Long gone are the days of the librarian as keeper of the books. In today’s cutthroat, corporate environment, we must be top of the line, competitive information leaders. But how do we keep our departments on the cutting edge? How do we ensure that we are professionals that are sought after when the deadlines approach? The key factors are communications, marketing, and politics. Running an effective competitive intelligence department is more complex than just having good organizational skills. Not that we would go far without those skills. Competitive intelligence, or CI, is the ability to gather the facts, see into the future, and convince your audience that you hold the key. Let’s look at some of the factors needed for success.

Communications: External vs. Internal

To be truly effective, a CI department must establish excellent communication lines both within and outside the company. There are many information gathering tools within the organization. To ensure the thoroughness of your research, explore your company for experts. Make a list of experts and what their specialties are. One scientist may be an excellent source of background information. The person in marketing may have suggestions on...
how to market a new service. Perhaps someone in investor services can help you make contact with a security analyst. These internal sources can be a wealth of information if properly cultivated. Once you have identified internal sources, a two-way communication channel needs to be set up. One way of keeping a consistent flow of information is to provide services to the contact. Setting up a news watch or conducting some Internet research might be enough to keep the source communicating.

External sources are equally important. Having a network of contacts is an excellent method to keep abreast of your industry. Remember that contacts do not have to be in your field to be useful. Consider making contacts with suppliers or distributors for your industry; this could be used when sleuthing on a competitor. Government and association contacts can also prove very useful. Remember that reciprocation is important if you want an ongoing relationship. The best technique for gaining external contacts is through conferences/meetings. Get involved in SLA or a similar organization and you will find a wealth of information.

Running Smoothly? Reevaluate

Too often we become complacent when events are running smoothly. Then we are tossed into chaos unprepared, struggling with a miserable upward climb. Don't wait until a crisis. Regular re-evaluation should occur at least partially every year. Services must be checked for their relevance, lists of users should be monitored for any shifts, and software must be evaluated for its efficiency and cost-effectiveness. It is extremely important that we remain educated, both by reading and by seminars/conferences, in order to keep abreast of an information market that changes by the minute. A full information audit should be performed on a regular basis. I suggest you break down and conduct one at least every three years. Keep in mind that good services are not enough to save your department in times of trial. Make sure you keep coming up with new ideas and rotate services, so your information never seems stale. Keep a short list of services that don't change. Remember that you can package the same service differently and it will appear new.

Marketing—The Lifeline

No matter how talented you are, you can never avoid marketing and still be successful for the long term. Although this belief is my maxim, how much marketing is necessary depends on your personal environment. With that in mind, here are a few items I conduct on a regular basis. First of all, know your clients. I use the term clients instead of patrons or users because it reminds me that I must be diligent in my service or the client will go elsewhere. This is especially true in today's Internet world. Mistakenly, many of my clients think that everything is free and on the Internet. Thus, one of the most frequently used marketing tools in my department is education. I must constantly educate my clients about what services I can provide, how much time I can save them, how much more information I can get to, etc. I must also educate myself so that I understand the personality of my client, what he thinks he needs, and what he needs but doesn't know yet.

I like to have one-on-one sessions with the managers of the different departments. I then have one-on-one sessions with the next level of professionals if I believe there is an area that needs improvement. This is time consuming, so I try to work on a different department each month. If you have trouble setting something up with the manager, make friends with his/her secretary. Secretaries are some of the most important people in a company. I can't count how many times a secretary has passed on the needs of her/his boss, making it possible for me to shine. These meeting do not have to be long. If it is the first time you have met, you may want to schedule more time. Make sure you are organized and provide general information about your services before you get together. This way the conversation can focus on how you can customize your services for their needs. Shorter meetings or conversations can be used for selling a new service or strengthening ties.

E-mail is a useful tool for communicating new or improved services. Make sure you make the e-mail brief and follow-up with an example of what the service looks like. If I am adding company timelines to available packages, seeing one will win over clients much faster than describing one. If you can set up a department page on the Intranet, do so. This is a great place for advertising your services. You can also point them toward great Internet sites, making sure they remember that you are the expert. Don't get too fancy with graphics on your page, this makes you look nerdy. Instead keep it professional looking. Cute games might win friends with the mail room staff, but the top managers will not include you in planning sessions with gimmicks.

I do suggest setting up a department identity. Create a brochure that tells about your services and provide it to the human resources department for new employees. If you are courting a new department, this type of ready reference is a good icebreaker. Consider creating a logo. Perhaps you can take the company logo and modify it to represent yourself. Make sure that you use this internally. If you want to use it externally, check with your legal department first. I would also suggest that you package your information. For

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example, we frequently conduct research on the directors of a company. We consume the data and present the biography in memo form with a chart of the main details of the person’s life. Our memo reads the same for all directors. We start with where he/she is employed and what boards he/she is on. We then cover his/her early years, his/her career, accomplishments/failures, social activities, family, and hobbies. By staying consistent we make the product more useful. This also makes us look savvy.

Politics: A Game of Survival

Politics is a very important part of being successful. In order to be an effective department, we must go beyond data collection. We must customize our services depending on who is requesting the information. This may seem time consuming, but it can be very valuable. You never know who will remember your extra effort. For instance, we keep an idiosyncrasy list by department so we know what they want when a regular request comes to us. This way if the manager of another department calls for his usual package, we know what the manager wants and he feels special because we customize it for him.

Another important aspect of politics is understanding the chain of command. There are two versions of this political ladder. The first hierarchy is the official reporting list. The CEO followed by the COO, the vice presidents, the managers, etc. The other list is who has the power to influence events. This isn’t always the top people. You should know how both systems work and make sure you network with the right people. Speaking of friends, do not forget to find a couple of mentors. My definition of mentor is someone who is in a position of influence, and who can assist your department while it jockeys for position. In return you provide extra fast service and inside information from the grapevine when deemed prudent. Always be careful when using the grapevine, it can backfire. Also, remember never to burn your bridges. Enemies show up in the worst places.

One last piece of advice concerning politics is visibility. It is important that you as a manager are very visible within the company. And no I don’t mean standing around the water cooler. Find ways of getting yourself invited to meetings. Volunteer for internal committees. This part of your job may be very boring, but the gains are substantial. Make sure that when other managers see you they think professionalism. Dress appropriately. Conduct yourself with class, but don’t be aloof. Present yourself as the expert. Take charge of the Internet/E-Commerce Revolution. By doing so you ensure
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