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Introduction to Frugal Competitive Intelligence

1 Introduction

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Many definitions can be given to competitive or strategic intelligence, and indeed no observer nor practitioner hesitates to propose his own. For my part, I usually say that the CI has to put information at the service of the strategy or the growth of the company.

In the field of competitive intelligence, speeches emphasize the necessity of some kind of absolute: everything should be done directly, completely, all the time. Managers should be kept aware of everything thanks to an ongoing monitoring of the competitors and they should share all the available information with their teams without delays. The same occurs with security, field in which everything should be locked up and protected against any kind of hypothetical attacks, even those from James Bond. Target: Zero risk. The lobby and influence, the third pillar of CI is somewhat off line with this logic. But due to a semantic shift, the universe of social media has invited itself as a central piece in the landscape. And it is highly recommended that companies monitor them closely and ensure a coherent and consistent online presence. In these approach, the suggested responses are mainly technological.

Only large companies can embark on such adventures. For most of the others, the adventure is unlikely as it is promising significant investments and costs for uncertain and random benefits, which are in any case not very visible nor tangible. Ultimately, entrepreneurs have the feeling of being in front of a mountain and most of them decide not to climb. Didn't they always work that way? Do they really have to climb this mountain?

The approach of frugal competitive intelligence, CI with limited means, is a response to this unpleasant situation. The clear message is therefore that it is possible for any SME, even among the smallest, to join the CI movement and to obtain tangible and important benefits. On the other hand, the scheme will not be similar to what occurs within the largest companies as it promote some pragmatic goal oriented methods and tools.

The most important, in the spirit of frugal CI, is intention, much more than tools. It is the desire to perform CI actions, to put information at the service of the company strategy or growth, rather than the implementation of tools and systematic practices. In fact, frugal CI rely on a four basic precepts being:

- pick your battles
- accept the idea of uncertainty
- focus on the most accessible information
- make the distinction between interesting and useful information



2 Pick your battles

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The first thing, when you launch a frugal CI approach, is to pick your battles. Small firms do not have resources, skills, money, or even time, to be present on all battle fields. Moreover, a properly sized CI effort should only concern a (very) small percentage of the company's resources (according to some figures, 1 to 2% of the turnover). This justifies the importance of choosing the cases on which to concentrate these (tiny) resources. It is up to the manager to identify the most important actions for the achievement of the corporate's objectives. As a general rule, these battles are found among the elements that make the company successful (competitive advantages) or among the risks facing the SME (lethal risks). This can range from the development of a new product to the securing of a supplier to the implementation of a communication strategy, the recruitment of new employees, the protection of certain know-how / information or the need for influencing a law or regulation process. The whole thing is to consider the case as a project and assign it objectives, resources and deadlines. That frame installed, it is the right time to investigate the information needs and the required means in order to increase the chances of success.

In this context, CI activity presents a "long tail" profile. A lot of actions in the initial phase (reflection) and then more sporadically throughout the life of the project, which could spread over many months / years. Depending on their needs, some companies will only do one CI project every year or every two years, while others, probably larger organisations, will allow themselves two to three actions a year, perhaps more. But in any case, all these companies are performing Competitive Intelligence.

3 Accept the idea of uncertainty

The second step is to accept the idea of uncertainty. The manager's life is made of lots of decision makings, from the less significant to the most strategic decisions. The uncertainty is completely part of the process and when the uncertainty disappears the decision turns into obviousness. Observation and experience show that most of the decisions are intuition based, fed by experiences, culture, knowledge ... By the end of the game, we could consider that CI should aim to feed the intuitions of the decision makers.

One can, of course, tend towards the risk zero, but this path is asymptotic and the closer one gets to the goal, the more expensive the progress, up to becoming unaffordable. The difficulty of exercising Competitive Intelligence thus lies mainly in the right dimensioning of the efforts, reaching which that will increase the most proportionally the chances of success (or reduce the Uncertainty) for the most reasonable investment.

4 Focus on most accessible information

The third element is to focus on the most accessible information. Of course, not all information have the same value. Even more, information value is impossible to determine in advance. The basic value of an information is null and information acquires some value, for the CI specialist, only through its ability to answer to response to the specialist concerns (questions). Depending the question, some informations will promise more value than others, but the most valuable pieces of information, the most determining, are not necessarily the most difficult to



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get. And as soon as we have accepted the principle of uncertainty and the idea that we should feed manager's intuition, we are ready to understand that good decision making could derives from different mixes of information. Our duty is to manage efficiently the imposed resources and constraints in order to provide executives with actionable information which will lower their risks. Sometimes, a lot of cheap and quickly accessible information can do the same job as few costly ones...

