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## Branding CI: Challenges and Opportunities

The lead article in the January/March issue of SCIP's Competitive Intelligence Magazine has generated considerable interest. It raised the subject of creating a consistent brand image for the CI industry (macro), as opposed to creating a CI brand within an organization (micro). Here's a quick review of the branding issues.

The author, Jason Voiovich, summarizes his CIM article as follows:

*Every industry struggles to define, refine, and leverage its brand perception for the betterment of the discipline and the profitability of its practitioners. CI is no different. Over its four-decade modern history, its brand perception has shifted progressively toward a more "individualistic" orientation. However, that progression has diluted its ability to clearly articulate a consistent value proposition that executives easily and quickly understand. Using social psychology models we can understand these transition points, and what it will take to move CI into the future. However, if ever there were an industry prepared to recognize and take advantage of opportunities to realign a simple brand promise, it would be CI. And the Great Recession might be just the opportunity it is looking for.*

I found particularly interesting several points raised in Jason's article, and subsequent discussions of it (interpretations mine):

1. The importance of collectively (and consistently) defining what CI is and how it can be applied.
2. The need to embed that definition in a brand that succinctly represents what advantages CI can provide for its clients (decision-makers).
3. The need to develop and effectively communicate a firm CI value proposition couched in terms relevant to the decision-makers it serves.
4. The advantage of developing a 'big tent' approach which provides common ground for a wide range of practitioners before CI is absorbed into related disciplines.
5. A consistent brand image minimizes the effort required to educate potential CI clients about the advantages of its deliverables, freeing up more practitioner time to develop intelligence that makes a difference.
6. A key value proposition for creating a widely-accepted definition of the CI brand is its ability to provide a focus on the key activity of generating insights by analyzing input from the external environment.

Here's my view of some potential ways that these points can be addressed.

### A common definition

Compared to many generally-accepted fields that operate in an organizational environment (marketing, accounting, legal, etc), CI is relatively young. Although the exact time when CI migrated into the private sector is not entirely agreed-upon, most believe that it generally predates the establishment of SCIP in 1986. (The first book I read on CI was written by Pfizer's William Sammon in *Business Competitor Intelligence*, published in 1984.)

Part of the difficulty in settling on a specific definition also relates to:

1. The variety of terms under which CI is practiced (SCIP was originally the Society of Competitor Intelligence Professionals).
2. The appropriation of the broader term "business intelligence" by the information technology discipline to apply the processing of internal information for decision-support.
3. The different country/cultural emphasis (in France it is called 'intelligence économique').
4. The limited focus of specific practitioners on one of the many elements of the external environment (competitor, scientific, technical, political, economic, social, regulatory/government, etc)

This apparent complexity of common elements also makes it difficult to embed a specific definition in a brand that succinctly represents what advantages CI can provide for its clients (decision-makers). However, many practitioners should be comfortable with defining CI as a key decision-support activity that generates insights by analyzing input from the external environment.

## **A common education**

Developing a consistent brand image can minimize the effort required to educate potential CI clients about the advantages of its deliverables. When creating a new intelligence function in an organization or expanding their client support, many practitioners find that they spend a considerable amount of their time educating new and potential clients about the advantages (and limitations) of intelligence deliverables. Minimizing this educational effort will free up more practitioner time to develop intelligence products that make a difference by improving decision outcomes. In addition, as part of differentiating themselves from their competition, CI consultants often

present their own personalized definition of CI.

This lack of a common definition for and application of CI is partially caused by managers having little previous exposure to CI's concept and processes. For this situation, several ongoing educational developments are providing a solution. One is the increased availability of CI courses in the MBA curriculum and its discussion in related courses such as strategy and marketing. This is also supported by the gradual increase over the years of both scholarly and popular business articles.

One of the drivers for academic visibility has been IAFIE, the International Association for Intelligence Education. IAFIE was formed in June 2004, at a gathering of 60-plus intelligence studies trainers and educators in Erie, Pennsylvania. This group, from various intelligence disciplines including national security, law enforcement and CI, recognized the need for a professional association that could span diverse disciplines, provide resources, and act as a catalyst for the development of Intelligence Studies programs.

## **A common society**

SCIP is uniquely positioned to provide the environment where the six issues raised by the branding discussion can be focused, and where their solutions can be developed. During the last few years changes in its internal and external environment have created an opportunity where SCIP can take a leadership position on establishing and stabilizing the CI brand. One hundred fractured voices cannot create a brand, but multiple inputs gathered and summarized through a common organization can.

Dramatic and rapid changes in the external environment not only makes it crucial to include CI in business practices, but it also provides an opportunity to create the shorthand brand that communicates value and sets the boundaries of the practice. Facilitating the development of CI as a discipline of thinking ahead and generating insights is what the newly energized SCIP can do for both CI practitioners and their clients.