

## The Analyst as Storyteller

By Jon Glassford

Intelligence analysts have a unique position and perspective within an organization. They must have an overall understanding of the entire business environment, the market and the competitors, as well as the strengths, weaknesses and plans of their own firm. They constantly scan the environment for change. They seek the meanings of change and any move by all competitors in their market or industry. They usually have an insatiable curiosity about their environment, and are always asking questions about who, how, what, why, where and when — all of the elements of a good story.

Good analysts should be able to “weave” facts, information, context and emotion into a story that explains the intelligence product so that everyone can relate to the analysis. Instead, intelligence analysts are often chastised for imprecision and lack of commitment to a given analysis. We tend to couch our analyses in third-person phrases. We often use terms such as “maybe,” “indications are” or “reports show.”

Emotion is as important an aspect of effective intelligence as logic. Our emotions help give meaning to our work, and should be part of any intelligence analysis. Emotions also serve as an evaluative aspect of intelligence:

- “I feel strongly that this is an indication of ...”
- “I’m not very confident in their ability to improve the quality of the product...”
- “I believe Competitor XYZ will ... because my analysis shows ...”

True, too much emotion can color bias an analysis. Analysts must maintain a sense of objectivity to avoid bias, but too much objectivity can water down a presentation to the point of boredom. An intelligence product must make sense, and it must be interesting and engaging to the intelligence consumer.

The analytical story is all about the corporation, the marketplace, and all of the competitors and their interaction. The plot is how the corporation competes in a given market over a period of time. This story should have the elements of a good novel:

- **The Protagonist:** the storyteller’s company, business or firm. It could also be a department, another business line or function, or even a product.
- **The Antagonist:** the major competitors.
- **Minor Characters:** other non-threatening competitors, government agencies, or organizations that have an impact on the industry.
- **Heroes and Villains:** individual players, executives and officials of all firms.
- **Storyline:** the success or failures of companies, products, strategies and tactics, new technology, new market conditions. Each department or each business unit of a firm contributes to the overall story, and each business unit has its own stories to develop.

The intelligence analyst serves as the storyteller, or the Keeper of the Book. She sets the stage by describing the market, the major and minor characters, plots and subplots (new and improved products), plans that succeeded and those that failed, plots and ruses discovered, ruses foiled. Using the story metaphor draws everyone into the life of the

corporation. It helps create a common vision, and can unify corporate employees toward a common series of goals and objectives.

So, how do you turn an intelligence product into story? Denning gives some very good examples in his book *The Springboard: How Storytelling Ignites Action in Knowledge-era Organizations* (Butterworth 2001). The story should:

- Be relatively brief and have only enough “texture” to get the meaning across. The consumers need to provide their own texture to create their own story. We all have our own set of experiences and mental frameworks. The Storyteller strives to develop a common theme — a story — to weave each set of experiences together, and at the same time avoid, replacing individual stories.
- Be intelligible to the audience — don’t talk rocket science to human resource personnel, and conversely, don’t talk about audience demographics to engineers.
- Be interesting.
- “Spring” the listener to a new level of understanding.
- Have a happy ending so that you get listener buy-in to the story. Think of it as an alternative outcome, another scenario.
- Deal with a specific individual or organization, which will help your audience identify with and relate to the story.

There are other factors in developing the story, and Denning provides a good list of ideas and “dos and don’ts.” The method and style of delivery, whether the format is a written report or an oral presentation, must fit the audience or intelligence consumer. Finding the optimum style comes with trial and error, a delineation of individual styles and preferences, and with training and experience.

And just as some novels do, an intelligence story needs illustrations and pictures. Taking the form of charts, graphs and maps, these illustrations give a sense of credibility to those who need quantitative knowledge as a means of confirmation. Stories must relate to both sides of the data fence — qualitative and quantitative.

Competitive intelligence and storytelling have a great deal in common. They are explanatory tools that serve to bring meaning to a very complex, data-driven and confusing world. Both use the six basic principles of knowledge and communication: Who, What, Why, Where, When and How. They seek to change the future by using the lessons of yesterday, coupled with the efforts of today. And both strive to predict the future.

Read any good stories lately?

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