



ASK ARTHUR!

ANSWERS TO YOUR CI QUESTIONS

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Dear Arthur

I have collected a lot of information on my competitors. Some of this information is strategic in nature while some is more basic. What is the best way of informing my management on the competitor information I've collected?

A key part of the competitive intelligence process is communicating gathered data in a usable format. Most managers will not appreciate it if you give them the raw data without any analysis. You need to put some effort into formatting and interpreting the competitor data you've gathered. How does the information relate to other pieces of information you have on the competitor? Are there any obvious trends? What are the key points you are trying to show? It is the answers to questions such as these that differentiates *information* from *intelligence*.

Information Preferences

Also important is how you present the information. It must match the manager's information preference. Some managers like full information with everything included, while others only want a key point summary. Giving summaries to the analytical type of manager gives the impression that you have not done the work: any informa-

tion will be viewed as superficial. Such a manager wants full details and won't make a decision with less.

Other managers prefer an executive summary consisting of a handful of bullet points outlining the key facts. They will come back to you if they want more detail. Providing everything in one go, except perhaps as an appendix, will be viewed as overkill and make them think that you cannot refine and extract the salient points from the data. So it is essential to know what your intelligence users want in terms of the format of the reports provided. The easiest way is to ask colleagues or the manager themselves how they would like the reports formatted.

Delivery Vehicle

A final aspect that you should consider is the mode of communication: face-to-face, presentation, telephone, email, and written memo. Which you choose also depends on the receiving manager's personality as well as their location and the sensitivity of the intelligence. Access to highly sensitive information may need to be restricted. Thus care needs to be taken to control written material and especially e-mailed data. In some cases, where the location allows, a face-to-face meeting may be the safest approach.

Other information – a product comparison matrix, for example – may be made accessible to staff that need to know how competitor products compare. This group may include sales people, customer relationship staff, marketing and product management. As a result such information may need a wide distribution – possibly placed on the corporate intranet.

The Final Stage

A further, purely personal viewpoint: you will often hear CI experts talking about dissemination as the final stage of the CI cycle. I disagree with both the use of the word dissemination and the idea that it is the final stage. To me, dissemination suggests a one-way process.

However in a business context, where it is important that the competitor analyst receives feedback on their work, the intelligence user has responsibility for passing back information. I prefer to talk about communication, which includes two-way information transfer.

Intelligence that is not used has no value. Its final stage is applying it to the decision process. A decision not to act is still a valid option. It does, though, require that a decision be made. Information passed to management and placed on a shelf without being used to guide business actions is not intelligence, and is a waste of the analyst's time and the organization's money. The final stage of the CI process has to be the utilization of the intelligence following its communication to the decision makers.

Arthur Weiss is managing partner with AWARE, a leading UK competitive intelligence consultancy. The answers given do not necessarily represent the views and opinions of either CI Magazine or SCIP. The AWARE website is at www.marketing-intelligence.co.uk. The site includes a free online consultancy, where AWARE answers questions posted on a variety of marketing and business related topics.