

Competitive Intelligence

A quarterly eBulletin from the people who bring you the Competitive Intelligence Executive MindXchange

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Strategic Competitive and Market Insights to Propel Profit and Growth

Integrating Web 2.0 Tools into Your CI Function

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"Web 2.0" simply means a web experience comprised of user-generated content. For example, everything you find on eBay is posted there by users. Facebook members upload their own content, as do users of YouTube. Having AOL recommend shopping sites to you? That's so 1996. In the new web, everyone can post, have an opinion and share.

Let's talk about some of these Web 2.0 tools and where they come into play in a competitive intelligence function. In general, these tools have a similar function within your CI department: They allow you to expand your CI "reach" without needing to expand your CI team. The promise of Web 2.0 is one of "collaboration." Since everyone shares knowledge, we all get smarter. Well, that's the promise at least. We'll discuss the reality in a moment.

The cost of these tools is also promising. Most of them are either free, or at least cheaper than the last business dinner you expensed. These are not massive "enterprise solutions"-type applications.

Now, here's what folks don't tell you about all of this wonderful collaboration. Most people won't participate unless they have a reason to do so. It effectively becomes "Somebody Else's Problem." Anyone who has read a Douglas Adams book knows that an item that is Somebody Else's Problem is effectively invisible. Invisibility is likely the last thing you want your project to become. It also means that getting people to participate has now become *your* problem. There are ways to get around this scenario that we'll talk about as we discuss the individual tools.

Wikis

A wiki is simply an online encyclopedia that anyone can edit. The premise is that as people contribute their individual knowledge to the entries, the entries will become more detailed and refined. This is how Wikipedia (en.wikipedia.org) works. It is not a tool for databasing information; it is not a presentation tool. It is splendid as a reference tool. From a usage standpoint, it is about as easy to use as Microsoft Word. You can likely learn 80% of what you'll ever use, or maybe ever need, in under an hour.

Mediawiki is the open source software provider; look up the Mediawiki entry on Wikipedia to find out how to integrate with your systems. It might help to walk through the site with an IT person.

Now, back to the Somebody Else's Problem issue. Wikipedia has millions of people contributing to it. Only a small percentage contributes meaningfully to the work. Unless you are reading this article from Bentonville, Ark., your company probably doesn't have millions of people to contribute to a wiki.

To get around this, you must *make it* somebody's problem. This might sound blunt, but let's face it, most folks are protective of their work, so if you want to engage them start creating documents for them. If the information is incomplete or incorrect, they'll be inclined to ensure their information is accurately represented. Offer it up as a "service." What we discovered is that by being the "cheerleader" for the wiki project, more people became aware, and started to contribute. Even though we were the CI team, we were creating pages for marketing, advertising and other divisions. After two years of usage, it is now ingrained in to the fabric of how we share data as a company.

One more tip: Don't make your Wiki site simply a long, boring page of text and graphs. Integrate pictures of your competitor's latest products, concepts or CEO. Sell the sizzle. The best part is, it is easy to copy and paste into the Wiki. You probably already have most of the content you'd want to upload initially.

YouTube

It's not just for drunk people anymore. We've started using YouTube as a web server. You can effectively hide items in plain sight simply by using a random series of numbers and letters as your file name. Look up the postings by your user name or your team's user name. (Hint: Don't use your company's name).

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This works well for posting web presentations, captured video from the web, or video you've shot firsthand. As a benefit, the items do not reside on your servers, taking up space. One downside, of course, is anyone can find it if they know how to look for it, so posting internal information that you don't wish to make public would be a bad idea.

Online Surveys

These are a great way to capture insights from a large number of people quickly. For instance, we were looking for a competitor's "test locations" recently. We wished to measure what impact, if any, these locations were having on Best Buy's retail stores. So, we emailed a survey to our store managers, asking them to tell us what format the competitor happened to have in the stores that were across the street from their location. They picked from four photos, one of which was the test store. Soon, we had identified 40 of the 50 test locations. In three days.

Of course, this will only work if you have buy-in from survey takers. We've had good luck using the website www.SurveyMonkey.com. You can get thousands of surveys for about \$25.

Wikis, YouTube and online surveys are just the tip of the iceberg. Most of these tools are very cost effective, and require little training for effective use. There are dozens of Web 2.0 tools that are literally at your fingertips, all it takes is some strategic creative thinking to make them work for you.