



Engineering Engineers: A True Story on How to Develop a Trade Show Intelligence Process

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The Competitive Intelligence Foundation's latest book, Conference and Trade Show Intelligence, provides practical advice, implementation insight, case histories, forms, and checklists designed to make your event intelligence efforts more productive. Twenty-eight leading members in the field present a compendium of best practices, including interviewing techniques, analysis, planning, ethics, and networking for both large intelligence teams and solo collectors. This article highlights the work of one chapter author, JP Ratajczak, who recounts his efforts to create a trade show intelligence initiative at his company. Similar to the other chapters in the book, he provides advice on how to be more effective at these events, and an opportunity for you to learn from his experiences.

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When reading about the processes and programs that some companies put together to collect competitive intelligence at trade shows, it's easy for solo practitioners or small competitive intelligence groups to throw up their hands and admit defeat. Excuses like "we've never done it before," "we couldn't pull off something that elaborate," or "we tried that but all the work wasn't worth it" are easy to make. Excuses aside, it only takes one person, some preparation, a little time, and the willingness to cash in a few chips with management. It can work. I've seen it. I've done it.

That's the great thing about being in the intelligence field. With a mix of collection and analysis skills, you have the building blocks you'll need to successfully organize and run a trade show intelligence program (or if you think about it, anything else in life!). But when talking about trade shows, where do you start? The following article is based on my own experience in developing and running an effective conference and trade show intelligence operation.

IF IT AIN'T BROKE, MAYBE YOU'RE NOT PUSHING IT HARD ENOUGH

In 2004, I found myself collecting intelligence at a conference in Orlando about five months after starting a market research analyst job with a prominent engineering and construction firm. I was attending the three-day long POWER-GEN International, the world's largest power generation conference, along with more than 15,000 other colleagues, clients, and competitors. Like the others on my market research team who were attending to collect competitive information, I was holding a small card I'd been given by a corporate researcher with some generic industry questions to ask our competitors:

What's their view of the Integrated Gasification Combined Cycle market?

Will the Liquefied Natural Gas industry take off?

I'd been sent for the sole purpose of collecting competitive information at the conference. But as someone fairly new to the industry, I ended up spending my first day on the floor stumbling through conversations while trying coyly to interject questions about the risk of working in the Middle East or of the breakeven point of Canadian tar sands oil extraction. Given my lack of industry knowledge, the topics were either too broad to elicit any specific information or too specific to gather information about.

The remaining days didn't go much better. The result of our company's conference efforts was an e-mail message written by another team member meshing the findings (broken down by company) of the few who attended as collectors, which we then sent to the head of the research group. Looking back on it, no one took direct follow-up actions as a result of our work. We'd pitched it into a black hole.

At this point it could have been easy for our team to throw up our hands, toss in the towel, or even just keep doing what we were doing even though it wasn't producing very magnificent results. But following a late night of after-conference networking, I promised a colleague that come next year's show, we would have something more organized and I would be the one to do it.

Someone before me had done a good job convincing some manager with a budget that collection at such an event was worthwhile. But honestly, if not even an executive summary makes it on their desk, then management will only sign your expense sheets from Orlando-like locations for so long.

WE'RE ONLY BORROWING TIME

About eleven months later, I hadn't started to make good on the promise I had made at the last year's POWER-GEN. But in those months, I'd managed to pepper the leadership with the benefits of competitive intelligence. They were becoming better educated on the subject, and deliverables with "Competitive Intelligence" in the title were starting to land on their desks. There was still no "official" competitive intelligence person or role, so in a sense I was still a solo practitioner attempting to enhance the company's trade show intelligence process.

Like any good competitive intelligence practitioner, I started with reviewing the existing literature (now that you're reading this, it has been augmented substantially!) to prepare for the upcoming show. The typical SCIP gurus provided some worthwhile reading.

But the process needed some tweaking. After all, my situation (like yours) was unique. For instance, in addition to the talents of the few who would attend the event solely as collectors, I potentially had at my disposal dozens of sales and technical people who were also attending the show. Another

factor was time. Did I mention that by this point, there were only about three weeks left until the show?

I knew what my ultimate goal was, and decided to focus on it.

Identify the information that decision makers could use, and do so using my resources as effectively as possible.

It was not exactly rocket science, but having a stated goal focused the activity. The first step in accomplishing this was to identify what our people wanted to know. If potentially dozens of our people would be collecting, I did not want them to be stuck holding a card with generic industry questions—where the answers would be nice to know but would have little tactical or strategic value. We needed to identify our Key Intelligence Questions (KIQs).

