

how to write a CI plan

by David Lithwick

Introduction

Writing a Competitive Intelligence (CI) plan, like any other business plan, is an exercise that provides value and learning, especially if you have not written one before. Not only will writing a CI plan force you to define the role that CI will play in your company, but it will also define the framework (e.g. people, time, budget, etc) in which the program will run. Additionally, the very task of writing a CI plan is as valuable as the plan itself, because the insight that you will gain through the process will enable you to deal more effectively with the challenges that you will face.

Tips

1. Keep your plan concise. This will ensure that more people will take the time to read the plan, and that it will not take an inordinate amount of time to update it.

2. Speak to a CI manager in a leading-edge industry, such as pharmaceuticals and telecommunications to learn which factors have contributed to their success in setting up a CI program. Some questions to direct your discussion are:

- Which departments make the most demands for your CI services?
- Is there a common CI request (e.g., monthly activity report, backgrounder for strategic plans, etc.), or are most assignments “one-offs” where your clients urgently request as much information on a specific subject?

- Do you find CI software to be effective?
- How do you manage an excessive number of requests at one time?
- What changes have you made to improve your CI program?
- What steps have you taken to systematize your internal information sources?
- What suggestions would you have for people assigned to setting up a CI program?

3. Assume that you will not be able to meet everyone’s expectations. The best approach is to work out a compromise with those who will make use of the CI that you provide. Often an internal survey will uncover people’s true expectations and beliefs. Make every effort to conduct one and to communicate the results within your company before embarking on a CI program. The results will, in effect, act as terms of agreement. For example, if 16 out of 20 people surveyed want to have a verbal debrief after each report is completed, then factor adequate manpower and time for verbal debriefs into your CI plan. A sample of an internal survey is as follows:

CI Survey

There is a growing demand for a designated CI program for our company. To help us determine your priorities for CI, please take a minute or two to complete the following questionnaire:

- What role should CI play within our company?

- Who do you consider to be our key competitor threat? Why?
- Which department (e.g. brand group, sales, customer service) needs CI the most? Why?
- Where are you currently getting your CI?
- Are you satisfied with the CI that you are currently receiving? Why/Why not?
- What gaps are not being filled with the CI?
- What would be the best method of exchanging information and communicating findings?
- What one suggestion do you have to ensure the program will succeed?

4. Make sure your CI plan is linked to your marketing plan. For example, if the primary objective of your marketing plan is to achieve 5% growth for each of the next three years, your CI plan should include specific strategies to help achieve this goal.

5. Make sure you identify some key factors for success (e.g. procedures in place for managing the CI process, CI training program, annual reader satisfaction study, etc.), as these will serve as a benchmark when gauging the success of your program.

7. Update your CI plan every six months. This is especially important during the first two years, because most programs that fail, do so within this period. Each time you update your plan,

IMPLEMENTATION		
Set Up	Action Steps	Quarter
Needs Assessment	Design the structure of our CI program to address the specific requirements of our internal clients, based on survey results. (The most frequent survey response, <i>requests for CI should be turned around within 48 hours</i> , will become the standard for the program).	1
Decide On a Name	Come up with a name for our program that really captures the essence of what we want to achieve and the benefits that the CI program will provide to our company.	1
Set Up A Team	Put together a team of three people: two people to manage the process and a third to make us accountable for meeting our objectives.	1
Get Senior Management to Champion CI	To help overcome employee resistance to CI that will stand in the way of our program, have senior management send out a letter to all employees endorsing CI and encouraging participation.	1
PROCEDURES		
Communications	Adopt the easiest and most secure way to communicate findings. For example, debriefing sales reps for competitor information at our monthly sales meetings would be a convenient way to discuss CI activity.	1
Project Management	Put into place procedures for briefing internal clients, requesting CI from sales reps and updating project status reports.	2
Report Templates	To cut down on report preparation time and improve communication of results, develop two templates (one for sales reps to complete and another for analysts).	2
Leakage	To cut down on the risk of sensitive information leaking out, develop a database of only those employees who require CI to make decisions. Additionally, set up procedures on minimizing leakage of sensitive information that takes place within sales and customer service.	2 & 3
Network – External	Establish working relationships with knowledgeable industry contacts (e.g., our ad agency, our management recruitment firm, key customers and former employees of our company) to facilitate the collection of competitive information.	3
Network – Internal	Identify employees who are already collecting or are in a position to collect CI, and then approach them to see how best they can work within the new program and whether any of these individuals should be invited to join the CI team.	3
Network – Supplier	Put together a listing of two or three reliable CI suppliers for when either the workload exceeds our resources.	3
E-mail hotline	Set up a dedicated e-mail address where marketing, knowledge management, sales and customer service can send in CI and/or ask for CI.	4
Filing	Set up a secure and efficient data storage/retrieval system to cut down on time expended searching for competitor files, and to ensure that important information is not lost or overlooked.	4
Post Evaluations	Institute an annual review (e.g. timeliness, accuracy, etc.) of the CI reports that we generate based on feedback sheets to be completed by our readers.	4
TRAINING		
Professional Workshops	Contact PMRS and SCIP (Society of Competitive Intelligence Professionals) to see what courses each offers, as those directly managing the CI process will need to be up-to-date on CI methods.	1
Internal CI Workshops	Make training available to people involved in either collecting and reporting CI or managing the process. These workshops will also encourage colleagues to buy into our program by providing practical demonstrations of how CI can help our company.	3

you are, in effect, updating and refining the program.

8. Finally, keep in mind that no matter how well conceived your plan is, the success of the program will ultimately depend on your ability to market CI services to your internal clients and their subsequent effort to make decisions with the competitive information.

Mini Case

Let's assume that you have been called in by the president to deliver a plan for a CI program. He expects the CI program to deliver immediate and tangible results, and is prepared to commit to a major budget once the success of your program has been demonstrated. You develop the following plan:

CI Plan – Year 1

Key Objectives

i. Establish a CI program to monitor and assess, on an ongoing basis, traditional and non-traditional competitor initiatives.

ii. Generate effective strategies to help marketing counter competitor threats.

Secondary Objectives

i. Reduce the amount of duplication, resulting from various people carrying out the same or very similar CI.

ii. Reduce the time it currently takes to locate internal reports that contain competitor information.

Conclusion

Though you may be able to 'wing it' for the first six months, the process (and consequently expectations) of your CI program will break down if you do not have a plan in place. Hence, it would be wise to take the necessary time to put together a CI plan as the first step in setting up a CI program.

David Lithwick is a senior partner at Market Alert Limited. He can be reached at (416) 932-9820 or lithwick@market-alert.net