worked for her back in Boston at DEC. She was into knowledge management, competitive intelligence, and the notion of adding value to everything that you do. This approach was being pushed by our management, which helped us to create a different culture, because it was, like you say, very different from the way they had been doing business for a long time.

That approach fit perfectly with me, because it matched my background, and was exactly what I had been hoping to do. The bigger challenge was one of fitting our effort into the existing culture, instead of just responding to people looking for data to substantiate their pre-existing opinions.

I had the most success when I first established a rapport with people and then asked the questions to determine what business decision they were trying to make. I tried not only to understand what they were asking, but also why they were asking it. I was always looking for the bigger picture beyond the current project, and how it fit into larger initiatives.

Often, thinking through those underlying questions and bringing suggestions to them meant giving managers more than what they asked for. Often, I would tell them that I did some further thinking and found another interesting viewpoint. It was often perceived as valuable, but not always.

**Q** There doesn't seem to really be a 100% clear path to the role of a CI professional, but there are certain skills and abilities that are common to a lot of practitioners. I have noticed interesting interconnects between journalism skills and at least a subset of the CI field.

**Since you came from a more formal journalism background, what skills do you still use, and which ones do you feel have been enhanced by being a CI professional?**

**A** I should clarify first that although I was a journalism major, and I did some freelance writing, I have never worked as a professional journalist. That said, journalists tend to be inquisitive, curious, and comfortable about asking questions, which is clearly a huge part of success as a CI professional. I remember in college being assigned to call someone in

the community and interview them, and it was incredibly intimidating.

Now I will call anybody and ask them anything, but it scared the devil out of me at the time, and I don't scare easily. I would put on a brave face, and go out and call these people, but it was great experience. When you are talking about going into CI or research or intelligence, it is so much about pulling information out of people and being comfortable knocking on random doors.

**Q** What advice do you have for the person who is a little reluctant to do that? How can you motivate yourself to move in that direction?

**A** You've got to reach out and build your network, and leverage other people's information. Anytime you can triangulate what you're doing, you're going to build a stronger background. I think you have to foster a sense of wanting to know the full story, and think about rounding out every aspect of what you know.

**Q** I heard once that the reason you need to call people for primary intelligence is that not all things can be counted. You have to have a willingness to go beyond the numbers and say that although you know that the lower right corner on your spreadsheet says 37, you don't really understand what that means inherently. What's your perspective?

**A** The goal is to tell a story with the data and make something valuable out of it. At the end of the day, you still have to tell a story about those numbers for them to resonate with a person, who then takes action. Sure, you have numbers to back you up, but it shouldn't be *about* the numbers. Now I'm in health care. Microsoft was bad enough with their engineers, but now I'm surrounded by actuaries!

Our members are people, and sometimes we have to make decisions based not on the numbers or the tables, but on what's going to make us important to someone.

**Q** When you are cold calling someone, a lot of your success seems to come down to the first 20 seconds on the phone. What do you say? What are some of the ways to open

the conversation with someone who doesn't necessarily have anything to gain from talking to you?

**A** Being clear about who you are is very important. If you do your homework on the person, then you can tell them who *they* are, and flatter them a bit.

You might say that you know that both of you worked in the same place at one time, or any other connection point. It's also great to tell someone that you understand they are the guru about a particular area – people just love to talk to you if you call them a guru.

**Q** Right. For example we walked up to somebody's booth at a trade show, and they asked us who we were with. We answered that we actually do a lot of work for one of their main competitors, but that's OK, since they weren't going to tell us anything NDA anyway. They laughed, and then it was almost like they took it as a challenge to talk away.

I don't think you can teach that kind of skill to somebody. In the first 20 seconds, you have to be a little bit interesting and different from all the other people who call all day long, even other people who do market research. You have to be disarming. You have to almost challenge them to prove that they have a lot of great information to give you.

Some people are terrified of getting on the phone, sounding like a moron, or calling a person up out of the blue. What tactics should someone have in their bag of tricks?

**A** The first thing is to do your homework. If you've got a question on X, Y, or Z, and you're calling a certain company, learn as much as you can about that topic before you call. Write down some questions.

Even if you don't know much, you can still piece together some questions, or say, "I did a little reading, and these are some terms I don't understand. Can you help me understand?" Generally, people are pretty happy to be asked to help, and to me, knowledge quells fear.

**Q** I'm sure there are people, especially in this job market, who would look at the conversation at this point and say, "Wow, you made a transition from software to healthcare."

One of the interesting things about CI is a lot of emphasis is placed on having industry expertise. How did you effectively make that transition, and what are some of the more interesting differences you've seen in trying to do CI for healthcare verses a software company?

**A** There aren't models for how you make that transition. As Microsoft is a really big company, I did research for all kinds of different groups. Essentially I was learning a new industry every time! I never knew what was going to hit me, and it scared the heck out of me at first. But after a while you just say, "Hey, I'm going to learn a new industry today. I'm going to learn whatever it is," and you can – it's just a process.

It's the same thing with my transition to healthcare. It's a very complicated process, but you just break it down step by step, and frankly the process for finding information is the same. You just have different sources to figure out.