As I noted earlier, others in the company had been exposed to some general concepts of competitive intelligence. However, sending a note to attendees and leadership asking "Please send me three KIQs" would involve explaining much more about KIQs than I needed to explain at the time. The simple query, "If you could learn any three things about a competitor, who is the competitor and what would it be?" sufficed. Or so I thought.

The initial response rate was less than pleasing—about 16 percent. I sent out a reminder e-mail. Still weak results. Finally, after knocking on some doors and making some calls, about a third of those contacted decided they needed to know something about the competition, and I compiled a list of about 35 KIQs. This year, instead of general and broad questions, we had specifics like "Can Competitor ABC's technology yield a guaranteed X percent availability?"

Admittedly, 35 key intelligence questions initially seemed like a daunting number, but it was a manageable number given the amount of personnel attending the trade show. The market research team reviewed the list of KIQs to see if answers were already available from other sources, and some were. This helped trim the list slightly.

I then e-mailed the remaining KIQs to the other attendees to see if they already knew the answers to any of the remaining questions. Unfortunately, no further answers surfaced. However, this action provided dual benefits—not only did we trim the list of KIQs, but now the attendees knew what their counterparts specifically wanted to know.

A WELL-BALANCED BREAKFAST

Like most every team event at every company, our company scheduled a mandatory kickoff breakfast the morning before the show. They sent the initial agenda to attendees several weeks before the show, detailing the layout of the booth, the marketing messages to be delivered, plans for networking with co-workers, and so on. We only had an

hour for the meeting, so I decided it would be worth trying to get one more competitive intelligence discussion in before the show opened.

I visited the person running the meeting and asked for a more detailed schedule of the hour. Upon review, it was clear that time would be really tight. I suggested that a five-minute talk on elicitation would be both interesting and valuable in the day-to-day duties of those involved in the conference, whether or not they were there to meet with clients. I had a basic summary for what I would cover, including examples of some tips. I politely suggested that my quick talk would be worth sacrificing some of the time dedicated to networking. The meeting coordinator accepted my request.

Since most of the team members attending the conference had limited training in collection and my time to present was short, I quickly reviewed the purpose of competitive intelligence, went over the difference between interviewing and elicitation, and followed up with a lighthearted and inspirational “10 Elicitation Tips to Remember” (see sidebar). My audience appeared energized and excited to start collecting. I made sure to tell them what I expected of them after the show: Summarize the intelligence they had gathered.

During the three days of the show, I periodically checked

in with team members to find out how their activities were going. We did not hold any daily meetings or debriefings—there were simply too many people with too many events on their schedules already. I had the feeling that the momentum built up before the show would help propel everyone without the need for constant reminders. Or so I thought.

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

Upon returning to the office, I promptly e-mailed the attendees asking them to share with me the information they had gathered and to send it within three business days. I gave them the option of an e-mail or a phone call from me in the interim, but promised after the three days were up, they would be receiving a call from me. As with the request for KIQA, the response rate was low—19 percent responded within the three days.

Exactly after the three-day grace period had ended, I was on the phone as promised. This proved much more successful (45 percent responded to this method) and for those senior attendees who hadn't acted, I paid personal office visits to debrief them, resulting in another 6 percent participation for an overall participation rate of 54 percent (not including myself).

I had to keep in mind that collecting competitive

SIDEBAR: 1 QUICK ELICITATION TIPS FOR NON-CI-SAVVY COLLECTORS

1. You already have great connections. You probably know someone who works at Competitor A or Competitor B, know a vendor who sells to them, know someone who has experience competing with them, or know that you will be at a session where one of their people is presenting. These topics make excellent conversation starters.

2. Direct questions can be a conversation killer. Questions are memorable and can draw direct attention to the information you're obviously interested in obtaining. They give people time to ponder whether they should be telling you something.

3. Information that is unknown is more valuable than information that is known. Don't be overly startled or surprised at what somebody tells you. Someone will be more likely to give you information they believe you or the public already knows.

4. Avoid words or combinations of words like competitive, intelligence, analysis, research, market research, proprietary, confidential, or legal.

5. Pay attention to the nonverbal messages. Studies show people have a microsecond-long reaction to situations before they can mask their feelings. Showing the tongue, even just the tip, usually is an unconscious sign of disagreement. When someone is about to say something they don't want to say or are uncomfortable saying, they tend to cover their mouths. Look for the nonverbal cues.

