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CI corner

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a monthly column devoted to answering questions relating to Competitive Intelligence

Dear CIC: I recently joined my company and am thinking about setting up a program for carrying out CI. I did do some CI at the previous company that I worked for, but only on an informal basis. Any suggestions? **Keener**

Dear Keener:

Avoid getting overwhelmed on defining CI. No doubt if you speak to a number of CI practitioners, you will get a variety of answers on what CI is and how to use it. Some will conflict. There is no right way to use CI. It boils down to your needs, your capabilities to collect CI and what decisions need to be made with CI.

You will need to decide who will initially be responsible for collecting and using CI. In other words, do you want to run with it or do you want to bring in other departments? If it is the latter, then you may need to educate the other departments on how CI can be used and what the goals are. (Our recommendation is that you first limit it to your needs, gain some learning in doing CI at your new company and then see where and how it can be applied to other departments.)

It will also be important to designate a core role for CI to play at your new company. For example, some companies use CI primarily to surface and assess competitor threats, while others use CI to benchmark their product offering against competitors.

Listed below are some common reasons for a CI program not to reach its full potential. Good to keep these in mind:

1. CI’s role is not defined;
2. company mindset that CI is unethical;
3. no procedures in place to manage the process;
4. people are too busy to either collect or read CI;
5. people do not find CI to be helpful;
6. no feedback given on the value of CI provided;
7. no decisions are being made with the CI.

Dear CIC:
I am thinking of making a career change to CI. Are there any industry sectors which use CI more than others? **Job Seeker**

Dear Job Seeker:

Three come to mind, and it is no coincidence that these sectors are also heavy users of market research. They are financial, telecom and pharmaceutical. These industries traditionally are well represented at CI workshops, have internal staff assigned to manage CI efforts and are regular outsourcers of CI.

Dear CIC:
One of my colleagues views CI as a macro entity, whereas I see it more as a micro science. Who is correct? **Micro Supporter**

Dear Micro Supporter:

Both are correct. It really depends on the nature of your information need. From a macro point of view, CI can capture more of “the big picture” items, such as market trends and drivers. From a micro point of view, CI can uncover tiny bits of competitor data, which in turn produce a pattern to draw observations from.

For example, let’s assume you work in market research for *Time Magazine*. An internal client would like some CI on front-end displays (i.e. the point of sale material at the cashier). A macro application would be to bench mark best practices of other industry leaders, such as packaged goods manufacturers and lottery corporations. On the flip side, micro analysis becomes important if you were to investigate *Newsweek’s* pricing strategy, where you would need to break down the competitor’s price into components and subcomponents to really understand how their price is constructed.

Dear CIC:
What is a big hurdle to overcome to ensure findings are accurate and reliable? **Truth Seeker**

Dear Truth Seeker:

Weeding out misinformation, which is information provided by someone which is untrue. Some misinformation is not deliberate (i.e. the respondent was trying their best to answer your questions, but provided wrong information). However, if misinformation is deliberately communicated, then the source likely felt threatened and did not want you to find out the truth, so they tried to mislead you.

Whatever the reason, if there is a key finding that is factually incorrect, it will stand out and cast doubt in the reader’s mind, no matter how thorough and accurate the rest of your report is. Here are some tips:

1. Assume that no matter how careful and thorough you are, there will be some errors in your findings. No one is perfect, especially when you are trying to source very sensitive information. It’s best to let your readers know that your findings are not 100% accurate; rather they include best guesses and estimates.

2. Have someone else proofread your report for inconsistencies, errors and missing information. This person should be knowledgeable about the topic that you are investigating.

3. If you suspect that findings from one of your respondents are untrue, then you always have the option of not including them in your report. The way to get around this is to do another survey, but still detail in the appendix the suspected misinformation.

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