

# Getting CI from Internal Sources

**WHEN SEARCHING FOR DATA  
ON THE COMPETITION, THERE'S  
NO PLACE LIKE HOME.**

*by Enrico Codogno, Canada Life*



Much has been written about collecting information from sources outside of one's company, whether interviewing competitors, searching the Internet, or turning to consultants. Most of this activity is done on an ad hoc or project basis. In this article, I advocate that companies should put in place a competitive intelligence process based on internal sources—specifically, their own people. The creation of such a process, as part of a corporate strategy, can help a company to achieve a continuous flow of CI.

My argument is based on the fact that much of what executives need to know about competitors is already available within their companies, residing within the filing cabinets and brains of employees. The objective for a CI manager, therefore, is to establish a process to facilitate information sharing, analysis and reporting that will create an evolving core

of knowledge to be used by decision-makers within the company.

## **THE INFORMATION IS HERE**

For most companies, valuable competitive information is found not only “out there” but can also be found “in here,” because many employees, spread across various departments and branches, already possess it. The problem is that employees often do not share that information.

Part of the problem is that there may be a history of information being ignored when attempts were made to share it with other departments. Cynicism may develop, for example, when information is sent from a branch office to head office and there is no feedback. As a result, the information is forgotten until the time comes to clear out a filing cabinet.

Other times, there is resistance to giving up information.

In short, there is a disconnect between available information and the need for knowledge by a company's executives.

The task of the CI manager is to bridge the gap between information sources and the decision-makers. He must develop his department into a hub where competition is inputted, processed (analyzed), and outputted as intelligence or usable knowledge for executive decision-making.

## **SENIOR MANAGEMENT SUPPORT**

It is axiomatic that senior management support is essential for any CI effort to survive. To get this support, the CI manager must clearly outline what it is that CI can do for senior management.

Strapped for time, senior managers want knowledge presented in a manageable format that cuts to the salient issues

without the clutter of non-essential details. The CI manager should be able to provide a summation of *Who is doing What, When, Where, How and Why*, and to answer the question, "What does this mean for us?"

A presentation of competitive intelligence, in my experience, should be no more than one page long. If senior management wants more details, it can be provided in a separate document.

The task for the CI manager is to avoid inundating senior management with information. Senior managers already have too much information to deal with and suffer from information overload: they want knowledge.

may reveal their marketing strategy: the market they are going after, the products and services developed specifically for that market, special offerings, etc.

Other seemingly innocuous forms of competitive information may be articles on a company's financial statement, a speech by the competitor's CEO, or a biography on a competitor's executive. Breaking down these articles into key points may reveal some details as to the true financial health of a company and the likely business strategies that the key executives will follow. That is why a CI manager should encourage his colleagues to bring in brochures; newspaper articles; rumors of hirings, firings and acquisi-

petitors but also on the company's weak points: a discussion group involving salespeople, customer service representatives and marketing people can reveal problems in service delivery and lead to actions to correct the problem.

Discussion groups can take many formats: monthly meetings at a selected location or via e-mail or intranet. Whatever the format, CI manager should keep it as informal as possible to allow a free exchange of information.

## CI IN PRACTICE

Upon joining Canada Life, I immediately began to create an internal network of contacts. I spent the better part of two months interviewing individuals in different areas within the organization: sales, marketing, customer service, underwriting, actuarial, profit centers, etc.

Each area had its own specific CI needs and capabilities, both strategic and tactical, but there also existed commonly held needs. I was able to document these common needs to map out a CI strategy.

Here are a few of the things that have been accomplished so far:

## DISCUSSION GROUPS

Discussion groups were established on our e-mail system so that key issues could be put forward. These groups included sales and customer service reps for both our life insurance and pension divisions. I summarized the discussions and presented them to senior management, outlining the topic and the main themes that arose from the discussions. As a result, actions have been taken to correct certain practices that were hurting Canada Life's competitiveness.

Other discussion groups have been set up whereby employees from different functions meet regularly in an informal setting to discuss issues. This provides a setting for reducing inter-departmental rivalry and for providing a common language to discuss issues involving processes that cross departmental lines.

## REQUEST PROCEDURES

Since many of the people I work with have never dealt with CI before, they did not know how to ask for information or what to expect in return. I provided them with a document in which I tried to ease the request process and to help them focus on their information

## THE MESSAGE THAT CI MANAGERS SHOULD BRING TO THEIR COLLEAGUES IS THAT THERE IS NO INSIGNIFICANT PIECE OF INFORMATION



## GETTING PEOPLE INVOLVED

Ideally, the competitive intelligence process should be established as an integral part of the corporate culture involving all employees: salespeople, customer service representatives, department heads, financial people, human resources, etc.

