Collecting CI at Trade Shows: The International Perspective

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Do but take care to express yourself in a plain, easy Manner, in well-chosen, significant and decent Terms, and to give a harmonious and pleasing Turn to your Periods: study to explain your Thoughts, and set them in the truest Light, laboring as much as possible, not to leave them dark nor intricate, but clear and intelligible.

—Miguel de Cervantes, *Preface to Don Quixote*

There is no such [thing] as Intelligence; one has intelligence of this or that. One must have intelligence only for what one is doing.

—Edgar Degas

Participating in a trade show is a part of most professional careers at some point or another. Typically, a trade show has three different types of individuals who attend the event:

- **Exhibitors**—staff a booth and generate marketing and business leads
- **Presenters**—deliver programming and information to other participants
- **Attendees**—participate in the sessions and network

You can also add a fourth participant to this list, that is, the competitive intelligence practitioners who attend the event to collect information on their competitors. Most of these practitioners use trade shows as an open forum to gather information on the activities of competitors and other industry participants. Preparing for both domestic and international trade shows involves different competitive intelligence–related activities for each of the four participant types.

EXHIBITORS

Exhibitors need to be prepared to discern between a prospect and a competitor when giving out information. Exhibit staff tend to disclose company information freely, treating all attendees as prospects. Because not all attendees are actual prospects, staff can inadvertently disclose sensitive information.

Exhibit staff can benefit from a short training course in how to identify a competitive intelligence collector. The course should remind them of the value of company information. The company's competitive intelligence team should always provide the booth staff with this preparation, as well as some training in how to gather intelligence from actual attendees who stop by their booth. Their participation helps the collection effort and controls the outflow of your information.

PRESENTERS

Presenters generally require less event preparation because the speech they are giving to the event audience contains information that has already been approved by the company's legal department and (hopefully) the competitive intelligence staff. Presenters should also be prepared to note who is questioning them and the questions themselves, and to discern whether there is a competitive motive behind the questions.

ATTENDEES

All individuals who are at the trade show as registered attendees should receive a briefing on the complete range of their company's competitive intelligence operational goals and objectives. As such, they function as part of the event collection team and should be treated as full participants in the information collection effort.

Because many of the attendees are not competitive intelligence practitioners, they should receive some advance training in the pre-event briefings. This training should include elicitation techniques and ethics.

CI PRACTITIONERS

Competitive intelligence practitioners have different preparation requirements for a domestic or global event. For a U.S. event, they can work with the company's exhibitor group to obtain an advance attendee list and identify specific people to contact for information collection. This list can also be used to set up the meetings with event speakers or event staff for competitor suppliers and customers who may be there.

Outside the U.S., competitive intelligence staff may find it more difficult to acquire the advance attendee list, and at larger global events it is often harder to locate a target because of the sheer volume of attendees. In this case, contacts with the competitor supplier and customer staff can open doors to the special rooms at the booth where more information is exchanged.

DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL EVENTS

International trade shows offer roughly the same environment as domestic events. For the competitive intelligence staff, the significant difference between domestic and international events depends in part on the country of the participant (competitive intelligence, presenter, attendee, and booth staffer). One of the key differences between a domestic and international trade show is the participants' openness to conversation and information collection.

Although event size is a factor as well, any trade show outside your home territory brings with it a cultural difference that transcends the size of the event. With an international trade show, language also becomes a significant issue—if you are in a different country with a different language, for example, or if the trade show attracts attendees internationally. English is now the common language of most international business, but not all trade show attendees will have similar command of the language.

A significant difference between U.S. and non-U.S. trade shows has to do with the basic purpose of the event itself. U.S. events are often structured around education and sales. The education part comes through the presentations while the sales part comes from the activities on the display floor. Outside the U.S., the events take on more of a public relations and networking flavor. The public relations part comes from the presentations by an exhibitor's top management, and the networking part comes from the activity at the exhibitor booths.

Collecting competitive intelligence at a U.S. (and Canadian) trade show is often complicated by an awareness of CI that leads to a strong counter-CI culture, which consequently makes any conversations between participants more guarded. Approaching a booth or presenter at a U.S. trade show often requires first disclosing your interest and affiliation before any information, including brochures and display items, are exchanged. This tactic makes it more difficult to open up a dialogue with the potential information source and have them provide real insight. But once the conversation clears the first acceptance hurdle, the amount of exchanged information opens up significantly. This situation is in large part due to U.S. shows intended as a venue for on-site sales.

Outside the U.S., the networking emphasis of the trade shows creates a greater openness to the initial approach at the exhibitor booth. Most of the valuable information is not available at the front of the booth, but rather is divulged in the private conversations held in a private room in the back of the booth. Back room access is generally by invitation only. Not all events or booths will have a back room; some will use a private off-floor office or hotel hospitality suite. In either case, this is the location where true information exchange happens and entry is by invitation only.

