

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

Ask the Experts! Panel Discussion: Powerful CI and MR Collaborations

An excerpt from a panel discussion moderated by Dan Colquhoun, Vice President of Customized Research at Frost & Sullivan, at the 16th Annual Competitive Intelligence 2009:

Dan Colquhoun: Many of you seem to have in your title the words "Business Intelligence." This so-called collaboration between CI and MR, is this business intelligence? Is this what we should label it as? Is this what it's going to be known as moving forward, or is there something else?

Eric Naiman, Director of Business Intelligence, Battelle Memorial Institute: In my organization, the hot new term is "insights." Everything's about insights today. And I have a feeling that sometime down the road, at least in the near future, titles are going to be recast to include the word insight so that we can synthesize all the materials we get from research, competitive intelligence, and so forth together.

Isaac Collazo, Vice President, Performance Strategy & Planning, Intercontinental Hotels Group: I would agree with you, because, the same thing, but we have two different groups. Within our groups, within our company, we do have a true Consumer Insights Group, which would be a traditional market research group, and then you have our group, and the way I look at what we do, is we're more the think tank. We actually really think about what this all means. We triangulate all the various data sources to come up with some strategy in our briefing, so I think of us as more like the Brookings Institute.

They're a little bit higher on our scale than here, but again, what we're trying to do is put it all together, both economically, and in terms of what's the economy doing? What's the consumer doing? What's our data tell us? So it's a broad, very broad scope job, hence our title is Performance Strategy because at the end of the day, this information is to help us perform better against our competitors.

Eric Naiman: Just to reiterate, when you work for senior management, they really don't care what it's titled, whether it's market researcher or competitive intelligence. They just want the answer, and they're expecting you, the expert, to figure out the best way to do it. So in my opinion, there's really a blur between the two areas now. And if you're a good secondary research or competitive intelligence, you have to know what market research is because you need to know what your limits are and how far you can take the secondary research.

And likewise if you're a primary researcher, you really need to understand when is the best opportunity to spend that money versus having a secondary researcher, so it's just as the other people have said, there's really a blurring of the lines, and eventually I think that people will end up doing both.

Jeff Beeny, Senior Manager, Corporate Development and Business Intelligence, Thermo Fisher Scientific: Yeah, I guess I'd really have to agree because they both kind of roll up responsibility through me and in our organization, the market research, if I'm in a strategy meeting with our CEO and CFO, my boss reports to the CFO, he'll look to me and say, "Okay, where did this number come from?" and if I don't really understand that and I say, "That's someone else's job," then I'm not going to look too good at the end of the day. To your point, they just want to know the answers to their questions. So you really have to know the research, as well as how to analyze that information. So yeah, I think you've hit it right on the head.

Dan Colquhoun: To what extent has technology been an influence on the development of this convergence capability within your organizations? Is it something that can run lockstep with the natural evolution of the business, or is it something that actually hurried it along in any way?

Eric Naiman: I think technology has done a lot, a tremendous amount to change the business, and I think in two ways, the first way that I see it's done is that anybody can get on the Internet now, and Google, or go to Wikipedia, or you know, Frost & Sullivan or whatever and find two cents, and they think, all of a sudden they think that they're an expert, and you know, that they should be doing your job. So I think in that sense, it's really, as I think we heard in the speaker this morning, really force people in the practice to get much faster and better and more accurate, and as we said, not so much just reporting facts.

What I've seen is that you've got to be able to report trends: what does it mean to the business? You know, Google is great, but it doesn't tell you how it specifically impacts your business. So that's the first thing. I think it's made

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the function a lot sharper, and more insightful. The other thing that I think it's done, because technology is so prevalent now, people aren't happy saying, you know, "I'm going to get something for you in three or four weeks. I expect something to be done immediately, and if you can't do it, I know that there are eighteen gazillion consultants out there that will be willing to help me out if you guys are too busy. So I think it's put a lot of added pressure on practitioners because everybody just thinks it's available, and they don't realize the insight, so I think the challenge is to be able to explain to people what are the limits of technology, how it has helped, how it hasn't helped. Because what I often see is that people rush, and they get something off of Google, and they want to make a multimillion dollar decision, and you spend more time reversing it than it really is going, doing it properly.

Isaac Collazo: I think that's an important part. Anybody can get the information, but few people can get the insight that that information, or the limitations of the data point that they extracted from the Internet. So I think that's a very key point of what distinguishes us from the masses. And the other thing, when I think what technology has done, it basically has enabled us to do the jobs that we're doing. I mean, beginning by 8:00 a.m. every morning, I know how our hotels have done around the world. And that's because of technology. ...

Dan Colquhoun: So it sounds like maybe a key issue, a key to in the creation of such an animal is not only the acquisition, which is pretty simple, I mean, we've been acquiring data since the days of stone tablets, but it's the organization of that information and that data. How do you manage the kind of data flows that you're experiencing?

Eric Naiman: Well, it's not just the management. The only reason I'm still employed is because Google doesn't synthesize. So it really is a matter of selling yourself and your value as an enhancement to the conveniences that technology has afforded all of us. And that's really, in my opinion, one of the big challenges today, now that everybody said before, everybody can find the data, and then go out and think like, I know everything I need to know about something, and off they go. So it puts a lot more pressure on everybody who's in our line of work, to be very cognizant of the need to add value, add insight to the masses of material that now we all have access to, and access to so quickly.

Jeff Beeny: I think it's about understanding your customers as well. Obviously if you're in a company that's 10 or 20 people, you can serve the needs of sales, marketing, management, you know, R&D, everybody. But if you're in a company like where I'm at with 33,000 people, if I do that with our group, there's no way we're going to get anything done on the scale of what is asked, so I think what we have done, is we've picked our customers, and we've had that luxury of organizationally where we sit.

I think management recognized that early on when I was creating the group, was to understand that our customers are really the division vice presidents, their financial counterpart, and their marketing counterpart, so there's only, you know, maybe 50 or 60 people that are really our internal customers, but what we've done is using technology, put that information out there so if you had a division president ask you a question, don't just send it back to him or his group of constituencies, but put it on our internal portal so that everybody can benefit from it. ...

So it's a way to open the information, get feedback as well through our portal, but kind of with the understanding that we don't want questions from everybody within the company because if the question's important enough, that person's going to bubble it up through their management and you're going to end up working on it anyways.

Eric Naiman: I think another aspect of technology that makes our life difficult is, and I know there's a lot of suppliers in the room so they're probably not going to want to hear me say this, is I think suppliers really push technology. In terms of whether it's market research reports, or I can do a market research project for you in a week to try and get attention, and they tend to be very good at blasting them, you know, to senior management, so all the senior management gets the, "I'll answer this question for you in two days."

And so I think one of the things that technology has done a wonderful job, as the panelists have said, but I think it also has limitations, and I think that one of the challenges I have is, I don't like to use suppliers that try and constantly push that, "My technology solution can answer all your questions in a week, or five days." We get quite a bit of that, which, a lot of those fires that we put out, so I think that there's a real danger, trying to emphasize that just because you have technology you can be able to get answers quicker and faster and better. And I think that's something that ultimately the industry needs to deal with.