

Loose Lips Sink Share Points

by *David Lithwick*

We are writing this article as a warning. A warning that there are people who flush out intelligence.

“So what? We do the same. We visit trade booths and pretend we’re buyers. We tell receptionists we’re sales reps to find out who the new VP is.”

Corporate intelligence is not new. Yet most readers’ understanding is lightweight. It’s limited. You imagine your competition is the same. Wrong! You may follow the Queensbury rules. You may be a weekend sleuth. They follow different rules. They collect intelligence for keeps. They penetrate 10 information points for your one. They extract eight times the layers of data that you uncover. Their analysis includes feedback from their senior executives. You discuss findings in the elevator with Herb, the Ottawa sales rep.

They circulate intelligence, which is detailed, strategic and married with other research. Decisions are made. You send a page memo to your boss and Herb. She reads it three weeks later. Herb is glad to see his name copied.

Your agency clips out competitive ads noting a key selling point. The competitor goes a little further. Each ad is input into the marketing plan that they are reconstructing. Your plan! Objectives, strategies, regional spending and timetable are continuously upgraded.

Have your competitors suddenly doubled ad spending two weeks before you launch? Are they running a contest in your test market to upset the finding? Perhaps someone leaked information.

Competitors go after as many people, from as many levels, asking as many questions, to fill information gaps.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Follow these rules, before you tell an unknown what your company is planning next year:

1. Pinpoint leak points that you suspect are disclosing information.
2. Make sure your receptionists, especially temps, screen calls.
3. Your sales people can be “seduced” when making calls. They want to meet their quota. They want to disclose product attributes to make the sale. They are vulnerable. Caution them on replying to questions that go beyond the call’s scope.
4. Customer service will pass details to competitors. Inquiries alone are credible, yet when merged together provide critical missing data. For example, a customer asks if toothpaste X is sold in Vancouver. She recently bought some in LA. Your service rep gladly replies, ‘We’re introducing toothpaste X next month in Ontario and Quebec. Vancouver will be two months later.’
5. Probe the caller. Intelligence gatherers dislike being questioned. It unnerves them because they want a quick answer. (The customer service rep, should ask “Where did you see the toothpaste in LA? I just want to make sure we’re talking about the same toothpaste.”)
6. Cashiers, waiters, floor managers and other staff are also contact points.
7. Circulate a memo on leaking information. Have it signed by a senior executive. Remember “LOOSE LIPS SINK SHARE POINTS”.
8. Limit the amount of marketing information circulated to employees. The more data circulated, the greater opportunity for exposure.
9. If you suspect a caller is gathering intelligence, then misinform. They may ask how large your market is. Don’t rush in and recite last month’s report. You’re speaking to an unknown. They persist and say they have been told the market is \$21 million. You agree, even though the market is much larger. Be wary of callers who say they’re students. See how quickly the caller loses interest when asked who his professor is.
10. Tell inquirers to put their request in writing and to call your competitors before they call you. Put them off. And route these queries to a single authority such as Human Resources or Corporate Affairs.
11. Monitor inquiries to see if there is a pattern. The same question being queried across multiple regional offices should make you suspicious ●