

BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN CI AND CORPORATE STRATEGY

RAOUL FARCOT, *Cipher Systems*



Competitive intelligence is still struggling to become a mainstream strategic business discipline within corporate America. To some extent, competitive intelligence is victim of its own name and has been pigeon-holed as a competitor centric discipline, rather than a mainstream strategic support function.

As a result, the ultimate challenge faced by today's CI professionals lies in their ability to educate their internal customers and reconnect their day-to-day research activities with the decision-making of their respective organizations.

COMPETITIVE INTELLIGENCE VS. STRATEGIC RESEARCH

One of the most common mistakes made by CI professionals is to restrict their activities to delivering a limited number of recurrent reports such as newsletters, news reports, and competitor profiles. Although these report types present some value, they should not become the focus of professionals whose main purpose is to support the strategic decision-making process of their organizations.

Technology can automate the majority of recurrent newsletter and market alert production. (See my column in the September/October issue of *CI Magazine*, 'Beware, Not All Intelligence is Created Equal' for more information.) To operate as a strategic support function, CI professionals must take on the perspective of their clients and focus their skills and resources towards market and customer oriented research projects or projects that emphasize market share preservation and/or revenue generation.

Examples of strategic research projects include:

Market and industry assessments.

Provide decision-makers with market sizes and trends based on direct, in-depth interviews with key suppliers, competitors, and customers. Detailed knowledge of a market's size and trends that influence its performance allows your organization's executives to plan effectively and lead, rather than react to trends.

Customer account auditing and product positioning.

Empower your organization's executives with impartial and actionable feedback from the marketplace such as:

- customer organizations' key purchase criteria
- how your client ranks in each of the key criteria relative to other suppliers
- a detailed analysis of the customer's unmet needs and purchasing expectations

This type of research can allow executives to develop focused attack strategies for existing and potential customers based on the customers' own needs and perceptions.

Acquisition due diligence.

Conduct one-on-one interviews with an acquisition targets key business accounts to impartially assess the company's relative strengths and weaknesses vis-à-vis other competitors, and from the perspective of key customers. Such activities can provide decision-makers with actionable insight into negotiating the best possible

acquisition as well as allowing the acquisition owners to effectively position the new company in key customer accounts.

Acquisition candidate screening.

Develop comprehensive profiles on target companies (public, subsidiaries, and private) based on extensive direct interviews with employees and senior management. Profiles typically include assessments of a target's sales and accounts, facilities, and the position of the ownership on the potential sale. This provides decision-makers with the immediate advantage of knowing the target's strengths and weaknesses and the ownership's attitude toward the sale prior to any introduction or negotiations.

SHIFT FROM "CI" TO STRATEGIC DECISION SUPPORT

While working with CI organizations across a variety of industry sectors, we've observed that a majority of CI professionals are still operating in a *go fetch* mode. They struggle with becoming part of the business decision process.

Here is quick action list that could help you better position your services in a strategic support light:

Don't paint yourself in a corner.

Calling yourself a CI professional in a corporate setting can be one of the worst moves you can make if you intend to grow your function into a strategic support role. The competitive intelligence label will not only make your external collection work more difficult, it might also make certain members of the management team uneasy as to your role in the organization.

Instead, you might consider titles such as strategic research manager or strategic planning support manager as an indication of your role in your organization. By analogy, military intelligence members are taught to simply say they are part of their respective service – they do not call out their intelligence role.

Start thinking as a management consultant.

Management consultants are trained to:

- Evaluate the business implications of an assignment.
- Measure the impact of their work on delivery.

These two principles are crucial to helping you make a transition from CI to strategic research. They are why you must start thinking as a management consultant if you want to add a strategic dimension to your day-to-day CI role. Identify the key strategic stakeholders in your organization and begin *selling* them your skills and services.

This is exactly what the *Big 4* consultancies do on a daily basis and why they become so entrenched in the decision-making process of some corporate organizations. This knowledge places consultancies in an ideal position to perform strategic research, in spite of their complete lack of collection and analysis proficiency!

Become an evangelist.

Chances are, some of the decision-makers in your organization know very little (or nothing at all) on the process, the requirements, or the potential benefits of your strategic research and analysis. You may need to spend time educating your management team and demonstrating the benefits of your research and analysis. As your project backlog builds up, keep a few sample deliverables on hand to illustrate the structure and potential benefits of your most recent strategic research assignments.

And remember that this is an on-going process. Schedule a meeting or a presentation every time you have the opportunity to do so, including lunches, breakfasts, sales meetings, and management planning sessions.

Create a strategic research map for your organization.

While meeting with managers, articulate and qualify their respective research needs. Your time and effort needs to focus primarily on requests that are strategic in nature — support decisions that have an impact on your organization's bottom line.

To prioritize strategic intelligence requests, compile a list of criteria that are key to your organization, such as cost impact, potential revenue, and technological impact. This map will allow you to allocate your time and resources to the requests with the greatest strategic impact. It also

provides you with a framework to quantify and measure the value of the reports generated.

By applying the frame of reference shift and practical suggestions made here, a professional in our field should be able to increase the impact of their contribution on their firm's decision-making process. With the economy on the rebound, now's the time to make the shift. Management is looking for help in finding the next wave of opportunity for their firms!

Raoul Farcot is vice president at Cipher Systems. He is currently responsible for managing technology and strategic research consulting projects in Cipher's corporate consulting practice. Raoul can be reached at r.farcot@cipher-sys.com (410) 349-0537 x 201.

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