The CI manager should begin by increasing the profile of competitive intelligence by explaining what it is and what it can do for the company. For this, communications (for example, a newsletter or e-mail) is essential. Also, visiting the branch offices to speak face-to-face with salespeople and customer service representatives is an excellent way to get key personnel to start thinking about CI. If nothing else, at least they know that there is someone at head office who will receive their competitive information and act as a connection with senior management and other departments at head office.

## GETTING THE INFORMATION

Employees may have competitive information but they may not see it as such. For example, a competitor's brochure may be seen as nothing but a sales tool, but it

tions; information gained from conversations with clients, brokers, and competitors; etc.

Employees should be encouraged to send the information in any form they feel comfortable with: e-mail, inter-office mail, fax, voice mail, etc. The message that CI managers should bring to their colleagues is that there is no insignificant piece of information: every piece is important in the effort to determine the competitor's next move, the trends in the market and the detection of nontraditional competitors.

(While urging employees to provide information, the CI manager has to make it clear that he or she is *not* a librarian. Competitive intelligence is the analysis of data to create knowledge, so that decision-makers can make decisions to keep their company ahead of the competition. The CI manager must avoid falling into the quagmire of being a repository for information. That responsibility should belong to the corporate librarian, who has both the training and the physical space to house documents.)

Discussion groups can be a source of continuous information not only on com-



needs. The requester writes down the problem or issue that needs to be addressed, why it must be addressed, what information is needed, and by what date. After the information has been provided, I receive feedback on whether the information was adequate or whether modifications to the original request are needed because new questions have arisen. This method leads to 1) improved communications because the information needs are clearly expressed and 2) discipline on the part of the requester and provider of information, as a hardcopy document spells out what the requester needs and what the provider is expected to deliver.

#### SPREADING THE WORD

The company intranet as well as internal publications have been used to increase the employees' awareness of CI and how they can contribute to the effort. The objective is to engrain CI as part of the corporate culture.

Finally, articles that discuss innovative ideas are analyzed to discover important findings, best practices and possible implications to Canada Life or the financial and insurance industry. This has proven to be very popular, especially among product managers looking for ideas to create new products and services for our customers.

#### CONCLUSION: A USEFUL STRATEGY

Gathering information from internal sources can be a useful strategy for obtaining competitive intelligence and for developing best practices. It can provide a CI manager with sources needed to build up a database for monitoring competitive activity and market trends, and with ready material to provide senior management with competitive intelligence on an ad hoc basis. Finally, if a decision is made to use CI consultants, the information derived from internal sources can provide a starting point to focus their efforts.

Finally, there is much to be said for self-education on the part of the CI manager. Being a part of organizations that deal with competitive intelligence (like SCIP), or market research (like the Professional Marketing Research Society—in Canada), or quality (like the American Society for Quality) or best practices (American Productivity and

Quality Center) can enhance the quality and value of the intelligence that the CI manager produces, because of the many insights that can be gathered from networking.

A proactive CI manager, who is humble enough to continually learn from others and improve his craft, is a valuable asset to any organization.

*Enrico Codogno is the competition specialist, group operations, at Canada Life Assurance. His previous experience includes responsibility for market research and competitive intelligence at Livingston International and Pitney Bowes of Canada, as well as companies in the trucking and property & casualty insurance industries. He can be reached at 330 University Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, M5G 1R8, Canada; tel: +1 416-651-0143; fax: +1 416-651-7883 or +1 416-651-7883; e-mail: codogno@ibm.net.*

# Advertise



## Competitive Intelligence

M A G A Z I N E

Why should you advertise in SCIP's *Competitive Intelligence Magazine*? Because our readers are the corporate professionals you want to target—the customers who want to buy your products and services.

*Competitive intelligence managers. Marketing analysts. Strategic planners. Knowledge management professionals.*

These are the groups you need to reach.

Our rapidly expanding readership is not a homogenous collection of narrowly focused corporate personnel. From information gatherers to analysts to top corporate decision makers, our readership consists of the entire range of knowledge-intensive professionals. Why not advertise to the right people all of the time?

For a rate card and demographics, contact:

Stephen H. Miller  
Publisher/Editor-in-Chief  
*Competitive Intelligence Magazine*  
SCIP  
1700 Diagonal Rd., Suite 600  
Alexandria, VA 22314 USA

Tel: +1 703-739-0696, ext. 113  
Fax: +1 703-739-2524  
e-mail: smiller@scip.org