It is possible to work around the inherent limitations of collecting data in both environments by using a variety of open and ethical tactics. In the U.S., it is generally considered unethical to hide your identity and employer, so this option will not be discussed here. Outside the U.S., different ethics are often used.

U.S. TRADE SHOWS

At the U.S. trade shows, the key hurdle is in becoming validated as a sales prospect. Because most competitive intelligence efforts do not involve a sale, pretending to be a prospect crosses ethical lines. Some data can be collected before being validated as prospect.

To effectively collect information on the trade floor, visit the booth over the course of several hours or even days, with each visit targeting specific data points and different staff members. If you have a competitive intelligence collection team, then these visits are even more effective. You can assign each team member a different point to collect, building on what each has learned in prior visits.

Besides the exhibit floor, you have an opportunity to collect information from the presentations that are part of the educational aspect of the U.S. trade show. During these events, the collection process has two functions. The first is to listen to the presentation itself and ask questions at the end. The second is to listen to the questions and answers posed by other attendees after the presentation is over. Often, these after-the-presentation questions provide more information on the topic than the presentation itself.

Other locations to collect useful information at the U.S. trade shows include any poster presentations (most often found at medical events) or through the open invitation industry working-group events held after hours. In both cases, the amount of scrutiny you receive is less than at the actual booth and the participants are usually more open to talk.

NON-U.S. TRADE SHOWS

At the non-U.S. trade show, the complication is in obtaining the information that is distributed during networking. Because these events are less focused on sales and more on reestablishing relationships (many of which are years old), it is harder to move into the closed network where information is exchanged. Furthermore, because most of the networking occurs in the private rooms (often accompanied with beverages and snacks), it is harder to "listen in" by being around the booth.

In these events, it is still possible to use the multiple collector approach at the booth. Do not be misled, however, by the apparent openness of the booth staff. Often, they provide only a limited amount of information before they bring into the conversation more senior persons who actually have the core knowledge. Usually, the senior people will quickly asses your position and determine whether or not you should receive the information you seek. As this

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Create a Web-based "Conference Manager", built in a relational database structure, to allow users to store and index the key characteristics of an event as well as the specific contributors and documents associated with an event. Integrate your Conference Manager with your company's address book or internal e-mail directory to help competitive intelligence users to create collection teams during a specific event.

For example, you might wish to include in this database names, locations, sponsors, and relevant competitive intelligence topics or questions associated with an event. (See figure 1 for an example of how this may look.) This input allows you to better organize the preliminary information and adequately prepare for the show.

To minimize time and users' involvement, implement a system capable of generating URLs (Web links). Forward these links via e-mail to users who can then access their specific assignments from their inbox without having to log onto a database during a conference. (See figure 2 for an example.) To maintain security and confidentiality, make sure that the link you are sending is IP-specific and can be accessed only by the person who has been assigned the questions and assignments.

By the same token, issuing user-specific input links also allows the database to automatically sort contributions by individuals. As seen in figure 3, this can help you to quickly determine which people have completed their assignments and who still owes you information on a specific topic.

Create an information staging area that allows you to preview and validate information before publishing it in your conference report. Based on experience, the default access status of any conference contribution should be restricted to the competitive intelligence manager. The manager will then determine if the information should be published into the database and/or admitted into a conference report. This prevents sensitive or irrelevant data from entering the main public repository.

Finally, hold a post-conference meeting with attendees to capture any further impressions they developed about the event. This meeting will allow you to supplement the main conference data with other potentially valuable observations.

Following these recommendations should improve the level of success at your company's next show attendance.

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happens, the junior person is often kept close and can hear the conversation, so a later approach by another member of the CI team can sometimes lead to a successful data collection effort.

Although the educational component is often a lower priority at the larger non-U.S. shows, exhibitors often give presentations. These presentations are similar in some ways to the U.S. investor conferences or a broad sales pitch. Once they are completed, the presenter often will leave behind copies of their talk. Through discussions with the presenter, you can sometimes receive an invitation to the behind-the-scenes activities at the exhibitor booth. Once in the private rooms at the booth, much more information is available, but here it becomes even more important to remember what is ethical during these discussions.

Non-U.S. trade shows often feature social areas, especially in the larger events. Many of the larger exhibitors will have a fully staffed bar that serves as a focus for attendee socialization. Usually, the exhibitor staff is not in this area so it is less of an opportunity for data collection than it first seems. Other attendees often review their notes at these locations and careful listening can uncover some insight, as can engaging the attendees in conversation.

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