The Right Questions to Ask

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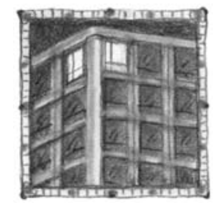

Good analysis starts with knowing the right questions to ask. One of the most common reasons competitive intelligence (CI) practitioners receive little management response to their efforts, is that management often asks largely historical, fact-generating questions, instead of developing questions whose answers can support good decision-making.

CI practitioners have to look at CI problems from their client's perspective. That means thinking as the intelligence recipient about what answers they require to make a decision or develop strategy. It also includes considering the likely outcomes of the intelligence from the clients' perspective - what will they do with the intelligence they receive? Putting yourself in the requestor's shoes will help you better plan you questions and ultimately produce better analysis.

Three steps produce good analysis (see figure 1):

1) Identify or anticipate the right questions,
2) Answer them with rigor, and
3) Deliver the answers effectively.

This column focuses on the first of the three steps: identifying the right questions.

ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

Begin by framing the intelligence question or problem by asking yourself the following questions:

- What is the decision or action item the request supports?
- What is at stake for my company, or my client's department or area of responsibility?
- What are their chief concerns?

> **The most important reason why intelligence fails to satisfy decision-maker expectations is because practitioners often answer the wrong questions.**

- What potential opportunities may emerge?
- What are the most important issues?
- What are the intelligence questions that need to be addressed?
- Where will you look to find answers to those questions?
- What tools will you use to help you get there?

You will probably not be able to answer all these questions when you receive the initial request. Even if you think you know the answers you must validate all your assumptions with your client. All intelligence requests require at least one follow-up discussion no matter how straight-forward they may seem. This discussion often leads to refining the initial request and providing more focus for the CI practitioner's efforts.

This client dialogue is an opportunity to fully understand what prompted the request for intelligence in the first place, and what your client's expectations are for the contents of your end deliverable. Anything short of full understanding sets the stage for your intelligence deliverable to fail to meet objectives. A conversation in person or over the telephone is the best way to capture this information. (Table 1 lists some common question traps.)

ASK MORE QUESTIONS

Once you've defined the request, consider asking other more internally-focused questions:

- Look at collection challenges that may exist for the topic. Can you collect material relevant to this request via published and human-source collection.
- Examine the expertise of your CI group that can be applied to answering the request. Do you have or can you find the substantive expertise to undertake the subject's analysis?
- Look at timeframes closely. Do you have enough time to research and analyze the questions? It doesn't

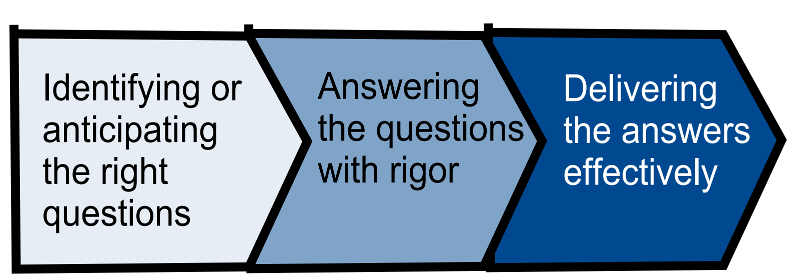

Figure 1: Three steps to good analysis

TABLE 1: COMMON QUESTION TRAPS

TRAP	TIP	TECHNIQUE
"Get me everything you can on the competition's strategy."	Recognize the root of the client's need within the request	• Ask for more specificity on how the information will be used? • Help user think out loud
"I'm sure it shouldn't be a problem to find out how they plan to market their new product."	Request indicators, parameters and examples of desired intelligence answers	• Ask questions that drill down to tangible deliverables and collectible information • Ask for factors that would most affect the outcome
"I'll need a report as soon as possible."	Determine how and when the intelligence needs to be delivered	• Get dates, preferred formats, etc. • Set a preliminary meeting
"I'll get back to you on budgets, but you can start now."	Determine cost parameters before starting the request	• Pinpoint how much time, money the requestor is willing to spend. • Follow up with a budget estimate, followed by a firm estimate

matter how brilliant your analysis and recommendations turn out to be if they are too late for the decision-maker to act on them accordingly.

The official planning for your intelligence project begins once you determine that you can answer the questions above with the resources at your disposal and in a timely manner. At this point, you can then move onto establishing the analytical framework or a blueprint for managing the intelligence request.

CREATE THE ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The analytical framework has four key components (see figure 2):

1. A statement defining the intelligence issue. A summary of the request that clearly outlines the implications for your company and the decisions and actions to be taken.
2. Key elements and trends, describing the current and future situation. Managers usually have some knowledge about the questions they are asking. In most cases it includes some combination of "facts" they have read or previously researched, and opinions about these facts. To avoid providing intelligence that simply contains what the client already knows, ask what their baseline set of knowledge is and where they obtained it. (Is it based on fact or personal opinion?). Then build your framework from there.
3. Key intelligence questions. Identify the specific analytically-based questions that, when answered, contribute to the decision at hand. These questions should be future oriented, enabling the client to act based on the answers and recommendations provided by the analysis.
4. Preliminary hypotheses. Craft a hypothesis about a competitor's strategies, plans or behaviors based on what is currently known about the issue, which includes casual observation, beliefs and stereotypes Hypotheses help guide your intelligence collection and structure your intelligence analysis.

Applying the analytic framework described above can help you to maintain objectivity and answer questions with rigor, the focus of the next column. Stay tuned.

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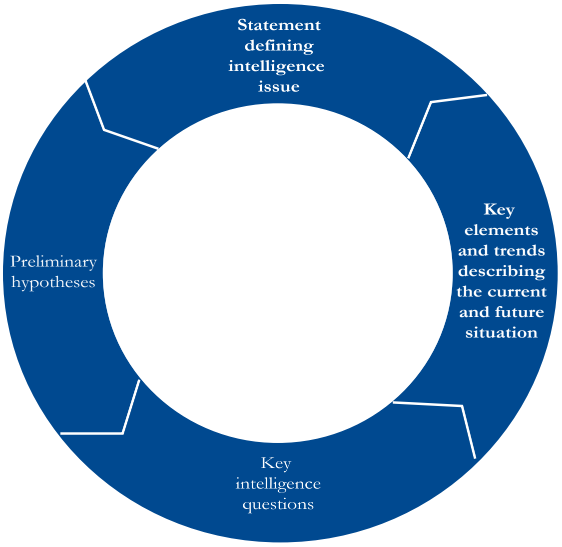

Figure 2: Analytic Framework