

Is Competitive Intelligence In A Rut?

Kenneth A. Sawka and Bill Fiora

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More than 500 CI professionals gathered in Chicago on April 21-24, 2009 for the Society of Competitive Intelligence Professionals Annual Conference and Exhibition. On the program were sessions on how to build a CI process, common analytic models, ethics -- the usual fare. Which begs the question, are we in a rut?

Earlier this year, Bill Fiora posted that same question to an online CI network (competitiveintelligence.ning.com). Few participants in that discussion -- and at an "active dialog" session that Ken led, with help from Bill in preparing for the session, at the SCIP09 conference -- could point to any new CI innovation in the last 20 years.

Does that mean that innovation is not occurring, or that it is occurring but not being shared? In some sectors CI practitioners seem more willing to share their new tools and techniques. At a recent competitive intelligence conference by Frost & Sullivan, a member of Best Buy's competitive intelligence function shared how Best Buy's retail stores in North America use Web 2.0 tools to communicate and consolidate CI findings collected from mystery shopping local competitor stores.

Why was Best Buy willing to share this innovation when other companies keep aspects of their CI process under lock and key? Different industry norms regarding the nature of competition, assumptions about how industry participants operate, and other factors seem to influence the openness of CI innovation.

Still, forums do exist where CI practitioners come together in small groups to learn from each other. Examples include the Conference Board's Competitive Intelligence Council, and the Intelligence Leadership Forum. The existence of these groups may indicate that innovation is shared only among small, semi-formal networks, not in large conference sessions. To innovate, then, is to be a superior networker, making personal connections with other practitioners with whom you can share and learn innovative ideas and practices.

A failure to innovate has hindered many CI functions' ability to earn senior executive trust, according to some session participants. Maybe, but what of the handful of

CI functions that have successfully positioned themselves as a valuable executive resource? Their success had less to do with innovation, but perhaps more to do with effective internal marketing by top-tier CI directors.

One fear that some expressed is that we could be replaced by artificial intelligence, as described in the book *On Intelligence* by Jeff Hawkins and Sandra Blakeslee. "[T]he ability to make predictions about the future . . . is the crux of intelligence," Hawkins argues. Predictions are based on accumulated memories, and Hawkins suggests that attempts to build robots with humanlike features will create machines that are more impractical than machines reproducing genuinely human-level processes such as complex-pattern analysis, which can be applied to speech recognition, weather analysis, smart cars, and, presumably, competitive assessments and early warning predictions. Makes sense, but it's hard to imagine entire CI teams being replaced by pattern-recognizing robots, no matter how "human" they appear.

Still, after 20+ years, isn't there a need for *some* innovation that would benefit the entire CI profession? The answer is yes. The holy grail of CI innovation, we believe, is in determining a method to accurately measure CI's value. Several sessions at this year's SCIP conference addressed this, but the general consensus is that our profession does not have a credible methodology for communicating the quantitative value CI brings to an organization. Whoever can offer such a model will truly advance our profession's innovation.

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