You’re Probably Keeping Tabs on Your Competitors All Wrong

Data intelligence opportunities to find out about your competitors are exploding. What are you waiting for?

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Most companies say they collect competitive intelligence (CI), but most of the time that means outdated scraps of information divorced from the company’s own strategy — or simply ignored: A study by Fuld + Company found that 45 percent of competitive analyses it analyzed had no actual impact on management decisions — even among experienced CI professionals.

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Overall, the CI field hasn’t changed much in the decades since its establishment in the 1980s, even though the intelligence data field itself has evolved dramatically: Market-research firm IDC predicts, for instance, that the “digital universe” of online data will reach 180 zettabytes in 2025; and that will mean a never-before-seen wealth of competitive intelligence there for the taking.

So, if your company is not yet involved in CI, it’s time to start — and that means more than just a review of your competitors’ press releases or getting product feedback on customer calls.

A company ignores the data available at its peril because its competitors may be a lot more active. CI, after all, has the

potential to provide you a significant strategic advantage.

The problem is that most companies' CI practices are slow, narrowly focused and disconnected from the rest of the organization. Here are three specific ways in which companies miss the mark with CI. Don't be one of them.

Mistake 1: Doing CI research just once a year

In fact, you should be practicing CI daily.

Remember when people went into physical stores to browse and rent movies on video tape? That was Blockbuster's heydey, circa 2000, but it was about to end: Blockbuster failed to recognize the growing threat that was Netflix and the changing tide in the world of on-demand entertainment.

It wasn't until 2004 that Blockbuster's leaders realized the threat and tried to act – but it was too late; the company's decline continued until it filed for bankruptcy in 2010.

Reviewing CI on a quarterly, annual or less frequent basis is all too common, but dangerous. CI can indeed be time-consuming, especially when you're pulling in intelligence hidden in seldom-visited corners of the internet. Some companies turn to consulting firms like Gartner or Kantar to help with deep-dive research projects once a year or quarterly briefings. Either scenario is simply too infrequent to take advantage of real opportunities or mitigate developing threats.

Related: The Secret to Outpacing Your Rival? Competitive Insights.

CI, then, needs to be a daily practice. Don't just review the latest news alerts and social media posts; monitor new customer reviews, website messaging changes and freshly posted

job openings; also look at help sites' articles.

Reviewing new intelligence daily makes annual analyses unnecessary. Instead, taking a few minutes each morning to process the latest developments allows you not only to *analyze* the intelligence, but also *act* while the intelligence is still relevant.

Zendesk has gone so far as to productize its CI process, adapting the OODA Loop (Observe, Orient, Decide, Act) to tackle CI in an agile way. Find a method that works for your team or borrow Zendesk's:

1. Observe CI data daily.
2. Orient around the intel to draw out actionable insights.
3. Decide which opportunities present the greatest return.
4. Act on the programs based on CI insights.

Mistake 2: Not looking at the whole picture

In fact, you should be examining even seeming minutiae like job listings and events.

When mortgage lender AmeriFirst Home Mortgage came across its competitor's internal training videos, the company knew it had hit gold. It could see where and how its competitors were investing so that AmeriFirst could be proactive about its own strategy. The message? CI is hidden everywhere, and the most valuable intelligence can be found in surprising places.

The most common CI practices focus on small activities like social media posts, news mentions and feedback from occasional customer or sales calls. But this leaves companies without the full picture of their competitors' moves. Indeed, 77 percent of businesses surveyed said they viewed holistic intelligence as necessary for successful CI programs, according to the *2018 State of Market Intelligence study* released in January 2018 by

my company, Crayon.

So where do you find this holistic intelligence? Oftentimes, the more critical intelligence is not available on social or news channels. And by the time something has surfaced there, the window of opportunity to take advantage has passed.

Job descriptions, for example, show where a company is investing, and how. And, often, this content is "unmanicured," revealing details like sales quotas, new products or company challenges. Event activity – where a company is speaking or sponsoring – reflects the core markets a competitor is targeting.

To take advantage of all the intelligence available online:

1. Map each competitor's digital footprint on and off its website, from blogs and support documentation to review sites and job boards.

2. Monitor for meaningful changes and analyze them as they surface.

3. Connect the dots between multiple moves – noting recent blog posts focused on a new vertical and an event sponsorship in that same vertical – to identify competitors' strategies.

Mistake 3: Hoarding intelligence among just a few people

In fact, you should be sharing it with your entire company.

During its fall from its status as the No. 1 retailer in America, Sears and its executives were cut off from key market intelligence conversations. When a shareholder activist was finally granted the opportunity to meet with the CEO in his 90th-floor office, an employee reportedly said, "This is the

first time bad news has made it above the 78th floor."

Clearly, key intelligence conversations weren't reaching the top of the ladder, no thanks to the CEO shutting himself off from them.

CI is too often "owned" by an individual or team in the organization – the product marketing team, for instance, or a competitive strategist or the head of marketing. This results in the hoarding the intelligence among a small group. And, the more siloed the CI leader, the less likely the information will be to reach all those who need to act on the findings.

So look at it this way: Your marketing department is not responsible for CI. *Your whole company* is. Understanding the market landscape and applying those learnings to your role – from sales to customer service to product – is necessary to help the company excel in every area.

Instead of CI being the focus of a few people that's also shared with executives and other stakeholders, CI should be democratized – and those stakeholders should become active players in the analysis itself. Companies are starting to test-drive this idea by creating internal councils with representatives from every department to participate in CI discussions. To incorporate the right players in your own CI efforts:

1. Identify the key stakeholders who'll act on the intel. Every functional area should be represented.

2. Discuss which key trends, signals and other intelligence each colleague is most interested in, to align CI with desired output.

3. Establish a cadence by which intel is shared and analyzed: Leverage a tiered approach where critical intel is evaluated immediately and a broader analysis is done on a weekly, monthly or quarterly basis.

Bonus! Not doing competitive intelligence at all

No company exists in a vacuum, and companies like YouTube that say they don’t need CI are letting their ego get the best of them. (“CI,” by the way, spans beyond direct competitors to partners, aspirational brands and even customers.)

The misconception that CI is used for copying competitors is far from true. Innovative companies like Disney rightly do not want to copy others’ solutions, but instead leverage CI to further innovate and standout. “I have been up against tough competition all my life. I wouldn’t know how to get along without it,” the founder himself, Walt Disney, once said.

The best companies, then, use competitive and market intelligence to highlight how they can differentiate themselves in a crowded market, learn what customers like and dislike about other solutions and obtain inspiration for new and innovative campaigns.

Related: 12 Ways to (Legally) Spy on Your Competitors

The bad news is that many companies have not evolved their practices to take full advantage of CI yet. The good news is that significant opportunities exist with CI to get ahead of your competitors and drive significant revenue. You should get started today.

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