

# I Have Good News And Bad News

**Bill Fiora**

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It's getting hard to find good news these days. The Dow is down 20% from its most recent high -- the very definition of a bear market. The entire financial services and automotive industries are in utter turmoil. Inflation is up, driven largely by increases in energy prices. And, amid all this, real wages continue to fall. Despite all this gloom and doom, however, practitioners of competitive intelligence have many things to cheer about.

Let's start with the economy. Unlike previous downturns, this one hasn't (yet) caused companies to drastically cut, or eliminate, their CI programs. In fact, it appears to me that CI hiring remains relatively healthy. In the last two years, I have seen a number of high-quality CI leadership jobs advertised online and/or pitched by recruiters. Many of these are what I would call CI "dream jobs," in that the position is strategically placed, appears adequately funded, and is focused on delivering analysis rather than information.

A second positive sign is the expansion of CI into new industries. This is a very real trend for me, as I now oversee a new CI function within a large law firm. Until recently, almost no law firms had a CI department, but now CI is one of the most discussed topics in the legal industry. Almost every conference I have read about or attended in the past 12 months has had a least one session on competitive intelligence. At the same time, while I haven't watched other industries as closely, I have seen new CI functions created in industries outside of the "usual suspects" of pharmaceuticals, financial services, and consumer products.

Perhaps most encouragingly, CI in law firms is focused more on the identification of new markets and opportunities rather than on tracking competitors in close detail. It is this development -- the apparent migration of CI from a tactically-oriented information function to one that helps executives identify and exploit growth opportunities -- that represents a third piece of good news. To me, this trend signifies the future of CI, and where the discipline can show the greatest return.

A recent survey from the Economist Intelligence Unit bears this out. The survey, covered in the April 2008 issue of *Looking Out*, showed that B2B companies are rapidly installing sophisticated global business intelligence systems. Indeed, 65% of survey respondents said that greater integration of external and internal business intelligence systems is the top change their companies will make to how they receive and share external information. (*10 Megatrends in B2B Marketing 2008*, The Economist Intelligence Unit, March 2008)

Taken together, what does all this "good news" mean? That there remains a strong, recognized need for competitive intelligence, and that need is expanding beyond traditional CI industries even in tough economic times. Clearly executives are asking for better insights into the external environment. What I find particularly encouraging is the frequent use of words like "analysis" and "forecasts" -- both in the EIU survey results and among my own CI consumers.

However, warning signs exist amid the rosy news. The fact that executives are asking for forward-looking assessments of external conditions means that they aren't getting it regularly. As in any situation, if there is a strong enough demand for something, then someone will find a way to fill it. My concern is that current CI practitioners may not be best-positioned to do so.

Why? First, CI has a branding problem. CI is still largely viewed by executives as the monitoring of competitors alone, and not as a function that provides a more holistic view of the external environment. At the same time, I feel that we often define our skill sets too narrowly. I doubt, for example, that many CI professionals see financial forecasts or risk assessment as part of their responsibilities.

Indeed, many of the CI dream jobs I have seen posted have been filled by non-CI practitioners who position themselves as being able to provide the insights managers seek. In some cases, the positions are filled by an internal hire with a background in a related function, such as market research or strategic planning. In other cases, the positions were filled by former consultants from leading strategy consulting firms.

While it is great news that there is clear demand for what CI practitioners do, I worry that we will miss out on the very opportunity that we helped create.

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