



# CI Corner

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A key challenge facing today's CI practitioners is how to overcome the issue of ethics.

*Dear CI Corner:* One of the vexing challenges I am facing is convincing my colleagues that undertaking CI is not unethical. Is there a set code that Canadian companies follow? What steps would you suggest? *Ethically Concerned*

*Dear Ethically Concerned:* There is no set code that all companies follow. Many have their own versions. Some, for example, only speak to competitor sales reps and call centre associates (versus marketing managers), while others get their CI suppliers to place the calls or simply limit their investigation to secondary sources.

The Society of Competitive Intelligence Professionals (SCIP) has a code of ethics that directs members to

- continually strive to increase the recognition and respect of the profession
- comply with all applicable laws, domestic and international
- accurately disclose all relevant information, including one's identity and organization, prior to all interviews
- avoid conflicts of interest in fulfilling one's duties

- provide honest and realistic recommendations and conclusions in the execution of one's duties
- promote this code of ethics within one's company, with third-party contractors, and within the entire profession
- faithfully adhere to and abide by one's company policies, objectives and guidelines.

For the most part, these guidelines seem achievable. The one that most people struggle with is the directive "to accurately disclose all relevant information, including one's identity and organization, prior to all interviews." How comfortable would you be advising your competitor of who you are and why you are calling? Wouldn't you be tipping them off? And how likely is it that your competitor would comply? If you are

uncomfortable contacting your competitors, you can still get some competitor research by following these steps:

1. Begin with an intensive online search.
2. Conduct internal interviews with your own sales reps, former employees, etc.
3. Speak to your suppliers (e.g., ad agency, head hunter, marketing consultant) for their insights.
4. Contact your customers to see what they have heard or know.
5. Interview third parties such as associations and financial analysts.
6. Speak to the competitor of your competitor.

**Tip:** The whole strategy behind collecting CI is teasing out information and filling in gaps based on hypothesis. Hence, a lot of your effort will be in analysis, piecing together tiny bits of information, as opposed to pushing and pushing for interviews. This aspect of CI is important because it serves as a boundary, helping you to avoid overstepping efforts in getting information. For example, if you are investigating a company and, through your Internet research, discover that it avoids entering markets with volumes less than \$100 million, and your product has annual sales of only \$25 million, you can surmise that it is unlikely that this company will enter the market. So you may need to place only a few calls to verify your assumption.

A monthly column devoted to answering questions relating to competitive intelligence

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