6. Flattery works wonders. Whether you're commenting on their product or their company polo shirt, people respond well to flattery. Another silent way to do this is to mirror their body language.

7. Use pauses and repeated words to get more detail. If someone says “well, we're thinking the widget market in South America will be expanding,” simply repeat “South America.” Then wait. Or say nothing at all and let them fill the silence.

8. Be prepared. Look over your key intelligence questions or key intelligence topics before you walk to their booth or know you'll be engaging them in conversation.

9. Just because you remember the KIQA doesn't mean you should go straight over and ask them. If five people from Competitor A come up to you and comment on a very specific issue, then that would raise your suspicion level. Elicit responsibly.

10. Do your collection ethically. There's no need to misrepresent yourself. People are at this trade show to talk about their company.

And one more: Write things down. You don't have to do it while you're in the middle of a conversation, but do it before you forget. It will also help when trying to compile the results later on.

information was not the primary reason these people attended the conference. Had I not on multiple occasions called, e-mailed, or met with them to discuss collecting, they wouldn't have done it on their own. I didn't have the luxury of showering them with gifts. I had to rely solely on schmoozing (as bad as that sounds) to get them to spend time on something I felt was important to the organization. Showing them that I had knowledge of the subject, that the finished intelligence could be valuable, and that I was coordinated enough to make the process work were all important to gain their support for my cause.

The structure did more than focus their activity. The organized list of KIQs made it easy to draft my final 16-page deliverable, which included the following:

- An overview of the process
- Recommendations for improving the process for next year
- Key findings broken down by KIQ (14 of the original 35 had been thoroughly covered)
- Key findings not directly addressing a KIQ
- A categorized listing of the collected collateral
- The original KIQs
- The raw intelligence

When packaged and branded, the final deliverable was solid enough to e-mail and present to the head of the sales and marketing department. It was a true representation of the team's efforts and reflected the work put into every step of the process. But the resulting benefits didn't end there.

Leadership had been exposed to what a coordinated, organized effort could yield. Competitive intelligence became an office buzzword. The attendees learned about competitive intelligence through direct participation and were anxious to see one another's results once I had compiled them. Some individuals went on to seek further competitive intelligence training. The team to which I functionally belonged garnered extra credibility.

All of this came from one person's effort to do a little extra coordination.

EPILOGUE: BUT IF I COULD DO IT ALL AGAIN...

Not only was this the firm's first attempt to collect trade show intelligence in an organized fashion, it was also my first attempt at coordinating such an activity. With the luxury of hindsight, there was obvious room for improvement.

Be Organized

It's easy to underestimate the amount of time required to get yourself organized. If you're trying to earn the admiration of senior management and you have the burden of trying to coordinate something sophisticated enough to be worthwhile,

give yourself enough time. Think of the time when you bought that new piece of technology, where the box said, "set-up only takes 10 minutes!"—and it took more time than that. Putting together any trade-show intelligence plan will take you longer than 10 minutes. Plan for it.

Make Your Results a Big Deal

Don't exaggerate your findings, but make sure they are user-friendly (readable, organized, succinct) for your leadership. Avoid using technical jargon (e.g., KIQs, humint), especially when your audience isn't yet competitive intelligence-savvy, but include enough intelligence to make your findings substantial. People pay money to read tabloid magazines with pictures of movie stars looking their worst. Unfortunately, your senior vice-president isn't going to want to pay for any more competitive intelligence if it doesn't have any makeup on.

Revisit Your Results

If you put so much effort into it, ensure that it has a payoff. Pat yourself on the back for the things you did well but document what didn't go as planned. If anything, it makes you look more prepared for the next time. Good athletes and coaches breakdown game tapes for a reason.

There Will Be a Next Time

Contact the people who were helpful throughout the process as advocates when it comes time to do this all again. The higher they sit on the organization chart, the better. Look for the people who were extra-eager to help with collection, or someone who had KIQs that you managed to answer. You put in extra time to make it happen, and that means there is probably another person out there who is crazy enough to do the same.

Love What You Do (Or at Least Look Like It)

You'll come across many obstacles that will make you question whether or not it's all worth it: the unreturned phone calls, the extra hours, the stress of coordinating and managing the efforts of dozens of people. But no one ever bought anything from a grumpy telemarketer. The key is to act with enthusiasm and keep a smile on your face.

After all, someone just might believe you.

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