P&Ls are P&Ls. Market research is market research. You find out who the experts are in that area. I follow all kinds of healthcare professionals' blogs, and I love social media. It's amazing the networks you can build, how quickly you can build them, and what you can learn just by listening to what's going on. For example, I'm connected to a bunch of healthcare people on Twitter, and just "listening" to what they are saying is amazing.

What's the most difficult about transitioning from one industry to another is talking someone into letting you do it! Hiring managers need to understand that competitive intelligence is a process and a discipline – not an industry. You put that discipline and that expertise into whatever industry you're looking at.

**Q** So you're saying that you need industry knowledge, but a person should be able to learn an industry rapidly enough and well enough to be valuable doing competitive intelligence fairly quickly.

**A** Absolutely. I'm bored easily, so I like to learn new stuff. That's what makes me excited, so I was really passionate about going to a nonprofit and learning the healthcare industry.

**Q** I once heard somebody comment about the requirements in a given industry versus CI experience, "I'm a specialist in marketing, but I'm a generalist at times with the industry." They're not trying to say that they can go build software applications specifically, or go work on patients in a hospital. But when it comes to marketing, they are very good at the specialty of competitive intelligence, and those skills can then be applied to different industries.

**A** That's absolutely true, and that's a great way of putting it – I'm a specialist in the CI discipline but a generalist in the industry world. I was doing research for software engineers, and they were the experts.

**Q** I think that's true of any large company, but even more so with technology companies. If you walk over to the systems management division, they will have a completely different view of the world than in the consumer division. What are the more interesting observations you made about how CI is practiced as a discipline when you went from software to healthcare?

**A** There are many general differences between the two. Healthcare has been around a long time – it's an old school industry like manufacturing. The industry works under a mountain of government regulations, and they're different in every state, which complicates things enormously. Because of this, and because insurance is essentially risk management, it's an incredibly risk-averse, conservative culture. The pace of everything is glacial compared to technology. Decisions don't get made fast.

So that, of course, impacts CI in many different ways. Because they don't make quick decisions, they don't have need to give you all the tools for quick delivery. They're willing to wait a while for you to collect information. They take their time, they think things through carefully, and everyone has to agree. There's a lot more value placed on gaining consensus

than in some industries. They're very careful and methodical, and particularly in that regulatory environment, there's good reason to be cautious.

On the other hand, innovation and the concept of "changing the game" seems to be the directive-of-the-day at every company, in every industry. That's a great thing, but it also requires some thought into culture change because true innovation demands it.

**Q** We interviewed someone who does war-gaming for a living, and he made the point that we reward people for good outcomes, and not for good decisions. CI is ultimately about increasing your odds, as a decision-support function.

**A** That's right. Also, it's important to reward people not just for making the right decision but also for failing, for trying something different. And celebrating the failures needs to be part of the culture, I think, if you're really going to drive innovation forward.

**Q** What's your take on substitution from the perspective of healthcare? Sometimes your competitor isn't a company like you. For example someone asked the producer of Saturday Night Live, "Who is your biggest competitor?" And he said, "Guitar Hero." It is just something completely different to do with your time. Healthcare seems like a fairly established, glacial industry, but from your perspective, can you talk about how sometimes the competitor doesn't look like you look?

**A** You need to expand the definition of competitor to any company that might take your business. Just as computers have broken into television watching time, there are disruptors in the healthcare industry. For instance, concierge medicine is a new thing.

There is a doctor in New York City, I believe, named Jay Parkinson. He started a practice, where he has subscribers, if you will, and he is their doctor. They pay him a specific amount per year, and he does some house calls but handles a lot of care via e-visits (online). His patients don't necessarily have insurance. They pay him a flat fee and he takes care of them.

There are new cash-only practices that don't take insurance or work with insurance companies, period. They charge flat rates, and they are cutting out the insurance company completely.

Some financial institutions, like Fidelity and JP Morgan, are selling health and wellness plans now. They are benefits carriers that many large companies have relationships with through their 401K's or what have you. So that is a relatively new thing to worry about.

If the government acts as a paying entity, is there a place there for insurance companies? Maybe, maybe not.

**Q** Culturally, how do you get people to pay attention to all these things that could be game changers, and to innovate when the tendency is to focus on the two or three other companies that look just like you?

**A** I do a few things. I send out five different weekly newsletters which cover different areas, such as consumers, information technology, and demographics. I proactively share ideas that I collect from blogs and Twitter.

I ask questions such as, "Here are some interesting happenings; how might this impact us?" There are many really smart people at Premera who are considering these issues, and I try and support their thinking by spreading it around, if you will. I try to draw trends out of information and help people think about the bigger picture.

We are taking some very interesting approaches. I have successfully talked them into letting me play with some cool Wiki-type technology internally. To me, having people talking and sharing different ideas is half the battle, and that's what I am trying to facilitate.

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*Scott Swigart and Sean Campbell use their rich understanding of the software field to deliver concrete competitive analysis for their clients. They advise companies such as Intel, Microsoft, AutoDesk, Mentor Graphics as well as niche players. Sean Campbell is also the Chair of the Oregon chapter of the SCIP. You can learn more about both of them at [www.cascadeinsights.com](http://www.cascadeinsights.com).*