In terms of information, it is generally considered that 80% of the information useful to companies is already in the structures. This pool of information is therefore one of the first to be exploited and investigated. The problem lies in the form of this information. Most of it is stored in a tacit form, in the brain or the knowledge of some workers, not in explicit forms or whatever databases. Of course, for years, KM managers have been trying to capture these tacit information and knowledge and to storing, managing and sharing them in various digital stores. But with only a little success and at costs that are not affordable by SME's. Experiences show, however, that mediation methods and practices, based on information staging exercises, make greatly easier the sharing of information and knowledge between pairs and collaborators. Experience either shows that with appropriate techniques et methodologies, it is quite easy to reveal et explicitate these tacit informations.

5 Make the distinction between interesting and useful information

Finally, it is important to make the distinction between interesting and useful information. The first flatters the ego and allows to shine (in society), whereas the second encounters specific intuition needs and facilitates specific decision making. In the same spirit, it is also important to differentiate information and document (information being a fact publicly revealed while the document is the carrier of the information). Frugal competitive intelligence focuses on useful information (in the context of the case) and detach itself from documents (be aware that a document could contains several informations and that information could be carried by several documents). Of course, since what feeds people cleverness is information, not documents.

6 Conclusion

The frugal Competitive Intelligence practices confirm that all kind of organisations can do CI and take advantages out of it. Not only the big ones, even the smallest. But you have to consider that CI is not only a matter of implementing a computer based monitoring system, whatever its targets or ambitions, nor collecting informations, documents and knowledge in a KM system. Being a CI minded company starts from the moment you decide to put information at the service of your development (or strategy) and you go for collecting additional information before every important decision you have to make.

Frugal CI makes you enter in a new world. You do not collect and manage interesting information any more, wondering time to time if you reach a decent ROI level. Instead, each time you need to make decision, you assess the expected benefits, the useful information that could help you make a better decision and the efforts (time and money) you are ready to spend on it in order to lower your risk to a chosen level. And the ROI no longer haunts your nights.

Frugal CI let you enter in a project based process which is still Competitive Intelligence.



7 About the author and the book

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After having spent his young professional years as programmer and business analyst in the early '90s, Pierre-yves Debliquy has been hired by Arthur Andersen as business consultant. This position introduced him to the emerging concepts of datawarehouses and document databases (Lotus Notes). His next employer was a leading actor in archiving, text and image recognition and search engines. From the last years of the century, as a support activity to his job of document management consultant, he started to develop Internet based competitor and technical intelligence activities.

In July 2000, Pierre-yves Debliquy launched his own company with the aim of moving his business from document management to competitive intelligence (Euresis). The evolution has been completed in 2006 with the creation of Brainsfeed, a project that proposed services around competitive intelligence (consultancy, training, conferences, education...)

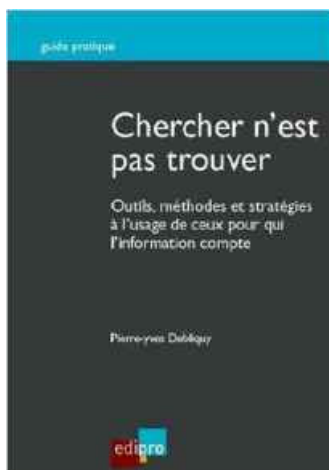
In January 2011, he has been hired by SPI (Territorial Development Agency in Liège - Belgium) as CI Adviser, in order to help local SME's create more value for the benefit of the territory through the discovering and implementing CI spirit and activities.

During all these years, he always had the desire to contribute to the development of his practice. Therefore, he performs a permanent activity of self-improvement, resulting in daily posts on his blog (<http://blog.euresis.com>), development of new methodologies and services for the managers, trainings and lectures in conferences. He also wrote 2 books.

Pierre-yves Debliquy, expert in competitive intelligence

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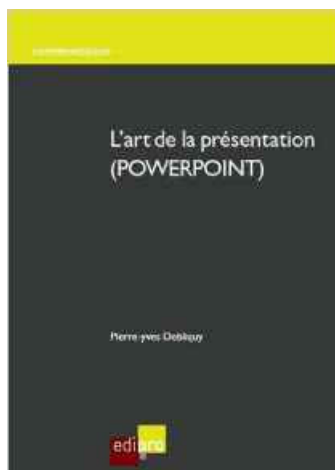
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