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Point of View:

New Year Resolutions for Competitive Intelligence Managers

The start of the new calendar year brings the promise of more daylight hours and the opportunity to make plans for change in the coming year. In addition to the standard "I'll exercise more" promise, let's add some professional and organizational goals. Here are some resolutions for competitive intelligence (CI) managers to consider.

1. Expand your information focus to include non-English language sources.

For many years, the information gathered for competitive intelligence, particularly from secondary information resources, has been in the "accepted language of business," English. International resources, covering areas such as social, political and technological issues, have provided important information in English, even if the originating language was different.

But as markets and competitors continue to be globalized, and as consumer markets have developed in major non-English speaking countries, the information that can be critical to understanding competitive developments is often only available in the local language. The increase of this unique, often critical information in other languages impacts the accuracy of searching in many areas, particularly secondary information sources, Google-type search engines and

social networking systems such as Twitter. Here's a simple example: When I search for new information on competitive intelligence, in addition to retrieving material in English, I also find references to CI-related information published in Portuguese, Chinese, French and other languages. While Google translate can give me a rough idea of what that content covers (I can only follow those ideas I am already familiar with) it doesn't help me understand unique concepts or ideas enough to actually interpret them. And this assumes that the original material had the phrase "competitive intelligence" embedded somewhere in the record. Otherwise, the search engine completely misses the phrase as it is used in other languages (think "Inteligência competitiva" "Конкурентная разведка" "intelligence économique" "竞争情报" and others).

And knowledge of the local culture, inflections and dialects is crucial for primary source interviewing and interpretation. Many articles have been written (at least in English) about the requirement to use native speakers in this role. (And that begs the question of the person's ability to accurately translate that conversation into the language of the CI person who will ultimately use the information.) Consider extending your internal CI network to include individuals with this capability.

2. Make more time for analysis.

Look carefully at how you spend your competitive intelligence time. Honestly evaluate if you are not only scheduling, but maintaining the most effective balance between gathering information, analyzing it, and presenting recommendations. You'll likely find situations where an excellent effort to gather comprehensive information not only reduces the time available to analyze it, but also neutralizes its impact by not allowing you to present it to your decision-makers in the form that optimizes their understanding of your situational analysis.

This effort to make more time for analysis can be supported by improvements in three related areas: technology utilization, network development, and information focus. Use automated systems to support the increased efficiency of your information networks, and to focus the collection of information on the crucial decisions and issues facing your organization. Providing focused, automated information alerts can be an effective way to support the involvement of your company's employees in intelligence networks, and to engage them in reviewing information changes and alerting you to their potential effects. Tighten your own information focus efforts. Consider adopting this resolution offered by Pascal Frion: "Of

course, I scan and filter, but also I will try my best to apply a ‘methodological refusal of information’ in some aspects of my job. Obviously, I do not want to live the life of a recluse, but I do not believe in the idea that more information is a good thing. For sure, it is as risky to miss ‘good’ information, as it is ‘risky’ to take information only because it exists.”

3. Revisit how well your current deliverables fulfill what your organization requires.

We tend to go on autopilot and continue to provide the same reports to the same people until some event requires us to re-evaluate them. Proactively apply a reality check to your competitive intelligence deliverables – at least determine who still actively reads them. One creative person buried a notice in a report of a free lunch at a popular local restaurant to the first person to call or email him about it. This gave him a quick list of who was actually reading what was sent to them.

And remember that an increasing number of managers are reading their email on the small screens of their phones. Consider re-tailoring your material so that

your main conclusions are in the first sentence, and substitute Web links for attachments.

4. Take someone new out to lunch.

Even with the increased availability of electronic networks, there remains significant value in developing and maintaining personal connections, both inside and outside your company. This could take the form of expanding your internal network by connecting with a sales force director and exploring how to bring their direct reports into the CI fold. Or meet with your key CI supporters to gauge how well the CI function has performed over time.

Exchange more experiences with your peers in intelligence—mentor and be mentored in competitive intelligence best practices. Many companies have more than one person with CI responsibilities, but your compatriot may be in a different division or department. Make a point to meet or call that person regularly, to refresh your attitude and learn what others are doing. If you’re the only CI person, reach out to other CI professionals in neighboring companies. SCIP chapter meetings and conferences are great

places to meet individuals and form your own CI network.

5. Grade your reports.

Identify and learn from the mistakes and successes of your specific competitive intelligence efforts. Although you’re always under pressure to move quickly to the next project, take the time to do a ‘win-loss’ analysis on what you just delivered. Talk to the key customer of the project to determine what portions of the CI deliverable were applied to the issue or decision, and what was lacking. Through this conversation, you can also gain a better understanding of how decisions are made in your company and who makes them.

If the project’s report card is good, you’ve documented its value while the impact is still fresh in people’s minds. If it’s not-so-good, you can find out where it needs improvement to make your next project results even better.

Check out the discussion on the SCIP LinkedIn group
<http://www.linkedin.com/groups?gid=68320> and share your own resolutions with your peers.