

Educating the CI Consumer

Kenneth Sawka

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Discount clothier Syms had a famous and memorable tagline: “An educated consumer is our best customer.” What held true for cheap men’s suits holds true for competitive intelligence. If you want to improve the effectiveness of competitive intelligence in your organization, educate your users on the benefits and limitations of intelligence.

Senior executives who understand competitive intelligence know how to make the most out of it. In speaking about savvy government consumers of intelligence, former CIA Acting Director John McLaughlin said, “Policymakers who knew how to use intelligence generally had a realistic view of what it could and could not do. They understood, for example, that intelligence is almost always more helpful in detecting trends than in predicting specific events . . . They were not intimidated by intelligence that ran counter to the prevailing policy but saw it as a useful job to thinking about their courses of action.” (John McLaughlin, *Analyzing Intelligence*, Washington DC, Georgetown University Press, 2008, page 72)

It’s probably not a stretch to say that most CEOs and senior managers are undereducated on the use of intelligence, and have no systematic understanding of their companies’ competitive intelligence function (if they even have one). If so, then they are almost certainly ill equipped to ask the right questions about competition, market trends, and other external forces that could enable a competitive intelligence staff or consultant to provide meaningful and actionable insights.

Perhaps unfairly, the burden is on the competitive intelligence practitioner to provide the education necessary to make top managers better intelligence users. Corporate competitive intelligence practitioners ought to look for every opportunity to educate their consumers about what intelligence can and can’t do for them. How?

- *When taking an intelligence request.* Never, never take an intelligence tasking from senior managers at face value. It is imperative that the intelligence provider and consumer spend time together framing and reframing questions, discussing what the organization already knows about the particular situation, and discussing

what aspects of an issue competitive intelligence can and can’t address. Doing so will result in an intelligence project that is achievable and that will satisfy the consumer’s needs. In the course of framing the request, the intelligence consumer can learn about the tools, methodologies and processes likely to be employed to address his or her needs.

- *When communicating intelligence findings.* Look for opportunities to describe how certain pieces of information were gathered, or how certain conclusions were drawn, when communicating the results of an intelligence project. Avoid getting into too much detail about methodology and process, and certainly never lead a briefing or presentation with a description of your methodology. But, highlight certain nuggets of information or insights with brief description of how you got there.
- *During the strategic planning process.* The annual planning cycle often creates an opportunity to discuss with your leadership the role intelligence can play in the strategic planning process. It’s also a time when senior executives are in a frame of mind to talk about external forces and to brainstorm ways to learn about competitive conditions and fill information gaps. Competitive intelligence practitioners can use the planning process as an opportunity to prepare a proposal of what competitive intelligence can do to support the process, describing the “hows” of that support along the way.

To be sure, educating the corporate intelligence consumer is an extremely difficult task. However, by looking for opportunities to advance intelligence consumers’ education just a bit, competitive intelligence practitioners can bring more meaningful value to their organizations and avoid charges of “intelligence failures” that were due to nothing more than a failure of senior leadership to understand the capabilities and limitations of competitive intelligence.

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